

Lent Compline Talks 2016

St Mary's Kidlington
Sunday 14th February
Prof John Morris

The Eucharist

The theme for our Lent reflections this year is the Eucharist – our weekly invitation to the Lord's Table, so I thought we should explore the Eucharist in this series of brief Compline addresses.

Because the Eucharist and Passover are so linked I'll consider The first Passover meal; then on subsequent weeks: God feeds us – in the Old Testament; the Last Supper as a Passover meal in the synoptic gospels; the Last Supper in John's gospel; washing the disciples feet at the Last Supper; being clean; those special words "this is my body; this is my blood". Then on Holy Week Monday – The Eucharist in the early church; Holy Week Tuesday (sung) – Do this in remembrance of me; Holy Week Wednesday – The Eucharist as the bread of life for us today.

We are using new Compline books which Felicity has had printed. They are in today's language; and the hymn comes earlier. Do let me or Felicity have any comments.

Let's remind ourselves how the first Passover meal came about as stated in Genesis and Exodus: Joseph, Jacob's youngest son who his brothers had sought, through jealousy, to do away with by throwing him into a pit, ended up being sold in Egypt to one of Pharaoh's guards called Potiphar. In Egypt Joseph prospered and, thanks to his ability interpret dreams including that of Pharaoh, saved Egypt from 7 years of famine. The rest of Jacob's sons eventually joined Joseph in Egypt where they prospered and multiplied. Many years later when all of Joseph's generation had long since died a new Pharaoh enslaved the Israelites. This is when Moses appears and we know the story of how by chance he escaped Pharaoh's purge of new-born boys, was brought up by Pharaoh's daughter, fled into the wilderness after killing an overseer, met God in the burning bush and was given the task of setting the Israelites free from slavery in Egypt. After many fruitless attempts involving various plagues, which apparently only 'hardened Pharaoh's heart', God promised a final 'plague' in which all the first-born in the land (animals and people) were to die, but the Israelites could be saved if they followed the instructions for the 'Passover' of the angel of death.

There was to be a preparatory 7 days in which they ate only unleavened bread. They had to take an unblemished lamb or kid, slaughter it, and mark their door-posts and lintel with the blood so that that household would be spared. The lamb must be roasted whole, eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, and eaten in 'urgent haste' dressed ready to leave – sandals and staffs. It had all to be eaten or, if not eaten, destroyed by fire. They were to share between families if necessary and also to make it a 'day of remembrance', and keep it generation after generation.

This is of course what Jews do this day. Have any of you been to a Jewish Passover meal? Once when I was at a science meeting in Jerusalem, I was asked to join in a Passover meal by local Jewish members of the meeting – certainly a very moving experience (though we did not eat standing and in great haste! and I don't recall any bitter herbs)

What has this got to do with our Eucharist?

The Last Supper has often been seen as a Passover meal (we'll look at the evidence that it was in subsequent weeks), but the word Passover appears in Matthew: Disciples "Where would you like us to prepare for your Passover supper"; Mark: "Now on the first day of unleavened bread when the Passover lambs were being slaughtered. His disciples said to him "Where"; Luke: "Then came the day of unleavened bread on which the Passover victim had to be slaughtered, and Jesus

sent Peter and John with these instructions – “go and prepare for our Passover supper.” Notice in two of these the link with unleavened bread. In John’s gospel “It was **before** the Passover festival during supper”

But in what way, should we as 21st century Christians see the link between the two – because we are not Jews keeping the OT command generation after generation. The coming of Christ has “made all things new”. The important thing for us is our belief that regular participation in the Eucharist is an essential way in which God continues to feed us.

I suggest that we should look much more at the essentials of the Passover story, rather than details of the instructions for the meal, though there are parallels between Passover and Eucharist. There are, of course, links of detail.

Preparation: it used to be that no-one ate before communion. Does anyone only eat unleavened bread? I suggest it is much more important to *prepare our minds and hearts* prior to taking communion. Maybe this Lent it would be a good discipline to spend some minutes doing just that.

The **Unblemished Lamb** that had to be killed: we take this as a reference to Jesus – the Lamb of God (you’ll remember John the Baptist said to his followers “Look there is the Lamb of God” Jesus, who **was killed for us** on the cross – (died on the cross/was killed).

In the Eucharist **we eat** unleavened bread – wafers – not with bitter herbs; we continue the instruction that nothing is left over, We may ‘reserve’ the sacrament for home communions etc ,, but we don’t burn all unused wafers!).

Sharing was essential: at the first Passover it was families and friends if necessary; I suggest that it is important for us that our Eucharist is a shared, not a solitary experience;

Being spared: The Israelites had to mark their doors with blood to be spared from the angel of death. In our Eucharist a really important part is our confession and the absolution of the priest, speaking for God – to spare us from the just wrath of God – for the things we have done wrong

But I suggest that the real essential was the **Relief** of the Israelites **from Slavery**. How does that apply to us? We’re not being forced to do heavy labour, to gather our own straw to make bricks. But there are ways in which we are enslaved – dare I suggest that we are partly enslaved by the ease of most modern lives so that we have less of a sense of dependence on God. It is only when you see how quickly that can change – as for the refugees from Syria that we realise how fragile that ease can be. We can also be enslaved by things – by mobile phones, gambling, alcohol ... Lent disciplines are in essence, voluntary acts to free ourselves from things that enslave us; the Eucharist gives us strength to do that

One last thing I haven’t mentioned – **Why** did they want to be allowed to leave Israel – it was not just to escape slave labour. What Moses said to Pharaoh each time was not just “Let my people go” it was “God says Let my people go IN ORDER TO WORSHIP ME”. What the Eucharist can do is not just to free us from things that enslave us, but to free us from those in order that we may worship – what is “true worship?” It’s NOT turning up in church, singing hymns, praying devoutly – all necessary, but not enough. It is summed up neatly in the letter of James “True worship is to help the orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself untarnished by the world”. In modern parlance as we say at the end of the Eucharist “send us out to **live and work** to your praise and glory. The Eucharist gives us the power, quite simply, to be Christ’s hands here on earth.