

Maundy Thursday – April 5, 2007
Ascension Episcopal Church, Hinton, WV
Luke 22:14-30 – The Last Supper

The Rev. Kent Higgins

As we enter into the retelling of the final days of Jesus' life among us, it becomes especially important for modern-day Christians to appreciate Jewish history. Having this appreciation both simplifies and complicates our understanding of what God is telling us in this part of his history.

Let's deal with the simplification first. All of the Gospels agree that Jesus and the Apostles were eating a Passover meal. Because John and the synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) differ slightly in the time sequence, some scholars try to make something of the differences. I think that is too picayune a point to spend much time on: what it is important to understand is the significance of Passover to the Jew. And remember, Jesus was without question a Jew. He taught in the synagogues. He compared and contrasted his ministry to that of those who had gone before him. The whole idea of "the messiah" is part of Jewish history.

The Messiah is the promised one of Israel, the person who will bring God's chosen people to their ultimate liberation by ushering in the Kingdom of God. And Jesus was and is believed by his followers to be that Messiah – "the Christ" (it's a title, not a name).

The Old Testament lesson we heard tonight would have been familiar to Jesus as one of the pivotal moments in Jewish history. There are numerous times when God makes it clear that he has chosen the Hebrew people to be his people, but this is one of the most critical, for it is the events of the night of The Passover, when God kills all the first born in Egypt, but "passes over" the homes of the Jews which have been marked with the blood of the lamb. This terrible act finally loosens Pharaoh's heart, and he allows Moses to lead the Jews out of captivity in Egypt, which we and they know as the Exodus.

The Passover meal followed specific guidelines, and when Jesus tells his Apostles to go to a particular room and prepare the meal, they don't have to be told anything else. What makes this Passover important to the Apostles is that it is the culmination, in Luke's Gospel, of the

teaching Jesus has been giving his followers. If you read the sections of Luke which immediately precede tonight's Gospel, you will see example after example of that teaching, and at the Passover meal, Jesus is explaining what is about to happen.

So the simple meaning of this Passover meal is that Jesus himself will be the lamb sacrificed for Passover. It will be his blood which gives life to his people and marks them as chosen of God. We celebrate that meal in the Eucharist, which means "thanksgiving," and we commemorate the ceremony in the Upper Room each time we break the bread and drink the cup of wine.

It is important that we see this as something we do as a group. Jesus gathered those closest to him to share that last moment of instruction, and the covenant he established is one in which we all share. We are members of Christ's body, which we understand as being the church. Coming forward to receive communion is not an individual act. It is a corporate act of worship. A priest cannot, for instance, celebrate communion by him or herself – it must be in company with other believers.

So that's the fairly simple message of this Gospel. Jesus is the Lamb of God, and that he has made his followers, including us here in this church, chosen people of God.

But how then does a Jewish understanding of the Passover meal complicate our understanding of the Gospel? The answer lies in knowing how Jews then and now studied Scripture, and that in turn requires an understanding of the idea of "midrash." Doctor Charles Davis of Appalachian State University says this:

"Midrash minimizes the authority of the wording of the text as communication, normal language. It places the focus on the reader and the personal struggle of the reader to reach an acceptable moral application of the text. While it is always governed by the wording of the text, it allows for the reader to project his or her inner struggle into the text. This allows for some very powerful and moving interpretations which, to the ordinary user of language, seem to have very little connection with the text. The great weakness of this method is that it always threatens to

replace the text with an outpouring of personal reflection. At its best it requires the presence of mystical insight not given to all readers.”¹

This is an approach to Scripture understanding which has much to commend it. It is completely consistent with the idea that the Bible is there for us to “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest.” In other words, Scripture is one way in which God feeds us – his people – with the knowledge of him that is fundamental to our lives.

Some people have applied that approach to comprehending Scripture in such a way that the mystery disappears. The story becomes so intellectual that, instead of finding meaning we lose the true meaning. The danger is that we say “such and so is like this or that,” but in so saying, the thing becomes less real and more an artificial construction. We end up debating how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

I think that some of us in The Episcopal Church fall prey to this over-stylization, this intellectualization of Scripture so that in the end we are left – not with answers – but with more questions.

I’m going to defer further discussion of that question until Easter morning, when the question I will ask you to consider is whether or not Jesus really did die on a cross, whether or not he was raised from the dead, whether or not the claims we make for him are true. I believe God intends to speak to us, and to our here-and-now issues and concerns, through Scripture. And here’s the thing. We have to decide if Jesus really is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

It is not my intention to inject doubt into your hearts and minds about who Jesus was and is – far from it. But it is my intention that you be faithfully certain regarding your beliefs and the teachings of the Church. Let me tell you a quick story to illustrate why I think that’s worth your time and your effort.

Some years ago, Gail and I participated in a Lenten study group, and one night we watched a video of N. T. Wright, an eminent theologian, as he discussed the resurrection. After the video ended, the group leader went around the room to ask if we believed what the creed

¹ <http://www.faqs.org/faqs/judaism/FAQ/03-Torah-Halacha/section-25.html>

says, “on the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.”²

A number of people answered that really, at the end of the day, they didn’t think that was what happened. I think they are victims to our modern age’s desire for scientific proof of every issue. But we can be “faithfully certain” of our beliefs without either relying on or refuting science, and it is that topic we will take up on Easter Sunday morning.

For tonight, it is enough to remember the words of our Eucharist, “All glory be to thee, Almighty God, our heavenly Father, for that thou, of thy tender mercy, didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption; who made there, by his one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world; and did institute, and in his holy Gospel command us to continue, a perpetual memory of that his precious death and sacrifice, until his coming again.”³ Amen.

² *The Nicene Creed* in the Book of Common Prayer (1979), p 358.

³ Book of Common Prayer (1979), p 334.