

Look both ways

Sunday 12 July 2009

Ray Hawkins

Readings:

Exodus 12: 1 – 11

Matthew 26: 17 – 30

Sermon

In Jesus' time the Jewish festivals were times when people would come together to meet with friends in God's presence and they developed into great family occasions.

The Feast of the Unleavened Bread was held in March - April and was also called the preparation for the Passover. It was a time when many Jews made the sometimes long and difficult journey to Jerusalem. It is estimated that around 2 - 3 million people would congregate in Jerusalem for the Festival.

Jesus and his disciples were among those arriving in Jerusalem for the Passover celebrations and little did the disciples realise that Jesus' ministry on earth was shortly to be brought to a swift conclusion. His time with them was drawing to a dramatic climax.

Before that dramatic climax though they would celebrate the Passover meal in which Jesus gave new meanings to the celebrations that had been held since the time of Moses.

The origins of the celebrations are covered in the reading from Exodus. The Jews are still trying to escape from slavery in Egypt but despite a series of plagues sent by God to afflict the Egyptian nation, Pharaoh has steadfastly refused to release them.

Now God instructs Moses about the final plague the one that will force Pharaoh to let the Jews go, every first born son in the land from the son of Pharaoh to the son of the lowest slave will be killed along with every first born of the cattle.

The plague would not affect the Jews because God instructed them to take a lamb and sacrifice it and take some of its blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes. This would be the sign for God to passover the homes of his chosen people.

The ritual to be followed was clearly spelt out by God and it was a Festival to done for future generations (Exodus 12: 14):

"This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD—a lasting ordinance."

Passover then was a very symbolic festival of celebration to remind the Jews how God rescued them from slavery in Egypt. It also symbolised God's promise of redemption spelt out to Moses in Exodus 6: 6 -7 for it revolved around the drinking of four cups of red wine. Each cup representing one of God's promises:

- "I will bring you out"

- "I will free you from being slaves to them"
- "I will redeem you" and
- "I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God"

Passover followed a traditional pattern. Lambs or goats were purchased and taken to the temple for sacrifice. The fat would be burned and the blood offered on the altar before the carcasses were hung ready for collection by the family.

The meal itself also followed a ritual pattern. First there would be a blessing of both the festival and the wine, followed by drinking the first cup of wine.

Next, the food would be brought out and the youngest son would ask why this night was distinguished from others. The father would answer with the story of the Exodus and would point to each item on the table as he explained its symbolic significance.

The unleavened bread, signifying the haste, the bitter herbs the bondage of slavery in Egypt and fruit chutney, the work their ancestors had done.

This would be followed by praise to God for past and future redemption. Then the second cup of wine would be drunk.

After the second cup, the bread would be blessed, broken, and distributed, and then eaten with bitter herbs and the fruit chutney. This would be followed by eating the meal.

The Passover meal included the roasted lamb that had been sacrificed in the temple. At the end of the meal; the father would bless a third cup of wine – the cup of redemption, which would be followed by singing a song of praise. A fourth cup of wine would conclude the meal.

The meal reminded the Jews of God's goodness to them in the past and of God's promises to them:

- "I will bring you out"
- "I will free you"
- "I will redeem you" and
- "I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God"

It was a festival full of deep meaning and symbolism and it was a festival that all Jews took part in, including Jesus and his disciples.

So this was the meal Jesus and his disciples gathered together to eat in that upper room. But in the process of doing so Jesus brought new meaning to the ritual meal.

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

Jesus followed the standard Jewish practice of giving thanks for bread at a meal by saying, "Blessed are you, Lord, our God, who brings forth bread from the earth." During my reader training at Lamberhurst the parish priest used a prayer with a similar meaning:

"Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation: through your goodness we have this bread to set before you, which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life."

But it is when Jesus took the bread, broke it and gave it to his disciples saying *"Take and eat; this is my body"* that he gave a whole new meaning to the meal.

Traditionally bread was considered a gift from God, so it was considered irreverent to cut bread with a knife, hence it was torn with the hands into pieces. Now Jesus was saying that this gift from God was even greater, even more precious, for it represented his body, his body that shortly after this meal would be sacrificed and broken on the cross.

This breaking of the bread almost certainly occurred with the third cup of the meal, the cup of redemption.

'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

Clearly Jesus was associating his words with the cup representing, "I will redeem you." So he gave the Passover meal an entirely new meaning.

Just as the Passover of the old covenant with God looked back and celebrated deliverance from slavery in Egypt, so the Lord's Supper of the new covenant with God looks back to Christ's sacrifice on the cross and celebrates our deliverance from sin by Christ's death, but also looks forward to his second coming when we will be united with Christ in heaven.

The word "covenant" refers to an agreement between parties that cannot be altered by the other party. In other words, God established the covenant and we humans can only accept or reject it; we cannot alter it in any way.

In Old Testament times, God had agreed to forgive people's sins if they brought animals for the priests to sacrifice so sealing the agreement with the blood of animals. But animal blood did not in itself remove sin for only God can forgive sin, and so animal sacrifices had to be repeated day after day and year after year.

Jesus fully understood his death as sacrificial, thus starting and sealing the new covenant between God and mankind. Under this new covenant, Jesus would die in the place of sinners.

Unlike the blood of animals, Jesus' blood would truly remove the sins of all who put their faith in him. And unlike the Old Testament covenant Jesus' sacrifice would never have to be repeated; it would be good for all eternity!

So rather than an unblemished lamb being killed on the altar, Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God, was slain on the cross, a sinless sacrifice to accomplish forgiveness of sins once and for all.

Those who accept Christ's sacrifice and believe in him receive forgiveness so now everyone can come directly to God through faith because Jesus' death has redeemed us i.e. made us acceptable in God's eyes.

In the Christian church this Passover 'meal' is now known as Holy Communion, or the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist.

Each of these names brings out a different dimension to the celebration:

- It is the "Lord's Supper" because it commemorates the Passover meal that Jesus ate with his disciples;
- It is the "Eucharist" or thanksgiving because in it we thank God for Christ's work for us; and
- It is "Communion" because through it we commune or join together with God and with other believers.

The Christian church still follows the same practice as that incorporated by Jesus at that last supper. When we shortly celebrate communion Brian will first bless the bread and the wine before we share in the bread, including a repetition of Jesus' words "This is my body", and then a sharing of the wine, again including a repetition of Jesus' words "This is my blood."

The Life Application Bible Commentary on this passage from Matthew concludes with these words:

"There will be a party someday, and you'll be there. Jesus will be celebrating the wonderful salvation that his crucifixion accomplished, and you'll be there. Sin and suffering will be past—no more cancer, no more car accidents, no more feeling lonely—and you'll be there. Next to you will be loved ones at whose deaths you cried, but there will be no reason for crying then. Just when everyone has gathered, Jesus will pick up his cup. It is the one that he didn't finish back in Jerusalem, the one that he said he would wait to drink until all God's work was done. And then he will hold it up, and a whole new world will begin. He will drink at last. A huge cheer will erupt from the biggest, happiest crowd ever gathered. And you will be there!"

What a wonderful picture those words portray this is what Jesus referred to in Luke 14: 15: "*Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.*" And what is referred to as "*the wedding supper of the lamb*" in Revelation 19: 9

But we need to look both ways for we can't look forward to this bright, almost unbelievable future, unless we first look back and accept Jesus as the perfect lamb sacrificed on that cross in order to save us!

So as we come to the table to eat and drink, we should quietly reflect and remember Jesus' death on the cross and his promise to come again. So we need to come in a penitent and yet thankful attitude for God's wonderful gift to us and be joyful as we meet with Christ and the body of believers, knowing that through Christ our sins are forgiven and we will inherit eternal life and partake of 'the wedding supper of the lamb.'