

Last evening we carried on the tradition from the Jewish heritage in our church gathered around a common table with friends, with those from other Anglican churches, with those from other traditions. From generation to generation the Jewish people have celebrated the Festival to the Lord. They come together at the Passover to make a sacrifice of a lamb and to recall their history and their story. They do this – to mark a day of remembrance – by telling God’s story in the setting of a meal. For Jews of the ancient world, meals were much more than an occasion for eating and drinking. They were a sacred time – a time for thanksgiving to God. It still is the same today for Jews throughout the world at Passover.

Likewise, we Christians are commanded to remember The Last Supper. Jesus instituted the Eucharist at his last Passover meal with his disciples. In the Greek the Eucharist, of course means, thanksgiving. And we celebrate this meal of thanksgiving every time we gather at the altar – around the Lord’s table – to share communion together. We recall the words of institution, the words we say as we break bread together. “On the night that he was betrayed he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood’” (I Cor. 11:23-26).

So this Maundy Thursday we remember why we have Holy Communion. We recall the institution of the Eucharist. And we hear why it is that we are to remember our Lord’s words.

When I first trained the youth to be ministrants, I reminded them that they are to distribute the mystical body and blood of our Lord, but they are not to whisper the words “The body or blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for you, keep you in

eternal life” or “the blood of Christ, the cup of salvation,” because it is a mystery, not a secret. So they learned to say with confidence these words when they distribute holy food.

The modern Scottish theologian, priest, and philosopher John MacQuarrie was the visiting speaker celebrating the Eucharist at my seminary many years ago when a student spilled an entire chalice of consecrated wine on the carpeted floor. She was beside herself until Fr. Macquarrie gracefully put his arm around her shoulder and whispered “If Jesus can figure out how to get into that wine, he can jolly well figure out how to get out of it.” Now that my friend is a 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian thinker I could relate to easily.

At a Jewish festive meal, it was the custom to drink the cup of blessing after the meal.

In Matthew Jesus offered the disciples the cup and said: “... ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’” (Matthew 26:27-28). In Mark he said: “‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many’” (Mark 14:24). And in Luke Jesus said: “‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood’” (Luke 22:20). Paul’s wording differs significantly from that found in the gospels: “‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood’” (I Corinthians 11:25). The Pauline form does not mention the wine; thus it avoids direct identification of the wine in the cup with blood, and the notion, particularly revolting to a Jew, of drinking blood. And the Romans and Greeks likened taking the body and blood of the Christian prophet to cannibalism. Being a Jew and a Roman, Paul might well have avoided the notion of drinking blood.

Fr. Macquarrie in his *Guide to the Sacraments* taught that “virtually from the beginning of the church, the eucharist was part of its life.” The Eucharist was part of a communal meal, typically in the evening. And as in Jewish meals of the time, and in Jesus’s Last Supper, the breaking of the bread was done before the meal, and the blessing over the wine was done after the meal. So in the early days the Eucharist appears to have been called “the breaking of the bread.” And wine was used only on festival days since

most people were too poor to be able to afford it. The breaking of the bread moved to the end of the communal meal with the blessing over the wine so that the two parts of the Eucharist could be appreciated better side by side.

Were we in Corinth in the 1<sup>st</sup> century or in another of the early Christian communities, we would bring what we had to share to the community meal on the first day of the week. We might have dates and olives to share, as well as the bread and wine. We would sit in table groups, small enough so that every one could reach the common dish and cup. Teaching and instruction was part of these community gatherings. By the second century the time for the Eucharist was moved to the morning. The many tables or table groups became one table or altar. The proclamation of the word was added based on the model of the synagogue worship service. And the communal meal was then held in the evening.

One of the interesting things to me and to Fr. Macquarrie, it seems, is the design of worship space keeping in mind that the sacrament of the Eucharist is the “crown jewel” of all the sacraments. When take part in the Eucharist we are bound together both horizontally and vertically. We can see how the Eucharist celebrated as a communal meal would bind us together horizontally, the participants being bound together and even bound together with the entire Church in one great Eucharistic meal. We experience this in our full meals after a service or before a teaching. The vertical bonding is with Jesus Christ who presides over the one great Eucharist. So we who take part in the Eucharistic meal experience bonding with Jesus and so to God. The sentence in the Prayer of Humble Access most exemplifies this to me: “that we may evermore dwell in him and he in us.”

So a more domestic, inviting, and informal setting, might be the best space for the Eucharist that focuses on the horizontal bonding of God’s people. And a grand cathedral with an arching ceiling might emphasize the vastness and the mystery and the grandeur of our relationship with God. But really, both aspects – the horizontal connection of us one to another and the vertical bonding with Jesus the Christ are inseparable.

For 2000+ years the Eucharist has been at the centre of our worship. Through the Eucharist we are physically nourished and spiritually nourished. We give thanks and partake of holy food and then, as an extension of the Lord's table, we partake in fellowship and food at coffee hour. That too can be sacramental.

Lord, may it be so.

Amen.