

That Final Meal: The Last Supper

As a ritual it combines elements of the Sinai Covenant (Ex 24) which was looked at in the first meeting and the circumstances when they left Egypt (Ex12). The Sinai covenant is concerned with achieving communion with God. The unleavened bread of the flight from Egypt resonates with ideas of sustenance and food for the journey. Both stories talk about how we pass over into God's life.

Once again it is important to remember Jesus' Hebrew background. In Hebrew ritual thinking past stories describe current relationships. The journey into God has to be completed afresh in each time by living the stories of the past. Exodus and Passover are for the Jew never completed, they are eternal and sacred. The Hebrew insight is that these rituals make the wisdom of the past available to the people of the present in a way that is more than a shallow accumulation of knowledge. By living the ritual, the insights of the past come alive.

What does Jesus do at the Last Supper?

Jesus takes unleavened bread - the bread of Passover with all its covenant resonances. READ Exodus 12.15-18

It is new bread. Unleavened bread is uncontaminated by the leaven left over from the previous year. In the northern hemisphere, Passover (& of course Easter) have spring connotations of newness and rebirth.

The bread signifies departure. Jesus is saying goodbye, but providing food for the journey the disciples are about to undertake without him. In a way this is as much the birth of the church as Pentecost.

The bread indicates solidarity. The unleavened bread was something that marked the Jews out as it was compulsory. It bound them together as a community observation.

Jesus takes the bread with all these implications which represents for him his life, his commitment to be community for those who have none.

He thanks God for it - that is his life.

He breaks it, as he had broken himself for his people.

He gives it, as he had given his life in perfect hospitality.

He tells his disciples to eat it - to take his way of living inside them with all the meanings of a new beginning, sustenance and solidarity.

This poetic ritual is made explicit for the disciples: "This is my body given for you."

Here, body means person/ life - to be bread is to be service to others - the disciples in eating Jesus body are invited to take on his approach to life - that is his body.

“Do this in remembrance of me.” or having participated in the ritual go and do in your lives what this ritual indicates.

The early church expresses itself through the central ritual of weekly Eucharist based on the last supper ritual. As many churches were not Jewish the Hebrew meanings contained in the last supper had to find expression in the gospels in ways which were unambiguous to the non-Jewish adherents.

In John's gospel the last supper story (13.1) is different to the synoptics, but in ritual language is telling the same truths. READ

Jesus actions washing feet is an absolute gesture of welcome, service and hospitality. Jesus is showing the disciples how to be bread.

The act is also one of community. Peter's protests are silenced because to not accept hospitality is to outside the community. The feet washing is therefore a powerful ritual of communion as well.

When John does talk in more recognizably Eucharistic terms he emphasizes the earthly nature of our faith. John 6:42 READ

Flesh and blood emphasize earthly physical attributes of our faith. God is found in everyday ordinary things: struggle, relationship, family. In our Eucharistic ritual Christ's reality becomes earthed in us. It is likely that beloved disciples community was at some risk of tipping into gnosticism, where physical life is regarded as imperfect and the result of creation by a demiurge. The beautiful opening chapter of John is susceptible to Gnostic interpretation and these stories of Jesus are the necessary correctives in the communities gospel.

Anderson counsels us not to be like the literalising "Jews" 6.52 who ask "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

Marks last supper story is framed by two stories which highlight its meaning. Father Frank spoke about this on his last trip here so I won't go over the technique at work.

The image of Jesus giving himself is contrasted with Judas and Peter's stories. Peter in particular as a representative of the early Church is shown to have made a shallow response in the light of future events. Mark's challenge is for the Church to go beyond this to a sincere participatory response to Jesus.

Participation in the liturgy

Vernacular liturgy and lay involvement were amongst the great gifts of Vatican 2. Our attendance at mass is participation but we need to think about what is actually happening.

Although the Priest performs the consecration it is our body given and our blood poured out.

To quote Father Frank:

In his memory we offer ourselves...

Today there is no-one else to offer to God, if not ourselves...

We make the offering through him, with him and in him...

Paul's Eucharistic teaching we looked at last time (1 Cor11.18-22) talk of insincere Eucharist. READ

“For Paul, the validity of the Eucharist turns on a commitment that is mutual, serious and carried through in life together. Like the Hebrews at Sinai, the way into communion with God is through communion with one another. God's presence amongst us will never be realized until we recover this dangerous sense that Holy Communion cannot exist solely between myself and God: religion is no private affair. Rather, Holy Communion is the name we give to the loving reality between human beings that we call community, or covenant, or the presence of Jesus. The bread and wine are its sacrament, but the reality is deliberate community.

