

Holy Thursday

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

The day we celebrate as Holy Thursday is the day in Jesus' time which was the preparation day for the Passover. Jesus sent in from Bethany to reserve a place for the Passover meal. At evening, which is at the beginning of a new day as the Hebrews account time (from sundown to sundown), the apostles and Jesus gathered together for the Passover meal, and Our Lord washed the feet of the apostles. During the Passover meal Our Lord instituted the Blessed Sacrament as His eternal memorial. Toward the end of the meal Judas, identified as the traitor, left. He foretold the betrayal of Peter and in the last discourse encouraged them to love one another. Interrupting the Passover meal prior to its completion, Jesus and His apostles go out to the Mount of Olives. At Gethsemani on the Mount of Olives, He took the three apostles (Peter, James, and John) and began His agony in the garden.

1st Reading - Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14

Our first reading is the account of the establishment of the first Passover meal. In the events leading up to this point the Israelites, who have been held captive in Egypt, are under the leadership of Moses who has with him his older brother Aaron to speak for him. Moses and Aaron have gone to Pharaoh repeatedly and asked that their people be allowed to leave Egypt to into the desert for three days to offer sacrifice to their God (Yahweh). Pharaoh has repeatedly denied them permission and after each denial a plague comes upon Egypt, although in each case the Israelites are spared: First, all the water turned to blood (the Nile was worshiped as the god Hapi and its turning to blood signifies that Yahweh has slain Hapi). Second, Egypt is overrun with frogs (the goddess Heket was worshiped in the form of a frog) and these frogs die everywhere and really stink up the place. Third is the plague of gnats and this is followed by the fourth plague, the plague of flies. This is followed by the fifth plague, the plague on livestock (the bull was worshiped as the god Apis, the cow as the god Hathor, and the ram as the god Khnum). The sixth plague, that of boils, is followed by the plague of hail which devastates all the crops and what survives this is devoured by the plague of locusts which follows. Then, the ninth plague overtakes the land, the plague of darkness (the sun was worshiped as the god Re). Then the tenth plague is announced to Pharaoh "**Thus says the LORD: At midnight I will go forth through Egypt. Every first-born in this land shall die, from the first-born of Pharaoh on the throne to the first-born of the slave-girl at the handmill, as well as all the first-born of the animals. Then there shall be loud wailing throughout the land of Egypt, such as has never been, nor will ever be again. But among the Israelites and their animals not even a dog shall growl, so that you may know how the LORD distinguishes between the Egyptians and the Israelites**" (Exodus 11:4-7). Even this fails to convince Pharaoh so Moses and Aaron return to their people to prepare them. What we hear today are God's instructions to Moses and Aaron who will then convey this information to the people. We will read all the verses rather than omitting 9 and 10.

12:1 The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, ² "This month shall stand at the head of your calendar; you shall reckon it the first month of the year.

This is the month of Nisan (corresponds to March-April in the Gregorian calendar).

³ Tell the whole community of Israel: On the tenth of this month every one of your families must procure for itself a lamb, one apiece for each household. ⁴ If a family is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join the nearest household in procuring one and shall share in the lamb in proportion to the number of persons who partake of it.

Notice that the sacrifice is to be shared in a family setting.

⁵ The lamb must be a year-old male and without blemish.

It is a sacrificial offering to Yahweh and as such is to be the finest which is available; not old, deformed, diseased or infirm.

You may take it from either the sheep or the goats. ⁶ You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, and then, with the whole assembly of Israel present, it shall be slaughtered during the evening twilight.

The lambs are to be sacrificed in the community of Israel, they not individual sacrifices, but the sacrifice of the community of the people of God.

⁷ They shall take some of its blood and apply it to the two doorposts and the lintel of every house in which they partake of the lamb.

As with all covenants, this covenant with God has a sign – the blood marking the doorposts and lintel (the horizontal beam which forms the top of the doorway). Exodus 12:22 tells us that the blood is to be applied with a branch of hyssop.

⁸ That same night they shall eat its roasted flesh

Even if they don't like lamb, they must eat the sacrifice as a mark of family unity. Part of the rite which forges the covenant involves eating the sacrifice; as is later reflected in the communion (peace) offerings of Leviticus 3; 7:11-21. Failure to eat the sacrifice would invalidate the offering and the firstborn would die.

with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

The unleavened bread is to show that it is done in haste, there is not time to allow the dough to rise. As they flee Egypt there will be no time to bake, the sun will beat down on the dough as they carry it. The bitter herbs are to serve as a reminder of the bitterness which they have endured as slaves.

⁹ It shall not be eaten raw or boiled, but roasted whole, with its head and shanks and inner

organs. ¹⁰ None of it must be kept beyond the next morning; whatever is left over in the morning shall be burned up.

The burned portion constitutes the offering to God. Exodus 12:22 also tells us that everyone was to stay within the house until morning.

¹¹ "This is how you are to eat it: with your loins girt,

This means that their tunics are pulled tight, with the ends tucked into the belt, so that their clothing is not loose and tripping them or otherwise hindering their movement.

sandals on your feet and your staff in hand, you shall eat like those who are in flight. It is the Passover of the LORD. ¹² For on this same night I will go through Egypt, striking down every first-born of the land, both man and beast, and executing judgment on all the gods of Egypt-I, the LORD! ¹³ But the blood will mark the houses where you are. Seeing the blood, I will pass over you; thus, when I strike the land of Egypt, no destructive blow will come upon you. ¹⁴ "This day shall be a memorial feast for you, which all your generations shall celebrate with pilgrimage to the LORD, as a perpetual institution.

A memorial feast is the type of sacrifice which is repeated on a regular basis (in this case it is specified to be repeated annually in verses 18 and 19). A memorial feast didn't simply recall what was once done, it made the participants in the memorial present as participants in the original sacrifice.

2nd Reading - 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Our second reading contains the words of consecration which we hear at every Mass. The time of this writing is some 27 years after Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. Saint Paul was not present at the Last Supper, being known at that time as Saul the Pharisee (Acts 7:58). Saint Paul's conversion took place on the road to Damascus about the year 35.

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you,

What Saint Paul is recalling here is the private revelation and instruction which he received from Our Lord at the time of his conversion (Acts 9).

that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, ²⁴ and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

"Remembrance" is not sitting back and recalling fond memories. For the Hebrew, remembrance is participation in the memorial sacrifice which makes the participants present at the first institution. This event is the only time which Jesus mentions the "new covenant," the covenant which will fulfill the covenants which were made with the Chosen People during the Old Testament times.

²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.

By proclaiming the death of the Lord, they are uniting themselves with Him as He celebrates the Last Supper, is tried, and is crucified on Calvary. If the bread and cup were only symbols, rather than being Jesus' Body and Blood, they would not be present at the original event (re-presenting the original sacrifice), but instead would be participating in a re-enactment (a representation) of the event.

Although it is not included in today's reading, we will continue reading for four more verses to determine the importance which Saint Paul (and Our Lord) attaches to his teaching:

²⁷ Therefore

Whenever we see "therefore" in Holy Scripture, we should pause to see what it is there-for. We are now receiving a summary of the previous teaching; a summary which emphasizes the important points.

whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord

The Greek phrase for "answer for the body and blood" is a technical way of saying "guilty of murder." I can tear your picture up, burn your flag, or do some other action to a symbol of you and you may be insulted, but you certainly aren't murdered. Therefore, what appears to be "bread" and "the cup" must be much more than just symbols, they must actually be Jesus Himself.

²⁸ A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰ That is why many among you are ill and infirm, and a considerable number are dying.

A person must examine their belief in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. If they don't truly believe (Saint Paul uses the term "discerning" which means seeing with the eyes of faith) that Jesus is present there body, blood, soul and divinity; they should not partake of the sacrament. To do so desecrates the sacrament because it denies Christ's divinity – His ability to do what He said He would and did do. Denying the Real Presence makes one guilty of being on the same team as those who betrayed, tried and condemned Him. Remember what happened to Judas who took the morsel and departed into the darkness of night and also of sin (John 13:30; Matthew 27:5; Acts 1:18). Every time we receive communion, we do so as a member of our faith family, the people of God.

Gospel - John 13:1-15

Saint John finds symbolism in Jesus' words and deeds and strives to relate them as practically as possible to the life of the Christian in the world. This account of Jesus washing of the feet of His disciples is unique to John's gospel, although there are hints of similar actions in Luke 22:27.

13:1 Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father.

This is the same “hour” to which Jesus referred back in John 2:4 when He told His mother “My hour has not yet come.” It is now time to begin the sacrifice which will lead to His glorification: His passion, crucifixion, death, and resurrection.

He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end.

Jesus’ love for all humanity is the theme which underscores this entire scene. What is to come is Jesus’ final display of His love and is the supreme exemplification of that love.

² The devil had already induced Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot, to hand him over.

See Luke 22:3; John 6:70; 13:27. The gospels show us the presence and activity of the devil throughout Jesus’ life. Satan is the enemy (Matthew 13:39), the evil one (1 John 2:13). What is emphasized in this passage is a comparison of the malice of Judas with the goodness of Christ; who reaches out and washes the feet of Judas and treats him as a friend right up to the moment when He is betrayed (Luke 22:48)

So, during supper, ³ fully aware that the Father had put everything into his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God,

Notice how Saint John places the emphasis on Jesus’ awareness of His relation to the Father at this time. This shows that Jesus intends this act to be a concrete symbol of the humiliation of His incarnational state.

⁴ he rose from supper and took off his outer garments. He took a towel and tied it around his waist. ⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and dry them with the towel around his waist.

Jesus voluntarily humbles Himself to the point of performing the task of a slave or servant. “[Jesus], though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave . . .” (Philippians 2:6-7).

⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Master, are you going to wash my feet?"

Saint Peter understands particularly well how thoroughly our Lord has humbled Himself, and he protests in the same manner as he did on other occasions when he did not want to hear of Christ suffering (Matthew 8:32).

⁷ Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing, you do not understand now, but you will understand later."

Jesus had said that He came into this world not to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45). While the

disciples are concerned about pride and vanity, Jesus teaches humility by example, by His deeds.

⁸ Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet."

Saint Peter fails to grasp the deeper significance of Jesus' action at this time. He does not even suspect that God plans to save men through the sacrifice of Christ.

Jesus answered him, "Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me."

This action typifies Jesus' life work, which Peter must accept as God's will even as Jesus has done. If Saint Peter persists, he will not share in the "place" which Jesus offers His disciples (see John 14:3, 17:24); he will be cut off. In all likelihood Saint John expects the Christian reader of this narrative to relate Jesus' words to their own life and be reminded of the function of baptism.

⁹ Simon Peter said to him, "Master, then not only my feet, but my hands and head as well."

Saint Peter still speaks in a shallow manner, not understanding the deeper significance. If Jesus insists on washing his feet as the condition of continued fellowship, so be it! But let him be washed entirely so that his share with the Lord will be complete.

¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Whoever has bathed has no need except to have his feet washed, for he is clean all over; so you are clean,

What Peter asks is quite unnecessary. The foot washing, after all, is only an example; it is not that the disciples need to have any part of their bodies washed. Having their share in Christ, they have all that is needed. "You are already clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. That is: You are clean only to that extent. You have already received the Light; you have already got rid of the Jewish error. The Prophet asserted: 'Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil from your souls' (Isaiah 1:16). . . . Therefore, since they had rooted out all evil from their souls and were following Him with complete sincerity, He declared, in accordance with the Prophet's words: 'He who has bathed is clean all over'" (Saint John Chrysostom, *Homily on Saint John*, 70, 3). By his choice of Greek words, Saint John again suggests baptism to the Christian reader ("bathe" *louō* was a word used for religious washings, and in 1 Corinthians 6:11; Ephesians 5:26; Titus 3:5; and Hebrews 10:22 various forms of this word are used to signify baptism.

but not all." ¹¹ For he knew who would betray him; for this reason, he said, "Not all of you are clean."

Jesus has just pronounced that the disciples as a group are clean, just as the symbol of washing signified. Yet, one of them is not clean, despite the fact that he too has been washed. Not even the sacraments can purify a person when the innermost dispositions are not pure.

¹² So when he had washed their feet (and) put his garments back on and reclined at table again, he said to them, "Do you realize what I have done for you? ¹³ You call me 'teacher' and 'master,' and rightly so, for indeed I am. ¹⁴ If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have

washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.

The meaning of the action is now explained to the apostles. Not only do the apostles and all Christians share in the fruits of Jesus' lifework, they must also act in its spirit. Jesus' whole life was an example of service toward man, fulfilling His Father's will to the point of dying on the cross. Our Lord promises us that if we imitate him, our master and teacher, in all that we do, we will find true happiness which no one can take away from us.