

Father Albert Shamon

A Word for Sunday



Palm Sunday

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 26:14-27:66; (R1) Isaiah 50:4-7; (R2) Philippians 2:6-11.

Passion Sunday begins the holiest week of the liturgical year. I would like to focus just on Holy Thursday: the Last Supper of Jesus.

The first question about the Last Supper is, "Was it a Passover meal?"

We'll leave the arguments, pro and con, to the experts. It is enough to say that the weight of authority rests on the side of those who say it was a Passover meal (Luke 22:7-8, 15; Mark 14:12; Matthew 26:17).

If it were not, why was it eaten in Jerusalem and not in Bethany, where Jesus was staying (Mark 11:11)? Why the cups of wine (Luke 22:17)? Why an evening meal (Mark 14:17)? Why the dipping in the charoseth sauce (Mark 14:20)? Why the concern for the poor, a standard feature of a Passover meal (John 13:29)? Why the talk about a covenant of blood (Luke 22:20)? Only in the context of a Passover supper do the words and actions of Jesus at His Last Supper make sense.

The Passover meal memorialized two great events in Israel's history: 1) the saving of the firstborn of the Hebrews from death by the blood of the lamb, followed by the liberation of the people from Egyptian slavery; and 2) the Covenant on Mt. Sinai, sealed with blood, making Israel God's people and God their God.

The meal — the eating of bitter herbs with broken pieces of bread and roasted lamb — signified salvation from death and slavery. The drinking of four cups of wine at different points during the meal signified the Sinaitic Covenant. The four toasts signified the four promises of Exodus 6:6-11: "I will free you from slavery" (cup of consecration); 2) "I will do it with power" (cup of proclamation); 3) "I will take you for my people" (cup of thanksgiving); and 4) "I will be your God" (final cup of thanksgiving).

The Passover meal can best be described within the framework of these four cups.

First cup: The head of the family pronounces a blessing over the wine, tastes it and passes the cup along for the others to drink.

Second cup: The head of the family washes his hands three times. Lettuce or

parsley dipped in salt water is eaten. One of three loaves of bread is broken into small pieces, and the roasted lamb is brought in.

The youngest asks, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" (Perhaps John did this.)

The head of the family explains the symbolic meaning of the meal: salt water, for tears and the Red Sea; broken bread, for affliction and poverty as slaves; the lamb, for liberation.

The first part of the Hallel (Psalms 112-113:8) is sung, and the second cup is taken.

Third cup: At the Last Supper, as the apostles prepared to recline for the meal, a quarrel broke out — perhaps because Judas claimed the honor of sitting next to Jesus. Jesus washed their feet to teach them that the greatest among them is the one who serves. All washed their hands.

The broken bread was passed around and dipped into the charoseth sauce. During this action, Jesus announced His betrayal. Judas left.

The lamb was eaten. Afterwards, all washed their hands. The rest of the bread was passed around; perhaps here the consecration of the bread took place.

After long thanksgiving, the third cup was consumed. The consecration of the wine probably took place at this point.

Then, during the glow of the Eucharist, there followed our Lord's commandment of love (John 13:31-35) and His comforting "Let not your hearts be troubled" (John 14).

Fourth cup: The meal concludes with the singing of the rest of the Hallel (Psalms 115-118) and a hymn (Psalm 136). Then the last cup was drunk.

All left the Cenacle for Gethsemane. On the way, Jesus spoke about the vine (John 15), about persecution and the advocate (John 16), and about unity (John 17).

St. John's timing of these events differed from that of the Synoptics, because John wanted to show that Jesus is the Passover lamb, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The keynotes of the Passover meal are memory, thanks, praise and hope. Our memorial of the Eucharist and the institution of the priesthood on Holy Thursday ought also to evoke in us a spirit of thanksgiving, praise and hope.

Cindy Bassett

The Bible Corner



Who do you say I am?

As soon as the members of the Sanhedrin saw Caiaphas rise, they came to order immediately. The high priest wielded great authority, not only here in the Hebrew court, but under the watchful eyes of Rome. It was common knowledge that Caiaphas and Pilate were personal friends.

Today, some 70 members of the High Council had convened to determine if sufficient evidence had been gathered to bring a formal charge against the man, Jesus.

For some time now, Caiaphas had kept this rabble-rouser under surveillance by the temple agents and his own personal band of spies. What Caiaphas found to be the most distasteful about Jesus was his seeming ability to attract the masses, whom Caiaphas intended to keep firmly in their place.

"I have called you here today to present your findings on Jesus," Caiaphas began. "Above all, keep in mind that we must do nothing to displease the Roman authorities, who support our temple and allow us to live in peace. Unfortunately, Jesus is a Hebrew, and any trouble he causes is a blot on us, too. Now just who is this Jesus anyway?"

One of the elders stood up and said, "Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. His followers are convinced that Jesus is King David's son, the Messiah himself. But I have done some investigating of my own concerning his background. Jesus is nothing more than a carpenter's son from a poor family in Nazareth."

"If what you say is true, how do you explain all the stories about Jesus teaching in the temple at the age of 12?" said another council member.

"All I know about Jesus and the temple is the day I saw him overturning tables and expelling all of the merchants," one of the chief priests added. "Jesus ruined an excellent day for business."

Benjamin, a wealthy lawyer, stepped forward next. "I fear there is something dangerous about Jesus," he began. "He associates freely with known sinners and all of the other undesirables of the region. I worry about the promises he makes to this element of the population. Jesus has offered a new society to all those who become his followers. What's more, he has hand-picked 12 assistants, whom he teaches to do the same things."

"What things?" Caiaphas asked cautiously.

A Pharisee stood up and said, "These followers claim that Jesus works miracles. Some say he has turned water into wine, calmed a storm, fed a multitude of people

with a mere seven loaves and fishes. But Benjamin is mistaken. There's no danger in any of that."

"We have a witness," announced someone in the back of the room, urging forward a rugged-looking herdsman.

"I saw it with my own eyes," the man stammered. "There was this crazy, demon-possessed man living in our town. No one would go near him for fear of being killed. Then along comes Jesus one day, and I saw him speak to this man. I heard a strange voice answer. The next thing I know, my entire herd of hogs goes running off the cliff into the lake. The crazy man is fine now, and I've got no herd left."

"Well, what do you make of this?" Caiaphas asked the witness pointedly.

"I think Jesus is some kind of demon-king, and that's why he has these powers," the herdsman replied. "The townspeople were so frightened after that happened that they begged Jesus to leave."

"I need something more substantial than just all of this hearsay and gossip," said Caiaphas. "Has Jesus broken any laws?"

"I saw Jesus heal someone on the Sabbath," one of the Sadducees said. "And he did it by saying, 'your sins are forgiven.'"

"What?" Caiaphas asked, looking pleased. "Only God can forgive sins. That is blasphemy, and clearly a violation of the law. I think we have him!"

A commotion was heard in the back of the room. "What's going on?" Caiaphas demanded. "Come to order!"

An old man broke away from those who sought to restrain him. "You don't understand!" he shouted. "Jesus is the Messiah. I am the man who was healed on the Sabbath. What crime is there in that? He's given me a new life!"

The arguments continued among the members of the Sanhedrin for most of the day. Meanwhile, Jesus continued to preach in Judea, saying, "These are evil times, with evil people. They keep asking for some strange happening in the skies to prove I am the Messiah, but the only proof I will give them is a miracle like that of Jonah, whose experiences proved to the people of Nineveh that God had sent him. My similar experience will prove that God has sent me to these people" (Luke 11:29-30).

Meditation for Lent:

Dear Jesus, let my life be a clear reflection of who You are to me.

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