

# The Last Supper Today

## *celebrating the gift of the Eucharist*



### 1 Key themes

The Passover;  
Covenants between God and God's people;  
Offerings for sin, and the servant who suffers;  
Friendship meals;  
The Last Supper;  
Jesus' continuing presence with us.

### 2 Covenant: an agreement establishing a relationship between God and God's people

#### 2.a The covenant with Noah

Then God said to Noah: 'I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth. This is the sign of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you: I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.'

Genesis 9: 8-17

God's promise – never to flood the world again.

The rainbow in the clouds – a sign God gave for this particular covenant.

Covenant is sealed by the offering of a sacrifice (here a burnt offering), and the shedding of blood.

These details will be picked up again in the Letter to the Hebrews see below 11.a on p7

#### 2.b The Covenant with Abraham

The Lord said to Abram\*, 'Leave your country, your family and your father's house, for the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name so famous that it will be used as a blessing. I will bless those who bless you: I will curse those who slight you. All the tribes of the earth shall bless themselves by you.' Genesis 12:1ff

\*(God changed Abram's name to Abraham in Genesis 18:4.)

God promised that Abraham would be the father of a great nation- Abraham believed God, even though Abraham was childless his wife past child-bearing age. Later God asked Abraham to sacrifice his only child – and Abraham went to do this (though God intervene to save the child) even if it seemed make it impossible for him to have many descendants. He is therefore often referred to as 'our father in faith'.

#### 2.c See The New Covenant below at 4 on page 3.

### 3 The Passover – The Lord shows he has chosen the people as his own

The chosen people – the Jewish nation – had gone to Egypt to buy food when there was a famine. They stayed there, and prospered. Eventually Pharaoh began to regard them as a threat, and enslaved them. He would not let them go. They escaped on the pretext of offering a sacrifice in the desert. But Pharaoh gave chase . . .

#### 3.a [The people left Egypt] They baked cakes with the dough which they had brought from Egypt, unleavened because the dough was not leavened; they had been driven out of Egypt, with no time for dallying, and had not provided themselves with food for the journey.

Exodus 13:3

When Pharaoh, king of Egypt, was told that the people had made their escape, he . . . had his chariot harnessed and gathered his troops about him, taking six hundred of the best chariots and all the other chariots in Egypt, each manned by a picked team. . . . So the

Egyptians gave chase and came up with them where they lay encamped beside the sea - all the horses, the chariots of Pharaoh, his horsemen, his army. . .

Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove back the sea with a strong easterly wind all night, and he made dry land of the sea. The waters parted and the people of Israel went on dry ground right into the sea, walls of water to right and to left of them. The Egyptians gave chase: after them they went, right into the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen.

In the morning watch, The Lord looked down on the army of the Egyptians from the pillar of fire and of cloud, and threw the army into confusion. He so clogged their chariot wheels that they could scarcely make headway.

'Stretch out your hand over the sea,' The Lord said to Moses, 'that the waters may flow back on the Egyptians and their chariots and their horsemen.' Moses stretched out his hand over the sea and, as day broke, the sea returned to its bed. The fleeing Egyptians marched right into it, and The Lord overthrew the Egyptians in the very middle of the sea.

And Moses and the people sang this song:

". . . Who among the gods is your like, Lord God? Who is your like, majestic in holiness, terrible in deeds of prowess, worker of wonders? You stretched your right hand out, the earth swallowed them! By your grace you led the people you redeemed, by your strength you guided them to your holy house.

Exodus 14&15, passim

- 3.b By these events the Jewish people realised that God had released them from their slavery, and that they were God's chosen people.

Releasing slaves from captivity is the original meaning of the word redemption, a word which we now use for being freed from sin.

Every year afterwards they celebrated this day as The Passover – and on that day always ate unleavened bread, remembering how they had had to eat it while they were escaping.

- 3.c From the contemporary Passover Haggadah (a Haggadah is a ritual or narrative used at a religious celebration) as used today:

The father of the family explains to the children why they use unleavened bread today:

"It is because there was not time for the dough in Egypt to become leavened before the Holy One revealed himself to them and redeemed them. And the dough they had brought out of Egypt they baked into cakes of unleavened bread."

- 3.d From a hymn in the Haggadah:

He brought us out of Egypt,  
and gave us their property, and divided the sea for us,  
and brought us through it dry-shod,  
and drowned our oppressors in it,  
and helped us for forty years in the desert,  
and fed us manna,  
and gave us the Sabbath,  
and brought us to Mount Sinai,  
and gave us the Torah,  
and built for us the holy temple . . .

Passover Haggadah

- 3.e Psalm 136 – thanksgiving for all God's works.

The joyous moment of the Passover became a fundamental part of the Jewish religions. Here is an extract from a psalm (probably written in about 600, around 500 years after the original Passover):

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good Great is his love, love without end;  
 Give thanks to the God of gods, Great is his love, love without end;  
 give thanks to the Lord of lords, Great is his love, love without end.

The first-born of the Egyptians he smote, Great is his love, love without end.  
 He brought Israel out from their midst, Great is his love, love without end;  
 arm outstretched, with power in his hand, Great is his love, love without end.

He divided the Red Sea in two, Great is his love, love without end;  
 he made Israel pass through the midst, Great is his love, love without end;  
 he flung Pharaoh and his force in the sea, Great is his love, love without end.

Through the desert his people he led, Great is his love, love without end;  
 Nations in their greatness he struck, Great is his love, love without end;  
 Kings in their splendour he slew, Great is his love, love without end.

from Psalm 136

- 3.f From the book of Deuteronomy (a second codification of the law given to Moses, dated around 600 – 700 BC)

You are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

Deuteronomy 7:6

- 3.g The Passover meal today:

takes place on special day in the evening;  
 includes unleavened bread;  
 drinking ceremonial cups of wine;  
 bitter herbs (memory of slavery);  
 the Haggadah gives the order of events, hymns used, etc.;  
 the children's questions asking for explanations;  
 above all, remembering all that God has done for them.

#### 4 The New Covenant

- 4.a There were several covenants made with the people in Old Testament times – all of them broken sooner or later by the people. They looked forward to a new covenant with God – everlasting and unbreakable:

- 4.b See, the days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel, but not a covenant like the one I made with their ancestors. . . They broke that covenant of mine. No, this is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel: Deep within them I will plant my Law, writing it on their hearts. Then I will be their God and they shall be my people.

Prophecy of Jeremiah 31:31

Note that this New Covenant is written deep in our hearts.

#### 5 The suffering servant, suffering for the people

Some remarkable passages in the Prophecy of Isaiah (dated around 600BC) which speak of a person who suffers on behalf of the people, and whose suffering relieves them from condemnation.

- 5.a From the prophecy of Isaiah:

Like a sapling he grew up in front of us, like a root in arid ground.  
 And yet ours were the sufferings he bore, ours the sorrows he carried. He was pierced through for our faults, crushed for our sins. On him lies a punishment that brings us peace, and through his wounds we are healed. We had all gone astray like sheep, and The Lord burdened him with the sins of all of us. The Lord has been pleased to crush him with suffering. If he offers his life in atonement, he shall see his heirs, he shall have a long life and through him what The Lord wishes will be done. By his sufferings shall my servant

justify many, taking their faults on himself. He let himself be taken for a sinner, while he was bearing the faults of many and praying all the time for sinners. Isaiah 53:1 ff

(The other texts on this theme in the prophecy of Isaiah are 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; and 52:13 – 53:12.)

## 6 Sacrifices for the forgiveness of sin.

Sacrifices were offered in Old Testament times for the forgiveness of sins – firstly for the priest, then he could do it for the people:

If the anointed priest sins, then let him offer for the sin which he has committed a young bull . . . If any one of the common people sins he shall bring for his offering a goat, a female without blemish . . . Leviticus 4:1-36

These themes will be taken up in the Letter to the Hebrews, see below section 11.a on page 7.

## 7 Jesus having meals with people

7.a Central to our understanding of the Eucharist today are the many occasions when Jesus ate with people – friends, religious leaders (with whom he often deeply disagreed) and with people who were said to be sinners. We refer to these as friendship meals to distinguish them from the Passover.

7.b Jesus and Zacchaeus

Jesus entered Jericho and was going through the town when a man whose name was Zacchaeus made his appearance; he was one of the senior tax collectors and a wealthy man. . . he climbed a sycamore tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus who was to pass that way. When Jesus reached the spot he looked up and spoke to him: 'Zacchaeus, come down. Hurry, because I must stay at your house today.' And he hurried down and welcomed him joyfully. They all complained when they saw what was happening. 'He has gone to stay at a sinner's house' they said. Luke 19:4ff

Note that Zacchaeus did not invite Jesus – Jesus said he wanted to come.

7.c Jesus and Simon the Pharisee

One of the Pharisees invited him to a meal. When he arrived at the Pharisee's house and took his place at table, a woman came in, who had a bad name in the town. She had heard he was dining with the Pharisee and had brought with her an alabaster jar of ointment. She waited behind him at his feet, weeping, and her tears fell on his feet, and she wiped them away with her hair; then she covered his feet with kisses and anointed them with the ointment. . . .

Then he turned to the woman. . . .

he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven'.

Those who were with him at table began to say to themselves, 'Who is this man, that he even forgives sins?'

But he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace'.

Luke 7:37-50

7.d Feeding five thousand hungry people

It was late afternoon when the Twelve came to him and said, 'Send the people away, and they can go to the villages and farms round about to find lodging and food; for we are in a lonely place here'. He replied, 'Give them something to eat yourselves'. But they said, 'We have no more than five loaves and two fish, unless we are to go ourselves and buy food for all these people' For there were about five thousand men. But he said to his disciples, 'Get them to sit down in parties of about fifty'. They did so and made them all sit down.

Then he took the five loaves and the two fish, raised his eyes to heaven, and said the blessing over them; then he broke them and handed them to his disciples to distribute

among the crowd. They all ate as much as they wanted, and when the scraps remaining were collected they filled twelve baskets. Luke 9:12-17

This incident is recorded in all four Gospels. In Saint John's gospel it is the occasion for the most important teaching on the presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist: see Error: Reference source not found section Error: Reference source not found on page Error: Reference source not found.

## 8 Events leading to Jesus' death

The Last Supper was a Passover meal which took place just before Jesus' death. The events leading up to it were:

### 8.a Lazarus brought back to life.

There was a man named Lazarus who lived in the village of Bethany with the two sisters, Mary and Martha, and he was ill. . . [Jesus came, but it took several days] On arriving, Jesus found that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days already.

Jesus said: 'Where have you put him?' They said, 'Lord, come and see'. Jesus wept; and the Jews said, 'See how much he loved him!' Still sighing, Jesus reached the tomb: it was a cave with a stone to close the opening.

Jesus said, 'Take the stone away'. Martha said to him, 'Lord, by now he will smell; this is the fourth day'. They took away the stone. Then Jesus lifted up his eyes and said: 'Father, I thank you for hearing my prayer.' When he had said this, he cried in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, here! Come out!' The dead man came out, his feet and hands bound with bands of stuff and a cloth round his face. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, let him go free'.

Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary and had seen what he did believed in him, but some of them went to tell the Pharisees what Jesus had done.

Then the chief priests and Pharisees called a meeting. 'Here is this man working all these signs' they said 'and what action are we taking? If we let him go on in this way everybody will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy the Holy Place and our nation.'

From that day they were determined to kill him. John 11:1-53 passim.

### 8.b This seems to have been the moment when the decision was made to kill Jesus. Probably they put a price on his head – whoever would lead the temple guard to him in a quiet place where the people could not save him would get thirty pieces of silver.

## 9 Preparations for the Last Supper

Meaning of passover – see above §3 on page 1. Passover is a thanksgiving and celebration for God's having saved the people God had chosen from their slavery in Egypt.

Devout Jews tried to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem, and that was where Jesus decided to celebrate it, even though he realised that it was personally dangerous for him.

This Passover probably took place on a Thursday (15<sup>th</sup> of the Jewish month Nisan 15)..

### 9.a The Last Supper – the probable order of events (see 3.g above on page 3)

Introductory blessing of the feast day

Blessing of the first cup (mentioned only in Luke)

Preliminary dishes (herbs, haroseth . . .)

Passover story is told

First part of praise is sung

Second cup is drunk

Grace over unleavened bread ‡ ►

Meal (lamb, bread, bitter herbs etc)

Grace over third cup

Second part of the praise

‡ Places where Jesus spoke about his body and blood.

► parts which will be retained in the modern Eucharist.

Grace over the cup of blessing. ‡ ►

9.b Grace at the meal

The grace over the unleavened bread, as recorded in the contemporary Haggadah would have been:

Blessed are Thou, Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth. Traditional Jewish blessing

The parallel with the prayer of offering the out Roman Missal today is striking:

Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, through your goodness we have this bread to offer which earth has given and human hands have made. Roman Missal

To this blessing Jesus added some words:

Jesus' grace over the unleavened bread: He took some bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them, and said: "Take: this is my body." Mark 14:22

Jesus' grace over the blessing cup: And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them: "This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many." Mark 14:23

9.c Do this in my memory

These words of Jesus may be hard to interpret. They mean much more than a request that his friends remember him fondly when they share a meal. Three possible translations of the Greek in the gospels:

- Do this in remembrance of me.
- Do this that I be remembered [by God]
- Do this that God may remember me

This sentence almost certainly means more than simply remembering Jesus when we celebrate a s Passover meal – or a Eucharist – together.

It may well contain the nuance that as a result of this celebration God may bring about the restoration of Israel – and therefore us – as God's faithful and chosen people (remember the words about the new covenant in Jeremiah, which we saw earlier: "I will be their God and they shall be my people.")

These words from the modern Passover haggadah calling for something decisive to be brought about make this clearer.

'Our God, may there arise . . . the remembrance of the Messiah.' to cause the kingdom to break in by the parousia. The Passover Haggadah

The parousia refers to the final coming of Jesus Christ at the end of time.

However we understand these words, they are powerful words which indicate the power and importance of what Jesus was doing at the last supper, and hence in the Eucharist today.

9.d The mystery of Christ's death – to understand this – a bit – we need to remember that Jesus Christ is truly an ordinary human being, who would feel about what happened to him just as we would – as well as being truly God.

Christ died as a martyr for what he believed in.

He died as a human, the Messiah, carrying out his Father's will as a reformer of the Jewish faith, and was killed because the religious authorities of his time wanted to be rid of him.

Christ died as God to bring about the New Covenant – Deep within them I will plant my Law, writing it on their hearts. Then I will be their God and they shall be my people.

Prophecy of Jeremiah 31:31

and Christ died to as our redeemer (see below section 11 on page 7).

## 9.e Extract from an early Eucharistic Prayer:

As this broken bread was scattered over the mountains,  
 And was gathered together to become one,  
 So let the body of your faithful be gathered together  
 From the ends of the earth into your kingdom

Didache

The Didache is a brief early Christian treatise, dated to the first century. It emphasises the role of the Eucharist in bringing us who participate together.

**10 What happened soon after the Last Supper.**

This extract from St Paul's letter to the Corinthians shows what happened at the regular Eucharistic meals in the Christian communities in Corinth, and also indicates that the liturgy we have today may not be derived entirely from the Last Supper, but also from the friendship meal tradition inherited from Jesus during his life. The Lord's supper at Corinth: how the friendship meal (see above section 7 on page 4) format became a problem.

## 10.a From St Paul to the Corinthians, date around 55AD

When the time comes to eat, everyone is in such a hurry to start his own supper that one person goes hungry while another is getting drunk. Surely you have homes for eating and drinking in?

For this is what I received from the Lord, and in turn passed on to you: that on the same night that he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread, and thanked God for it and broke it, and he said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this as a memorial of me'. In the same way he took the cup after supper, and said, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me.'

Until the Lord comes, therefore, every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are proclaiming his death, and so anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will be behaving unworthily towards the body and blood of the Lord.

First letter to the Corinthians 11:5 ff

The reduction of the Passover format – see below in section 13 on page 8

**11 Understanding the Eucharist and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ**

11.a The Letter to the Hebrews is contained in the New Testament, but its authorship, and intended readership are unknown. It is dated to before 70AD, because although the author deals with the sacrifices offered in the temple being superseded by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, he does not mention that the temple had been destroyed, as it was in 70AD. The author has a remarkably detailed knowledge of the temple ritual, and also of Christian theology. He shows how Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of the ancient rituals. He also shows a deep sense of Jesus' humanity as well as his Godhead

11.b We have a great high priest, Jesus, the Son of God . . . tempted as we are, yet without sin. . . Every high priest chosen from among men . . . has to offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people.

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications to him who was able to save him out of death, and he was heard for his godly fear. . . being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him . . . designated by God a high priest. .

The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

He has no need, like those priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did this once for all when he offered up himself. Hebrews 4:14ff

11.c The Mystery of Christ's death in Saint Paul.

This extract from Saint Paul gives the essential elements of our salvation history (the Kerygma: Christ died, Christ rose from the dead – and so we are saved).

For if, while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. Romans 5:10

**12 Jesus' teaching in Saint John's gospel**

12.a St John's teaching on the Eucharist is in chapter 6, rather than at the Last Supper.

In St John that things can have two levels of meaning: there is bread (which lasts only for a while, and we still die) and the true bread (which gives us eternal life).

Here John notes that the Passover (not the Last Supper one) was near at hand.

12.b The feeding of the five thousand:

The Passover was at hand. . . .

Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, distributed them . . .

When the people saw the sign, they said 'This is indeed the prophet . . .'

The next day [on the other side of the sea] Jesus said: 'Truly truly I say to you, do not labour for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life.'

'It was not Moses that gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. . . 'I am the bread of life, he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.' 'This is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.'

'I am the bread of life. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread that I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.

For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.

He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. . .

he who eats this bread will live forever.'

John chapter 6, passim

**13 The original Passover ritual has become shrunken to just four elements**

Passover format	Elements originally retained (7 actions)	Format today (4 actions)
Introductory blessing		
Blessing of the first cup		
Preliminary dishes (herbs, haroseth . . )		
Passover story is told		
First part of praise is sung		
Second cup is drunk		
Grace over unleavened bread ▶	Jesus took bread blessed it broke it shared it	Celebrant takes bread and wine Blesses them Breaks the bread Shares them.
Meal (lamb, bread, bitter herbs etc)		
Grace over third cup		
Second part of the praise		
The Blessing Cup ▶	Jesus took the cup blessed it shared it.	