**Holy Thursday**

**Mass of the Lord’s Supper**

**Readings: Exodus 12;1-8, 11-14, 1 Corinthians 11;23-26 and John 13;1-13**

It has always been an open question as to whether the Last Supper was the Passover meal that year or not. According to Mathew, Mark and Luke it was. According to John, it was held on the evening before and the crucifixion took place at the time of the Passover.

Whichever is right makes no difference because after 12 months the themes of the Passover and crucifixion would be so closely identified that a difference of one day would have been forgotten. These links were .........

The sacrifice of the Passover Lamb and Crucifixion of Jesus

The ritual meal and the Eucharist

The liberation from slavery and from that of sin

The new life in Canaan and the new life in Christ

The offering by the Levitical priesthood and the new Christian equivalent.

But as with all his other teaching Jesus added the distinctive aspects of self-sacrifice and humility. The readings reflect all these themes.

The account in Exodus is about 600 B.C. but records the institution of the Passover in Egypt 600 years earlier. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian Church is our earliest written reference (c. 57 A.D.) to the well-established weekly Eucharist. (Paul was writing to correct irreverence in their practices)

Taking the two readings together, there are three important points arising. In ascending order of importance (in my opinion) is, firstly, the urgency of the flight from the Egyptians which was translated into the expectation of Christ’s return.

The second is the sacrifice of the lamb with that of Christ, both finding liturgical expression in the Eucharist.

The third is the meaning of the Hebrew word *ZIKKARON* in the penultimate sentence of the Exodus reading. The English word ‘remembrance’ does not do justice to the strength and subtlety of the Hebrew. It really means re-enacting the original event, so that later generations can catch up with their ancestors. They passed though the same experiences.

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In the Christian milieu it enabled subsequent generations to be present at the last supper, crucifixion and resurrection. As such, naturally it gives rise to what we describe as the ‘real presence’ of Christ in the liturgical action.

But to the old ideas Jesus always brought new understanding and in the Gospel reading we find two examples. One is the distinctive humility that was the mien of the Lord and the second, the commission to his followers to continue his mission on earth. As remembrance does not do justice to *ZIKKARON,* so what we take to be humility and love do not do justice to the strength of those emotions contained in John’s account.

**Good Friday**

**The Celebration of the Lord’s Passion**

**Readings: Isaiah 52;13-53;12, Hebrews 4 14-16, 5;7-9 and John 18;1-19;42**

On Good Friday the liturgical service has as its centre John's narrative of the passion of him who was portrayed in Isaiah as the Servant of Yahweh and who became the one High Priest by offering himself to the Father.

Isaiah’s (fourth) Servant Song so closely recalled the suffering of Christ that it was used from the earliest time with that connection. Virtually every line of the poem is reminiscent of the Passion. His suffering was unjustified, vicarious, and emancipating. There is even a reference to his burial in the tomb of a rich man. (See Joseph of Arimathea in Matt 27;57, Mark 15;46 and Luke 23;50-53

The second reading from the anonymous essay we call ‘Hebrews’ champions the priestly role Christ played in his Father’s presence. Obedience to his will, offering of his own sacrifice and an identity with humanity through sharing its nature. It is implicit that we share in his victory through membership of his body on earth i.e. the Church. We have nothing to offer of ourselves but can share in his offering and receive his transcendent life.

For the Gospel reading for Good Friday, we use John’s account of the Passion. Each evangelist has his own particular perspective and John's is that Jesus’ royalty constantly shines through his humiliation. From the beginning, Jesus is in command of the situation. He triggers events by orchestrating his own arrest. The temple police, awed by his personality, fall back and Peter would prevent the arrest, but Jesus intervenes.

On the cross, Jesus makes his last will, bequeathing his mother to the disciple and the disciple to his mother (For John Mary is a symbol of the Church). And finally, it is Jesus who decides on the moment of his death—he gives up his spirit at the very moment of the slaughter of the lamb for the Passover!

John’s ideas on the significance of the crucifixion are expressed throughout the Gospel in his long soliloquies. But he adds two further points here.

Firstly, Pilate bears unwitting testimony to Christ's kingship when he brings Jesus before the people and when he refuses to alter the inscription on the cross.

The second point is that at the beginning of his public ministry, the Baptist had proclaimed Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the world's sin. Now in his death Christ fulfils the prophecy as he announces the completion of his sacrifice: "It is accomplished" (John 19:30)

**The Easter Vigil**

On the holy night of the Easter Vigil there are seven Old Testament readings, recalling the wonderful works of God in the history of salvation. Then we have Paul’s letter to the Roman Church on Baptism. This was the night when new candidates would be baptised and allowed to be present at their first Eucharist.

We move from Old to New. Prophecy to fulfilment. Darkness to Light. This is the decisive point in the Service of the Word and is where we symbolically light the Altar candles. Note that the verbs which speak of our dying with Christ are all in the past tense. The verbs which speak of our resurrection are in the future.

The Gospel varies with the three-year cycle. Year A is Matthew. For the first time, the accounts cannot be harmonised. They differ dramatically and thus we cannot be certain what is historical, what is didactic and what is legend. (Notice that the angel rolling the stone away is not to allow the resurrection, but to enable the disciples to see that the tomb was already empty.) But the most striking detail of all three evangelists is the fact that they agree that the first witnesses of the Resurrection were all women. This seems to be an important change with the past because the witness of women was not allowed in Jewish courts. In the new Christian order, it establishes equality of the sexes as its defining feature.