

SERMON NOTES

Great Thursday
Holy Eucharist

Syntaxes Gospel
Matthew 26:17-30

THE NEW COVENANT

INTRODUCTION

The second reading for Great Thursday, the evening we remember the Last Supper of our Lord, is from the Gospel of Matthew and is paralleled quite closely by the Gospels of Mark and Luke. The reading can be divided into three parts: the preparation, the pronouncement concerning the traitor, and the portrayal of the covenant—the Eucharist.

As we noticed earlier in the first reading for this evening—from the Gospel of John, which described our Lord washing the feet of His disciples—there seems to be a difference between John and the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, concerning on which day these events occurred. John definitely places the Supper on the evening before Passover, and the Synoptics *seem*, from the copies we have of their manuscripts, to be equally definite that the Supper occurred on Passover.¹

The Passover was the first of the seven important feasts of the Jewish calendar. It was a remembrance of the night that the Pharaoh was convinced by the death of all the firstborn in Egypt to allow his slaves, the Israelites, to leave. The Israelites themselves had been protected from the plague that killed the firstborn; they had obediently killed a lamb and smeared its blood on the lintel and doorposts of their homes. That night, the Death Angel, on seeing the blood, passed over the marked homes and did not slay the first born within those protected dwellings.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread was, likewise, a remembrance of the exodus from Egypt. The Israelites, in their haste to leave the morning after Passover, did not have time to allow their bread to leaven, and so, carried it with them unleavened. It became a statute that at the Passover Meal no leaven was to be found in the home; the meal was, therefore, to be eaten with unleavened bread.

¹ The discovery of earlier manuscripts in the future may clear up the seeming discrepancy, but until then, our Church simply refers to that last evening meal of our Lord before His crucifixion as the Lord's Supper. Please see the excursus in the Appendix, "The Lord's Supper and Passover."

The Passover celebration was actually a part, the 1st day, of the week-long Jewish Feast of Unleavened Bread. On the 14th day of the month Nisan², at twilight (the days began and ended in the evening), the Passover Lamb was killed and eaten as the evening meal that began the 15th day of Nisan. The Feast of Unleavened Bread closed at evening of the 21st day of the month Nisan. Both the 1st and the 7th day of the Feast were days of Holy Convocation. All days of Holy Convocation were considered High Sabbaths. The normal Sabbath was the 7th day of the week. However, a High Sabbath, depending on the month, might fall on a different day than the 7th day (our Saturday). In seeing Thursday evening as Passover for that year, Friday until evening would have been the 15th of Nisan the year our Lord was crucified. Friday would have been a High Sabbath, a day of Holy Convocation. By Law, no work was allowed on days of Holy Convocation.

From this, we can see that if the Jewish leaders had Jesus crucified on Friday, and if Friday was *the day after Passover evening*, they broke the Laws of Moses in an astonishing way for those who prided themselves as guardians and interpreters of the Law.

SYNAXIS READING

Matthew 26:17-30

“Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?”

And He said, “Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, ‘The Teacher says, “My time is at hand; I am to keep the Passover at your house with My disciples.”’”

And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover.

Now when evening had come, He was reclining at the table with the twelve disciples. And as they were eating, He said, “Truly I say to you that one of you will betray Me.”

And being deeply grieved, they each one began to say to Him, “Surely not I, Lord?”

And He answered and said, “He who dipped his hand with Me in the bowl is the one who will betray Me. The Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man

² The ancient name for this month was Abib.

is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born."

And Judas, who was betraying Him, answered and said, "Surely it is not I, Rabbi?" He said to him, "You have said it yourself."

And while they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body."

And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins."

But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom."

And after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

NOTES

1. The Preparation of the Passover

“Now on the first *day* of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?’”

If Matthew is consistent with Mark and Luke, who in the parallel passages also call this day the first day of Unleavened bread, they are all referring to the 14th day of the month Nisan,³ for Mark, like Luke, adds that it is the day when the Passover lamb was being sacrificed. This day actually began the evening before; (the evening, not the morning, began the day). We observe this event on Thursday evening; the following evening would be the Friday evening beginning the Feast of Unleavened Bread or Passover.

Understanding the Synoptics reference to the first day of Unleavened Bread in this way—though a bit confusing from a western viewpoint of time—reconciles the Synoptic Gospels with that of John.

It must have been at sunset on Thursday—the 14th was just beginning—that this question was posed to Jesus, for by the next morning, Jesus had been arrested.

In order to prepare to eat the Passover, one must cleanse the dwelling of leaven, for only unleavened bread was permitted for Passover and the week to follow.

³ Exodus 12:18. Here the month is called Abib. After the Babylonian Captivity, the Jews adopted the Babylonian calendar and Abib, the early name for the first month of the Jewish calendar, became Nisan. See Nehemiah 2:1. Today, as in the first century of our era, Passover is celebrated the evening of the 15th of Nisan.

And He said, ‘Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, “The Teacher says, ‘My time is at hand; I am to keep the Passover at your house with My disciples.’ ” ’

“At your house” is literally “by you,” or “in company with you.”

The verb translated, “I am to keep,” though it could be translated as a fact—“I am keeping,”—it should probably be taken in the subjunctive indicating only a possibility—“I may keep.”

Mark gives more details about the *certain man*. Jesus told two of the disciples, “Go into the city, and a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him; and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher says, “Where is My guest room in which I may eat⁴ the Passover with My disciples?” ’ ”

Luke adds that the two disciples Jesus sent on this mission were Peter and John.

Jesus often referred to the time of His crucifixion as His *hour*; here, it is “My *time* is at hand.”

And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover.

The disciples’ preparation on that evening would be the cleansing of the room of leaven, while the rest of the preparations—the arrangement for the sacrificed lamb and other items would be carried out on the next day (the continuation of the 14th which had started that evening).

2. The Pronouncement on the Betrayer

Now when evening had come, He was reclining at the table with the **twelve** disciples. And as they were eating, He said, “Truly I say to you that one of you will betray Me.”

In the room freshly cleansed of leaven, Jesus and His disciples ate their supper. They did not sit but reclined, probably on pillows, around the table. The diner supported himself on one elbow, the left, and ate with the right hand.

Although other persons may have been present, the **twelve** are specifically mentioned as being at the table with Jesus. (Mark relates that a young man was present—or, at least, following the group later as they went to the Mount of Olives—dressed only in a sheet wrapped around his naked body. It is suspected that the young man was Mark himself, possibly having slipped out of bed to observe Jesus and His disciples.)

Jesus announced that He knew He would be betrayed by one of the twelve.

And being deeply grieved, they each one began to say to Him, “Surely not I, Lord?”

Each disciple, greatly upset, used the same form of the question, which expects a “No” answer.⁵

⁴ In the Greek the verb is a deliberative subjunctive, and only indicates possibility, not fact. “Where is My guest room in which I may possibly eat the Passover with My disciples?”

⁵ Even Judas expected Jesus to answer in the negative. What was Judas thinking—that Jesus was deceived?

And He answered and said, “He who dipped his hand with Me in the bowl is the one who will betray Me.

Eating with another person created a sacred bond of friendship. King David, a thousand years earlier, had been betrayed by his trusted friend and counselor, Ahithophel. To show the depth of the treachery, David lamented in Psalm 41:9, “Even my close friend, in whom I trusted, **who ate my bread**, has lifted up his heel against me.” Therefore, the mode which Jesus chose to identify Judas heavily underscored how heinous was the crime he was about to commit. He was the one who dipped his hand into the bowl with his host.

Evidently, however, no one understood that it was Judas. John in his Gospel explains that Jesus gave the sop of bread to Judas, and then told Judas to do what he was going to do quickly. The disciples thought Jesus had sent his treasurer on a mission to give something to the poor, or to buy something for the Passover.

The Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born.”

The statement mentioned above made by King David in Psalm 41:9 was taken as a prophecy that the Messiah, David’s descendant, would likewise be betrayed by one of His closest associates.

This pronouncement of woe on the betrayer should have been taken by Judas as an invitation to confess and repent and be forgiven. The fate that awaited Judas if he continued was horrible. The betrayal had already occurred by Judas’ involvement in the plot, and so, the prophecy had been fulfilled already. What Judas did next was up to him.

And Judas, who was betraying Him, answered and said, “Surely it is not I, Rabbi?” He said to him, “You have said it yourself.”

Judas chose not to confess, but to play innocent and proceed with his treachery. Is it a coincidence that He did not use the title *Lord*, but instead used *Rabbi* (Teacher) in his reply?

But our Lord’s response left no doubt that He knew that Judas was guilty. “You have said it yourself” was an indirect way of saying “Yes! It is true.”

In the Synoptic accounts, we are not told when Judas left. Matthew and Mark place the identification of the traitor before the Eucharist, Luke places it after the Eucharist. The writers were not concerned with chronology but with emphasis. Luke seems to emphasize— as John did with the account of the foot washing—that Judas was present and participated in the Eucharist.

3. The Portrayal of His Death—the Eucharist

And while they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is My body.”

Jesus interrupted the evening meal, and with great simplicity, established what has become the central focus of our worship service, the Eucharist (Thanksgiving). Jesus *gave thanks* for the bread and the wine.

Jesus often used metaphors in His teaching. It would have been obvious to the disciples that Jesus was using the bread as a meaningful symbol of His body, although at this point, they did not understand the symbolism.⁶

Our Lord was portraying His death; on the morrow His body would be broken just as the bread was broken. By eating the bread, the disciples symbolically partook of His coming death. Later, St. Paul wrote:

“Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him.”⁷

And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.

The second part of the Eucharist (Thanksgiving) is the wine. While the bread symbolizes His death by broken body, the wine symbolizes His death in the shedding of His blood. Blood is also often used in the Bible as a metaphor for death. To be guilty of blood, meant that one was guilty of someone’s death.

The covenant is the New Covenant promised in Jeremiah 31:31-34:

“Behold the days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD.

“But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

A covenant was always ratified with shed blood. In the case of the New Covenant, the blood would be that of our LORD and it would make the New Covenant possible. This blood was shed that the iniquities might be forgiven and remembered no more, because it was the payment in full for every sin ever, or ever will be, committed.. This New Covenant binds those covered by it to God in a new way; they will know Him in an intimate way never before experienced.

⁶ Later Christians have been divided concerning the symbols of the Bread and the Wine. However, the renowned scholar and former Patriarch of Constantinople, Malachia Ormanian, in his book, *The Church of Armenia*, translated by G. Marcar Gregory (New York: St. Vartan Press, 1988) p. 109, makes it clear that the Armenian Church does not admit the Roman Catholic view of the Eucharist: transubstantiation. According to Ormanian, “All these innovations could only have been accepted by the Latin world by an improper interpretation of the practices of the primitive Church.” Please see the Excursus: “The Armenian View of the Holy Eucharist according to Ormanian.”

⁷ Romans 6:6-8

But I say to you, I will not drink of **this** fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom."

Fruit of the vine, was another way of saying *wine*. Note that Jesus notes that **this** symbol of His blood in the cup is still **wine**.

Was the Father's Kingdom inaugurated after the Resurrection, or will it be at the Second Advent? Our Lord was probably referring to the great wedding banquet He will celebrate with the Church—all those who have accepted Him as their Savior and King.

And after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Judas must have left them by this time. Our Lord and His remaining disciples ended the supper by singing a hymn of praise to God. The Mt. of Olives was a short walk across the Kidron Valley. There was an olive garden there, the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus would spend His last hours with the disciples in prayer. There He awaited the mob of soldiers led by Judas and the beginning of His ordeal.

APPLICATION

The middle reading of our Great Thursday service recounts what Matthew has chosen to record about the Last Supper of our Lord. The main focus is on two events: the announcement that there was a traitor among the disciples and the establishment of the Holy Eucharist. These two events are linked together in Matthew just as the Foot-washing event was linked to the announcement about the traitor in John's account of the Last Supper. Both accounts show us sinful man and his need on the one hand, and the gracious and loving provision of God on the other hand.

The traitor, Judas, shows us what we are. Mankind was created and chosen by God to be His own. We were bestowed the high honor of bearing His image in ourselves. We were fed with His food and were bound closely to Him, and He to us. Yet man turned from God, spurned His love and care; we gave our allegiance to His enemy, Satan. We plunged our beautiful world into pain, sorrow, wars, and evil beyond description. God could put a stop to it; He could kill every one of us and start over, but He loves us.

God loves us so much; He was willing to do anything to save His enemies—ungrateful, covenant breaking, and treacherous mankind. For, while we— thinking only of our own personal and illicit gain—broke the sacred covenant, symbolized by the eating of His food, He remains faithful to us. He is willing to forgive us and take us back. The Eucharist portrays for us the provision He has made to do just that. He took upon Himself our form in order to pay the penalty Himself for our treachery.

The Eucharist shows us⁸ our Lord's broken body that died on the Cross for us, taking the punishment that we earned as traitors. The Eucharist shows us⁸ His blood, poured out in death to ratify the New Covenant—a covenant even greater than the one we broke; a covenant that will make possible complete forgiveness, plunging our sins in the sea of

⁸ The Eucharist spiritually depicts the event on the Cross that happened only once for all time (Hebrews 10:12).

God's forgetfulness, never more to be remembered; a covenant that will bind us once more to Him in a way never before dreamed of, astonishing even the holy angels.

Will we be Judas; will we ignore God's gracious and loving offer, and feign innocence, preferring rather to serve the lying Satan that wishes only our destruction? It would be better for us if we had never been born.

No, rather, let us in thankfulness accept His gracious provision of salvation and restoration. Let us joyfully enter into the New Covenant, letting Him write His ways upon our heart, letting Him wrap His cords of love tightly around us, binding us forever to Himself in an intimate relationship that can only be described as *knowing Him*.

As we stand before the Food He gives us, the Holy Eucharist, the Food of Thanksgiving, and remember His sacrifice for us—His laying aside His glorious majesty to stoop to the Cross to save us, undergoing unimaginable spiritual horrors—may we respond with our own sacrifice, the sacrifice of our lives in service to Him. It is little, nay nothing, compared with what He has done for us, but it is the most we can do to show our love and thankfulness to Him. In this moment of remembrance and commitment, we will know the power of His Holy Spirit within us, and we will leave knowing that in His power we cannot fail, for we are bound to Him, and He to us.