

The Last Supper

Mark 14: 12 – 25

The year was approximately 30 A.D. The place was Jerusalem where hundreds of thousands of pilgrims had ascended to offer their sacrifices at the temple and celebrate the Passover festival. It was the day of preparation, a day, as Mark reminds his readers that the Passover lambs were sacrificed, and the disciples of Jesus came to him asking where they were to prepare for their Passover celebration. With so many visitors in the city, one wonders why Jesus and his disciples didn't retreat the couple of miles to the village of Bethany where his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived. Only a short time earlier had Jesus raised his friend from the dead, and word had spread quickly to the city of Jerusalem, where some were glorifying God and others were plotting to kill him. There was a plan about to unfold, and it required that Jesus be in the Holy City. And it was to begin with a Passover meal celebrated within the city in the section known as Mount Zion. Most likely, this was in the midst of an Essene colony within the city. The Essenes were a separatist sect of men in Judaism who often lived in desert conclaves, practicing an ascetic, celibate life style. They were known as the sons of the light. We can guess that this Passover was in this section by one small clue: Jesus tells his disciples to go into the city and follow a man carrying a water jar. Men did not carry water jars, except if there were no women. The light of the world would celebrate his final meal with his disciples in the home of one of the sons of light.

Passover was a time to remember that, on their final night in Egypt, death passed over the households of the Israelite who smeared the blood of a lamb over the doorpost. That night, death came to the first born of Egypt, but not to the Israelites who were protected by the blood of the lamb. On the night of the last supper with his disciples, it was not known to the disciples, but the blood of another lamb was about to save them from death not just for a night, but for eternity. How significant the Jesus chose the day of the sacrifice of the lambs to share this symbolic and holy meal with his disciples, one that would link the Passover of freedom from Egyptian bondage to the freedom with the sacrificial lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Each of the gospels gives us some significant insight into the events of that night. Three of them mention that the meal took place in an upper room within the city of Jerusalem. The Upper Room today is marked by a simple room that was a crusader's church, the vaulted ceiling and marble apse at the one side hardly reminiscent of what it actually looked like in the time of Jesus. But their purpose was not to recreate the upper room, but to mark an authenticated spot where faithful can remember and celebrate the final night of Jesus.

Being a Passover Seder, the meal would have been eaten reclining, with each of the guests leaning on their left arm and eating with the right hand. As they were reclining at the table, their legs and feet would have been extended outward. Such details may seem insignificant, but will become important as the story progresses. Unlike the image we have of DaVinci's Last Supper with Jesus sitting at the center of a long table, middle eastern custom would have dictated that the disciples and Jesus would have sat at a three sided table, called a triclinium, represented by our table here. The guest of honor would sit at the second seat in on the left side, as we look at it, with the two most honored guests reclining at his left and right hand. John's gospel tells us that at one point during the meal, John (the disciple whom Jesus' loved) leaned back to speak to

Jesus, which would have put John at Jesus' right hand. A Passover table would be set with a bowl of salt water for each three guests. Jesus tells his disciples that one who dips in the bowl with him will betray him: one of the three was John, the other was Judas. Judas had been welcomed in one of the two places of honor at the last supper with Jesus.

As they came to eat in the upper room, it would have been customary for a servant to offer a gift of hospitality: a drink of water, anointing with oil, or the washing of the guests' feet. With the rough and dusty roads, the washing of the feet would be particularly welcome. Yet, obviously this was not offered, and so once they were at the table, Jesus went to each disciple and washed their feet. If there was no servant, it would have fallen to the host, who would be in this last seat over here. John's gospel again tells us that Simon Peter had called to John to ask Jesus about the betrayer, apparently without Jesus' noticing. That would mean that most likely, Simon Peter was sitting in this last position. It makes his protestations about Jesus washing his feet even more memorable – Peter should have been the one to do it, but his neglect allowed Jesus to become the servant. Embarrassed by his failure to be responsible, he objects to having his feet washed, but Jesus straightens him out, and models for him what he must do if he is to be a disciple.

Dr. Gillian McKeith has written a wildly popular book entitled *You Are What you Eat*, that is based on a popular BBC television show of the same name. She has been called the tough-love diet detective. Part of her approach is a constant and careful look at the menu we eat. At the Last Supper, the menu was certainly on the forefront of Jesus' mind, but not as we might imagine. There were only two things that Jesus was focused on: the bread that he broke, and the cup that was shared. In the Seder, only one of the pieces of unleavened bread, or matzoh, is broken, with a portion hidden away to be eaten at the end of the meal as a symbol of future redemption in the messianic age. Some scholars believe that the bread that Jesus was broken and shared at the meal was the afikoman, the middle broken piece of bread from the Seder. He gives it to his disciples with a powerful command – "Take, this is my body." Jewish law had strict prohibition against the eating of human flesh and drinking of any blood, for in so doing, you were consuming the very soul of another, which was considered an abomination. But Jesus is giving them a commandment, "This bread is my body – eat it – for you are what you eat. I am in you and you are in me. (as quoted in John's gospel)". Carrying the significance of future redemption, Jesus is, in essence, telling his disciples that he is their hope for redemption, not some future hope for a messianic age – "I am the present and future hope" he is telling them. In the same way, when the supper was concluded, Jesus takes a cup. Some feel that it was the third cup of the Seder, but Paul's description in Corinthians, most likely gleaned from those who were present at that moment, says that it is after the supper. When the Seder meal concludes, there is just one cup left: Elijah' cup – a symbol of the future messianic age. It is traditionally not consumed, for it is a fifth cup that is poured in hopes for the coming of the messiah. Jesus takes the cup and has the disciples drink from it. There is no reason to wait, the messiah has come, and these followers are commanded to drink from it, consuming the life-blood of the messiah, taking on in them as followers of Jesus the essence of who is for the world. You are what you eat, Jesus is saying, and as you take the bread and drink the cup, we are not just remembering, we are re-embodying the risen Christ within us so that we might go into the world to let the light shine through us.

The last supper of Jesus with his disciples was a redefining of the covenantal meal of the Seder. This is a new covenant, with a new sacrificial lamb who will be offered once and for all, a covenant between God and all of humanity. We come to the table like the first 12 that we might claim our place within the new covenant of God's grace through Jesus Christ.

At the last supper, Jesus was at the same time the servant and the host, and the disciples of Jesus are the honored guests. As the host and servant, Jesus welcomed all, including the one who would betray him, one who would deny him three times before dawn, and ten who went into hiding rather than follow him to the cross. None remained with him. If Jesus would choose to eat his final meal with these 12, he would certainly welcome all of us at the table as his guest, that we might be served, that our hunger is fulfilled and our thirst for meaning is quenched.

At the last supper, Jesus makes a definitive statement that the future hope of God's kingdom has broken into the present age as he take two symbols of the future – the broken bread and the cup of Elijah, and repurposes them for the church, calling us into the ministry of bringing the kingdom into our midst “as it is in heaven.”

At the last supper, the disciples then, and all who now “do this in remembrance of me,” take within themselves the broken bread of Christ. How significant that it is a broken bread – for Christ was broken for us, and Christ died to heal the brokenness of the world. As we partake of the broken bread, we are reminded that we need not be perfect to receive at the table – we can offer our brokenness to be healed, that in the tasting of the bread and the cup, we might be made whole.

If you knew that one particular meal would be your last, with whom would you share it? Close friends and family, famous people you'd always want to meet? Maybe you wouldn't want to eat at all. Jesus chose to share it with those closest to him, even knowing that they would fall away. But he chose to make his final meal a gift to them and to the church. Each part of the meal was carefully thought out, and he used every moment as a way of telling us all that in him is our salvation, and in Christ alone.

Christ our Lord invites all who desire to live in love and peace with their neighbors to come and feast at the table. We are invited to be his guests, and he waits to serve you.

- *If you are hungry, come to be fed.*
- *If you are broken or hurting, come to be healed.*
- *If you are uncertain, if your faith is faltering, come to receive the blessed assurance.*

For Jesus Christ is waiting, Jesus Christ is seeking you. As you come to the table, you will receive a piece of bread, a spiritual reminder of Christ's body. You will dip that into the cup, a spiritual reminder of Christ's blood, and then receive them, and in the receiving of the bread and the cup, you are receiving within yourself the spiritual essence of Christ, that it might empower us together to be Christ's body in a world that needs the redeeming power of his blood.