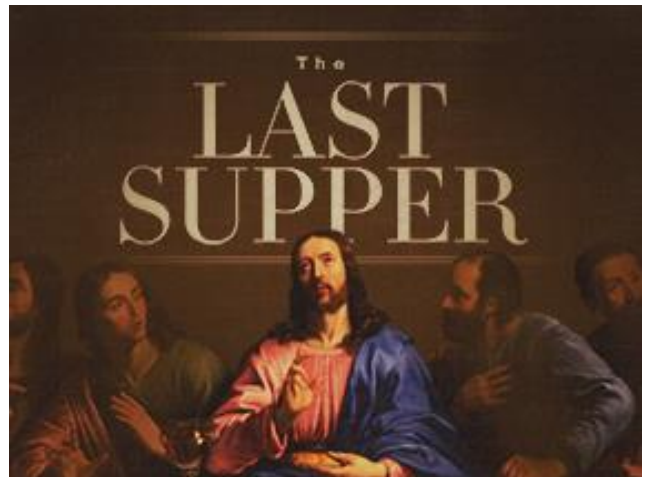


170219 THE LAST SUPPER

19th February 2019

It was a privilege to work with the underground church in China last year - very humbling. They've so much to offer and teach. Now a particularly moving moment was leading communion with the Underground Bible College. Those taking the bread and the cup were mainly young people training to be pastors in China or missionaries to Muslim countries along the Silk Route. Before the service I'd given my liturgy to our translator to check over. Pastor Martin said it was



fine but to allow time for folk to examine themselves. I knew the 1 Corinthians¹ reference so was happy to make room for some self examination. Well, when it came time I was surprised. I'd expected a quiet, self-reflection of the heart but no - they started praying and repenting out aloud, the volume rose as they prayed earnestly and for many with tears. After time, I whispered to Pastor Martin, "Shall we move on". "No, give it more time". After a bit longer I whispered again and this time got OK to move onto to the bread and the wine.

Communion is wonderful - celebrated all over world, from the largest mega church to the smallest of home gatherings in persecuted China. It's called "mass" by Catholics, communion by protestants and the Lord's Supper by many. It's centered around bread and wine but with much talk of a body broken and blood spilt. Well this morning as we are working through the last three chapters of Matthew we come to the Last Supper. Here we'll see how communion started, what it means and implications for us today. How it started, what it means and implications for today.

Prayer

This is our third message in Matthew 26 and let's pick up the story in verses 17-19:

On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?"

He replied, "Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, 'The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at

¹ 1 Corinthians 11:28

your house.’ ” So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover. Matthew 26:17–19

Notice the three-fold use of the word “Passover”. This is no accident. Repetition is a common way the Bible highlight what’s important. By this repetition Matthew not only stresses the Last Supper was a Passover meal but how incredibly important Passover is to understanding why Jesus had to suffer, why he went to the cross.

With preparations complete let’s move onto the meal itself.

Verse 20

When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. Matthew 26:20

So Jesus and his disciples around a table. A table laid out with the Passover meal - bread without yeast, wine, bitter herbs, roast lamb. Now every Passover has a presider - someone to introduce and explain each course. Most often it was a father around a table with the extended family. Here, Jesus presides. He takes on the role of introducing and explaining each course of the meal - but with difference.

Now as we explore the Last Supper, we’ll focus on three elements making up the meal. Elements, not only to eat but packed with meaning. The first is the bread.

I. The Bread

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.” Matthew 26:26

Now what’s the background surrounding the bread at Passover? Well the bread was different than normal in that it was made without yeast, often called unleavened bread. What happens to bread baked without yeast? It doesn’t rise. If dough is rolled thin then becomes like a large cracker biscuit when baked. Why, this bread? Because the night of the first Passover in Egypt was one of escape. When the death of the first-born sons of Egypt was discovered their first response was to rid themselves of the Israelites. Grabbing the opportunity the Israelites didn’t have time for any bread dough to rise. So they quickly baked bread without yeast to sustain them in their flight from Egypt.

To this day eating unleavened bread reminds the Israelites of their flight from Egypt. So at some point in the Passover meal the father picks up the bread baked without yeast by his wife the day before. Then he says in front of his children, “This is the bread of affliction, that our fathers ate in the land of Egypt”. He would pass the bread around the table and all the guests, including the children, would take a nibble while he retold the story of how much their fathers suffered so those eating the meal could be free.

Notice, however, what Jesus does at the Last Supper? He takes up the bread as expected but changes everything. Instead of saying, "This is the bread of affliction, that our fathers ate in the land of Egypt" he breaks the bread and says, "Take and eat, this is my body". In affect he's saying, "I am the new bread of affliction. Long ago, our fathers ate the bread of affliction so we could be free. But I tell you I am the bread of affliction who will bring you out of greater bondage. On the night before they were redeemed from slavery they ate the first Passover, tonight's the night I redeem you from much worse. Tonight I'm going to pull off the greatest of all rescues. This will be an Exodus beyond all Exodus'. Take and eat, this is my body - the bread of my affliction". This then is the bread we take every communion.

II. The Wine

So now to the second element of the meal, the wine. There are four cups of wine served at the Passover meal. The four cups represent four ways of describing their rescue from slavery as found in Exodus 6:6-7. The cups are prefaced with God saying "I will..."

Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Exodus 6:6–7

The four cups are

1. "I will bring you out..."
2. "I will free you..."
3. "I will redeem you..."
4. "I will take you as my own people..."

And as each cup was served the presider would explain various aspects of the Israelites rescue from slavery.

But notice what Jesus does. Jesus brings something new. Jesus redefines the Passover cup.

Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Matthew 26:27–28

With this cup Jesus brings three new ideas to the table; covenant, blood and forgiveness of sins. The previous covenant was made with Abraham. It was because God was faithful to his covenant with Abraham that he rescued the Israelites. This old covenant was sealed by the sacrifice of animals. Now Jesus institutes a new covenant. One that will be sealed by the blood of God's own son.

How does this work? Well, remember the blood of the Passover lamb was placed above the doorway. When the angel of death saw the blood he would pass over that house and move to the next. Jesus is saying this new covenant is available to all who shelter under his blood, the true and better Passover Lamb. And this “sheltering under” is be marked by the forgiveness of sins. This is a new emphasis of the Passover meal. The traditional Passover focuses on rescue from slavery. Jesus is saying that with his death this new covenant would be marked by rescue from sin and death and the complete forgiveness of sins. Jesus redefines the four cups into one. One filled with his blood that bring us both rescue and forgiveness. This is the cup we drink every communion.

III. The Lamb

Now for the third element of the meal - the main course. We’ve looked at the bread and the wine and, though they’re vital, they’re not the main course. I mean you don’t go out to a restaurant, order garlic bread and a beer and call it a meal. You don’t invite friends over for dinner, serve up focaccia bread and a glass of wine and expect to be considered good hosts. Not at all - these are just starters. So what is the main course at Passover? It’s... lamb. Roast lamb. Now why doesn’t Jesus mention the Passover lamb in the Last Supper? He’s redefined the bread and wine, so why not the lamb. Because... Jesus himself is the Passover lamb. All those hints and comments about his death in the previous months were pointing to him being the Passover Lamb. His references to being betrayed, handed over and crucified, point to death as the True and Better Passover Lamb.

It’s Jesus, not a woolly quadruped, whose blood we shelter under to be saved. Something John the Baptist recognised. He made the connection way before anyone else. At the very start of Jesus’ ministry, just after his baptism, we read...

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! John 1:29

Jesus is the Passover Lamb. Long before, the Israelites sheltered under the blood of a lamb the night before being rescued from slavery. At the Last Supper the disciples celebrated a new Passover Meal the night before an even greater rescue; the rescue from sin and death by the True and Better Passover Lamb. Yes, Jesus’ body is the bread of affliction who sets us free, his blood is what we shelter under, and Christ himself is the Passover Lamb who rescues and forgives. This is why Jesus, the Son of Man, went to the cross. This is why he suffered so cruelly. This is why we bow our knee and worship the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Amen and Amen!

And now, looked at the origin and meaning of communion, let’s consider the implications. What are the implications of the Last Supper on the way we celebrate communion here in New Zealand in the 21st century, Well out of the many we will briefly consider four:

1. Passover informs Communion

The Passover meal informs Communion but is not the same as Communion. So here at GPC we have normal bread and grape juice. Not unleavened bread and wine. Some churches do, but we don't. You see there are many ways of celebrating communion that fall within God's Word and resonate with each culture and age. In the past these differences have caused much division in the church. However it's Jesus' interpretation of the Last Supper that has the final Word not the Passover or Church traditions.

2. Children

Secondly there are implications for children. Traditionally mainstream churches, like Presbyterian, Anglican, Roman Catholic, have restricted children's participation until they've been baptised as infants and gone through communion classes. Some independent denominations and churches hold the same view, others are more relaxed. Now this is how I see it. Children play a central role in the Passover meal. They're instructed, they participate and they don't wait until a certain age. The key here is being instructed. So if there are parents here who want their children to take communion then I believe that's fine as long as you've talked to your children, in your home, about what it means. For me growing up I was happy to let the communion plate pass while I was young and when I went through communion classes and took my first communion it was very special. So Judy and I have always said no to our children until they went through baptism classes. I would do the same again. So to repeat, if you're happy to instruct your children at home, at an age appropriate level then fine. Otherwise children wait.

3. Jesus is the host

Thirdly, there's the reminder that Jesus is the hosting communion and not the minister. Now this is not always clear. Because Jesus is present by his Spirit and not physically it looks like the minister is the host. Not at all. Far from it. Think of the minister as the servant who waits on his Master and distributes the bread and wine from the real host, Jesus. That's why I wear a stole. Though they can be elaborate they represent the towel Jesus had around his neck when he washed his disciples' feet. Also the word minister is derived from the Latin word for servant. So remember Jesus is host. You may be tempted to thank me for serving you. Please don't. The thanks are directed the wrong way - Christ deserves your thanks. Myself and those distributing the elements are very much his servants.

4. "Do this in remembrance of me"

The final implication is a reminder of communion's significance. Apart from Matthew the four other Biblical accounts of the Last Supper have Jesus clearly saying, "Do this in remembrance of me". After breaking the bread, "Do this in remembrance of me". After taking the cup, "Do this in remembrance of me". Twice repeated. Do you know there's no other place in the Bible where Jesus asks us to repeatedly remember something he's done. Jesus doesn't ask us to repeatedly remember his miracles, his healings, his washing the disciples' feet or even his resurrection - no only his death. Why? - because the cross is the single most important event in all human history. All human history before was leading up to the cross and no matter

what Trump, the Putin or Xi Jinping think, all human history after will be defined by the the cross. This is no small thing. We celebrate Waiting Day and ANZAC day, important though they are, nothing compares in all human history to when Christ followers break everyday bread and take an everyday cup. We stand on holy ground.

So what have we covered today. We've seen the origin of communion is rooted in the Passover. We're seen how the Passover sheds light on the meaning of communion. The bread is the bread of affliction, Christ's body, broken that we might be rescued. We've seen the cup is Christ's blood, that we shelter under as God's judgement passes over us. And we've seen Jesus himself is the Passover Lamb who was slain to rescue us from slavery, slavery to sin and death. Every time we celebrate communion we remember and participate in the work of the cross - Christ's death, for our rescue, for God's glory.

No wonder Revelation loves to show Jesus as the lamb that was slain. Let's finish with words from Revelation. Please stand and we will join with the angels and heavenly beings...

“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!”

Revelation 5:1