

Divergence on the Lectionary - Maundy Thursday (All Years)

First Reading

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, “This month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers’ houses, a lamb for a household. And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb.

(Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight.

“Then 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. They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted on the fire; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted, its head with its legs and its inner parts.)

And you shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD’s Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt.

“This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations, as a statute forever, you shall keep it as a feast. (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and

said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (ESV)
Gospel Text

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you." For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean."

When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

(I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, 'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.")

After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was

reclining at table at Jesus' side, so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it." So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the moneybag, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the feast," or that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

When he had gone out,)

Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.' A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First and Second Reading

I'm grouping the first two lessons together in part because there are so many lessons to write about during Holy Week and in part because in their differences they contribute to the point I want to make about the Last Supper.

That point is this. The Last Supper was not a Passover meal. I have been to one or two Maundy Thursday Seders along the way, and they're lovely. But we really must stop treating the night when Jesus washed the disciples' feet, the night He instituted the Eucharist, as though it were also a Seder. Our lessons even support the idea that this is a mistake.

The focus of the meal on the night that Jesus was betrayed was bread and wine. Paul is clear about that. All of the Gospels are clear on that. But when we read the story from Exodus we see that the emphasis is on the lamb. It's just inconceivable that the Passover meal could have been so thoroughly overlooked, especially by Paul, the former Pharisee.

Yes, the Synoptics all suggest that the meal occurred on the evening following the “first day of preparation.” That would be the beginning of the next day, Passover. But there is no mention of the meal beyond the bread and the wine. The most difficult point for the notion of the Passover meal is that John states that the meal was “before the Passover” (John 13:1) and that the crucifixion took place on the Day of Preparation (John 19:42).

John’s Gospel has on its side the reality that none of the Synoptics were based on the memories of someone who was there. John is. The Beloved Disciple reclined against Jesus at table. What’s more, John’s Gospel is considerably more historically reliable on at least one point, the length of Jesus’ public ministry. John has it carry over nearly three years while the Synoptics confine it to one.

Then there’s recent scholarship on the description of the trial in John 18:13-24. Most NT scholars will now agree that John’s account is the most historically probable of the four.

Add to this the extremely unlikely idea that the council that condemned Jesus would have convened on the night of the Passover, and the scales tip firmly to the side of the Last Supper occurring on the evening of (that means before) the Day of Preparation.

Given all that, we can now read Luke’s account more carefully and notice that while the disciples were sent to prepare the Passover, it was on the “Day of Preparation” (which includes the evening before) and that Jesus, at table with His disciples says that He has desired to eat this Passover with them, but that He “*will not eat it* until it is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God.” (Luke 22:16) Now, some manuscripts do include “again,” but the absence of “again” in the most reliable witnesses makes it likely that it was a scribal addition at some point.

So while Luke places the meal at a time that suggests the Passover, he also makes it sound as though Jesus has not, and will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the Kingdom. Luke seems ambivalent.

Once all of that is taken into consideration, it’s clear that in the early church the desire to link Jesus’ sacrifice to that of the spotless lamb of the Passover was strong, but that the evangelists had to stretch credulity in order to place Jesus arrest and trial on the first night of Passover. What we can be sure of is that the Last Supper is linked by every evangelist to the Day of Preparation, the day on which the lambs for the Passover were slaughtered (by the thousands) in the Temple. This links Jesus’ death immediately to the death of the Passover lamb.

So it’s time we stopped talking about the Passover meal on Maundy Thursday. Yes, we say “Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us,” and He is, and we do, but it isn’t what they

were doing that night, and we do a disservice to both Passovers by acting as they they happened at the same time.

That said, it is by His Blood we are saved from death, as on the first Passover.

And like the Passover meal, our Sunday Eucharists are a weekly, rather than annual, opportunity to enter into that event and reclaim its truth, and the truth it speaks over us, the identities it speaks over us as those belonging to God.

The more I think about that, the more I wonder if by celebrating the Eucharist every week we haven't weakened its impact. Imagine celebrating the Passover every week, what that might do to its efficacy. I'm just thinking out loud.

Gospel Text

(I included (inset) the verses that our Lectionary reading leaves out, just to make better sense of the part that beings, "Now is the Son of Man glorified." But I'm going to focus on the foot-washing verses, at least this year.)

The thirteenth chapter of John almost preaches/teaches itself. It is such a dramatic enactment of the love of God that it's hard to find anything to amplify. Nonetheless, I've managed to find a couple of bits to comment on, if briefly.

My first thought.

When Jesus says, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet," I want to ask, "To whom do I owe this obligation?" (Because that is what the word "ought" means, to owe.) Before I thought much about it I'd have said, "To you. I owe it to you to wash your feet." But now that I've thought on it a while, I think, no, I owe it to Jesus to wash your feet. Because He washed mine, made me clean, I am obligated, to Him, to make others clean. And yes, it's an act of service, of humbling myself, but I don't think that's the major part of it any more.

I've washed a dozen or more (sometimes more than two dozen) pairs of feet every Maundy Thursday over decades of ministry. And I think I got it wrong. For me it was always about putting others above myself. Humbling myself as Jesus humbled Himself. There is an element of that to this, but I no longer think that Jesus meant it to be the primary element. I think that it is the cleansing that matters. That is, Jesus has washed me, but with His blood. He has made me clean. And because He has, I owe it to Him to declare the forgiveness of sin to others. Not from a position "above" anyone (that's the

humility part) but from below, from a position of awareness, awareness of my own need for forgiveness.

And that leads directly into my second thought.

Right after the verse I just wrote about our translators have, “For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.”

Here’s how I would translate that, “For I have just given you a pattern (think sewing, or blueprint) so that you also *may* do just as I have done to you.” The word “do” is in the subjunctive mood. There’s no *should* or *may* in the Greek, just the subjunctive mood. And while you *can* translate that as “should,” it is more often about potential. Jesus example is *what makes it possible* for us to “cleanse” others as He has “cleansed” us. Yes, we owe it to Him to do so, but if He had not released that possibility by initializing that “pattern,” we’d remain powerless to do so.

This sort of brings me around to the way that I believe commandments function in the Bible. (I know this isn’t the first time I’ve written it, nor will it be the last.) When God gives us a commandment (or on Maundy Thursday, Jesus gives us a new commandment) God doesn’t tell us something They want *from* us but something They wants *for* us. He never commands anything but that which will bring us greater life and health. And here’s the fun part. Each commandment contains within it the grace to do it, to accomplish it. It’s like the reverse of the famous Spiderman quote. With God it reads “With great responsibility will come great power.”

I wish you all a blessed Triduum.