

Holy Week Readings



Jesus poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. (John 13:5)

Holy Thursday **Mass of the LORD's Supper**

HOLY THURSDAY

*Mass of the LORD's Supper*¹

introduction

In John's gospel there's a prophetic gesture made by Jesus that's not recorded in the synoptic versions of the gospels. Jesus gets up from the table and washes his disciples' feet. The focus in John is on Jesus' initiative and action. Foot washing expressed hospitality and humble service toward's someone of higher status. Jesus makes such a gesture of service towards his own followers. Unlike the other evangelists, John doesn't have an account of the Last Supper. However, in the letter to the Corinthians, Paul gives an account that's close to Luke's description of the event. The *Exodus* recalls the Passover feast, when GOD's liberation of the Israelites is celebrated on 'a day of remembrance'. It's the motive for thanksgiving for Israelites, 'throughout the generations'.

first reading: Exodus 12 : 1 – 8, 11 – 14²

[the first Passover instituted]

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt:(1) This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you.(2) Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household.(3) If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbour in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it.(4) Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats.(5) You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight.(6) They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it.(7) They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.(8)

Latter-day Israelites remember the dramatic liberating event at the Passover time. The shaping of new life for a new people requires discipline and fidelity to the WORD of GOD. The instruction underlines the LORD's people-forming activity. It requires the hearers' active participation in a family-centred ritual to make the act of thanksgiving shape their lives in the present age. 'Passover' or 'Exodus' is the Israelite's foundational story. The celebration of Passover became an annual memorial of the shaping of the people through the action of the LORD. Devout Israelites believed that in the celebration they actually come out of Egypt with

1 Jesus Washing Peter's Feet by Ford Madox Brown (1852-6) Tate Gallery U.K.

2 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

their ancestors. Their liberation began with the permission by Pharaoh to grant them a holiday to celebrate the LORD's festival in the desert.

In the account of Exodus, at the moment of release from slave work there's a pause to describe the LORD's words of instruction to Moses and Aaron. The Israelites will remember this dramatic liberating moment every year.³ They yearned to belong and understand the tradition and share in the triumph. The *'whole community of Israel'* will celebrate this memory and reflect on their triumphant transformation as a liberated people (vv.3-8). Groups are formed that will be large enough to consume the Passover victim so that nothing will remain of it. The festival is to be celebrated by each family in the intimacy of their own home. Although this text represents the priestly tradition, it provides no role for priests. This celebration of liberation is a family-centred celebration.

This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD.(11) For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD.(12) The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.(13) This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance. (14)

The Passover story is focused on human obedience. It isn't about influencing the LORD. The ritual impacts on the people and sets them apart. Drawing on the experience of the flight from the Pharaoh, the details of the meal (vv.11-14) prepare a people to move out quickly. The LORD is the teacher and the details of the ritual are all part of the lesson which the Israelites must learn. The ritual does not itself produce salvation. The LORD is the source of hope and freedom for the enslaved. The blood of the lamb is not offered as a sacrifice to GOD, but it is, *'a sign for you'* which GOD promises to observe. The meal is communal, bringing small households together.⁴ No-one eats this feast alone and nothing is left behind. The meal is a ritual established by the LORD for the salvation of all. The story proclaims the mighty saving act of the LORD. This day is commanded to be kept as, *'a memorial day'* as *'a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations'* (v.14) and the point of remembrance is thanksgiving and trust.

3 [v.2] *'this month'* - *the month of ripe grain* – near the vernal equinox i.e. Marcy – April.

4 [v.4] *'The lamb shall be divided'* - probably, in the expenses of its purchase. Some explain, *"reckon for the lamb the number of persons required to eat it."* Cf. Ex.12:10.

response: Psalm 116 : 12 – 13, 15 – 18

[thanksgiving for recovery from illness]

*What shall I return to the LORD
for all his bounty to me?(12)
I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD,(13)
I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people.(14)
Precious in the sight of the LORD
is the death of his faithful ones.(15)
O LORD, I am Your servant;
I am your servant, the child of your serving girl.
You have loosed my bonds.(16)
I will offer to You a thanksgiving sacrifice
and call on the name of the LORD.(17)
I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people.(18)*

A thanksgiving prayer in response to divine rescue from mortal danger;⁵ and from near despair;⁶ with vows and temple sacrifices (vv.13-14,17-19). The gratitude of the speaker is expressed by the action of pouring out of a sacrificial drink-offering to the LORD.⁷ The new direction of life for the 'servant (of the LORD)' is not just freedom from the powers of death, but freedom to engage in building a new, life-giving society. It is for the developing of forms of behaviour that sustain the gifted new social possibility.

The speaker has discovered something remarkable and subversive about the LORD. The holy GOD is with the broken and crushed ones.⁸ The LORD's solidarity is not with those who go from one success to another, but is with the ones denied success. Thanks to the LORD's intervention in powerful but unspecified ways, faithful servants are liberated and given the real power for life-giving.

second reading: 1 Corinthians 11 : 23 – 26

[the institution of the LORD's Supper]

For I received from the LORD what I also handed on to you, that the LORD Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread,(23) and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."(24) In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."(25) For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the LORD's death until he comes.(26)

5 Cf. Ps.116:3-4. The Greek and Latin versions divide the psalm into two parts: Ps.116:1-9 and 10-19.

6 Cf. Ps.116:10-11

7 [v.13] 'The cup of salvation' - probably the libation of wine poured out in gratitude for rescue. Cf Ex.25:29; Nm.15:5,7,10.

8 [v.15] 'Precious in the sight of the LORD' - the meaning is that the death of the LORD's faithful is grievous to GOD - not that the LORD is pleased with the death. Cf Ps.72:14. In Ws.3:5-6 the LORD accepts the death of the righteous as a sacrificial burnt offering.

The apostle claims the authenticity of his interpretation of the meal, in terms of the revelation he has received from *'the Risen LORD'*.⁹ For Paul, Christ is not only the founder of the community of believers; he is the community, because it is through the community that the saving reality of Christ is made effective in the world. What Paul has received from the community, he has received from Christ. *"Proclaiming the LORD's death until he comes"* (v.26) takes place through the action of eating and drinking. The action is the statement! What is, *'said'* is the death of Christ. It makes *'the remembering'* something more than a glance towards the past. Paul links his understanding of the death and resurrection of Christ to a show of how authentic humankind should live.¹⁰

The purpose of Paul's effort to evoke remembrance of his (Paul's) ways in Christ among the Corinthians, was that they should imitate him. If they imitated Paul, they would imitate Christ. In remembering Christ, they acknowledge the demand implicit in Jesus' death, which made would-be disciples' new mode of being possible. By their behaviour they proclaim that possibility to others. Paul probably depended upon common Christian memories to know the historical words that Jesus spoke on the night he was betrayed. But the tradition he conveyed to the Corinthians had interpreted the event in the light of the resurrection. The supper's proper purpose now, is a ritual of anticipation. An occasion of instruction and proclamation. It both identifies and directs the community to its mission, until the completion of time and the fullness of GOD's reigning.

gospel reading: John 13: 1 – 15

[Jesus washes his disciples' feet]

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.(1) The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper(2) Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from GOD and was going to GOD,(3) got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. (4) Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.(5) He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "LORD, are you going to wash my feet?"(6) Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand."(7) Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."(8) Simon Peter said to him, "LORD, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"(9) Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash,

9 1 Co.11:23-25 – is the earliest written account of the institution of the LORD's Supper in the New Testament. The narrative emphasises Jesus' action of self-giving (expressed in the words over the bread and the cup) and his double command to repeat his own action.

10 Cf. 2 Co.5:15.

except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.”(10) For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, “Not all of you are clean.”(11) After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you?(12) You call me Teacher and LORD – and you are right, for that is what I am.(13) So if I, your LORD and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.(14) For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. (15)

When John’s account of Jesus’ washing the feet of his disciples, before the festival of Passover,¹¹ we are given both an example how to render service to each other in the community, and how to render service to everyone else.¹² Foot washing is a cleansing ritual. Washing was an important religious activity among the Israelites because purification and pollution had dramatic consequences in the presence of GOD’s holiness.¹³ Jesus’ action challenges all authority structures, reversing the roles between disciple and teacher.

When he came to wash the feet of Simon Peter, the disciple at first refused to allow Jesus to wash his feet. But his objection turns into a plea to be washed head to foot (vv.8-9). Jesus indicates that foot washing is enough for cleansing them ‘*all over*’ except for, ‘*the betrayer*’. The action accomplishes more than cleansing. In letting them, ‘*know what I have done to you*’, Jesus interprets this ritual of purification as an instruction in discipleship (vv.12-15). It is a lesson in authority relationships in the new messianic community. As in the Passover story in the first reading, the ritual is not a means for making the participants clean with GOD. It is a divinely instituted instruction about *doing GOD’s will*. Jesus taught with authority. Here his instruction is about the role of disciples. Their role is to show a particular kind of authority which is quite distinct from the way power is usually understood.

Those who might be afraid their authority would be diminished by menial service of others have to learn this new understanding. Very soon Jesus will enact this authority in the most profound way. He will walk knowingly to his death at the hands of those who think they are in control. Thus, Jesus interprets his own role and reveals GOD’s purpose in sending him. GOD’s ways are not the way that the world, or the way the disciples are now thinking! Jesus is *THE Ruler* and *Teacher* (v.14) who instructs disciples, past and present in the matters that are

11 [v.1] ‘*Before the festival of the Passover*’ - this would be Thursday evening, before the Day of Preparation; in the synoptics, the Last Supper is a Passover meal taking place, in John’s chronology, on Friday evening.

12 This episode occurs in John at the place of the narration of the institution of the Eucharist in the Synoptic gospels. It may be a dramatisation of Lk.22:27 - “*I am your servant.*”

13 Ancient religious traditions commonly practised washing rituals for reasons of purification, which were understood to be much more profound than mere hygiene. Now Jesus washes his disciples’ feet, knowing that a grave pollution lies ahead, bonding them to him in purity, even before the betrayal.

vital. The forces of death and chaos appear to have the upper hand. But in reality, *"the Father had given all things into his hands . . . he had come from GOD and was going to GOD"* (v.3).

for sharing:¹⁴

- *The first Passover instituted.* Comment on Exodus 12 : 1 – 8, 11 – 14
- *The institution of the LORD's Supper.* Comment on 1 Corinthians 11 : 23 – 26
- *Jesus washes the feet of his disciples.* Comment on John 13 : 1 – 15

prayer:¹⁵

*O GOD, in the fullness of time
 You revealed Your love in Jesus the LORD.
 On the eve of his death, as a sign of Your covenant,
 he washed the feet of his disciples
 and gave himself as food and drink.
 Give us life at this sacred banquet
 and joy in humble service,
 that, bound to Christ in all things,
 we may pass over from this world to Your kingdom,
 where he lives with You now and always
 in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
 GOD for ever and ever. Amen.*

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14 Lectio Divina: Lectio Divina: reading GOD's WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio* (*reading*) – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio* (*reflection*) – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in GOD's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio* (*prayer*) – allow your heart to speak to GOD, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio* (*rest*) – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of GOD, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: *'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'*.

15 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.