Sermon for Maundy Thursday

In the reading of the Exodus narrative we have heard the original events that were commemorated each year in the Jewish Passover that subsequently became the basis of our Eucharist celebration.

By the time of Jesus, the Passover was a pilgrim festival held in Jerusalem, centred on the temple ritual. This centralisation probably dates from the time of Josiah’s Reform in 612BC. By the time of Christ, many hundreds of thousands, possibly even as many as 2 million, thronged to the city for this major religious event from all corners of the Roman world. The historian Josephus claims that in AD65 that 3 million came for the festival and 600,000 lambs were slaughtered. Even allowing for exaggeration, it was obviously a huge event with a major movement of people across the whole region.

The festival commenced on the 14th day of the Jewish month of Nisan. Leaven would be ceremoniously burnt by the priests in the Temple in preparation for the festival.

Throughout homes, mums and children searched for all traces of leavened bread, traditionally even checking the mouse holes, to make sure the house was cleared for Passover. At 3.00pm the lambs were slaughtered in the Temple; their blood being splashed over the altars and the carcasses taken home to be roasted for the Passover meal itself which would be eaten that evening. Since the sun would have set by the time of the meal, it was now 15th Nisan by Jewish reckoning, the First Day of the Passover Festival.

Those present would lounge around the table with their heads towards the table and feet pointing away, rather than sitting at table like we are used to doing. So Leonardo da Vinci’s painting is inaccurate in that respect at least. This explains how Mary could have entered the room and have anointed Jesus’ feet and have wiped them with her hair so easily at Bethany on the preceding evening. It was free men who reclined at table, not slaves or servants, but at the Seder meal, all men had to recline to show that they were free men thanks to their deliverance from Egypt. Even after reclining to eat fell out of fashion in medieval times, Jews would still recline for the Seder meal. They traditionally wore white robes for the meal, rather like the young man who fled naked from the garden of Gethsemane, leaving his robe behind in Mark 14.51.

Everyone present had to eat at least a piece of lamb the size of an olive. If the company of people was so large that this olive-sized piece was all they received, then other roasts could be eaten as well to make up the meal. The meal was accompanied by the psalms and prayers which are far fuller and more complicated than the extracts we have used this evening. For instance, a cup of wine was put out for Elijah. There would be 4 questions posed by the youngest boy present and four ritual answers given by the eldest man to tell the story of the Passover. Four separate drinks of wine would be taken and the unleavened bread eaten with the bitter herbs, dipped in salt water, denoting the bitter suffering they had endured under the Egyptians and their tears. There are several pieces of unleavened bread eaten during the meal, but one is known as the afikomen. This piece is eaten at the end of the meal, for that is the meaning of its name, to symbolise the Passover lamb, because that is the taste that the Israelites must leave with on their lips. It is interesting that the final part of the Last Supper in Luke there is a second drink from the cup; so they depart with the taste of Jesus’ atoning blood on their lips.

On the table of the seder meal was a cup of wine for Elijah, the harbinger of the Messiah. For the Messiah’s coming was prayed for and then doors flung open as the day of waiting and watching commenced. Again, we Christians hear echoes here of the Garden of Gethsemane.

So was the Last Supper a Passover meal or not?

Matthew, Mark and Luke suggest it was the first Day of the Passover, after the lambs had been slaughtered that afternoon in the Temple. John seems to think it was before the Passover, because he says Jesus died on the cross at the time that the lambs were being killed in the Temple. Did John say this for theological reasons, rather than historical, in order to drive home the point that for Christians, Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world?

The evidence that may support Matthew, Mark and Luke is as follows:

Luke 22.15 “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer” sounds like the meal could well have been the Passover, but possibly could have been a meal Jesus thought he was about to have with them in the near future. If those MSS which read: “I tell you I shall not eat it **again** until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God,” then it clearly must have been the actual Passover meal. But are those MSS with the word “again” the most reliable?

Catholics and Anglicans who use wafers for Holy Communion accept Matthew, Mark and Luke’s chronology.

The evidence in favour of John:

1. Why no mention of the lamb which would have been the main part of the meal?

2. Why use the word artos for bread, the usual word for bread, when he could have used azuma, meaning unleavened bread?

3. Why only the one cup, or two at best in Luke, rather than the four of the Passover ritual?

4. If it were the annual Passover meal, why is the Christian Eucharist not an annual celebration?

Those who use ordinary bread like the Greek churches are taking John’s chronology in favour of the other gospels’ chronology.

The implication of John’s version is that Jesus had adapted the Passover meal replacing the traditional Passover lamb with his own body. The meal which became the foundation of the Christian communion service now has another focus. The foundation of the exodus remains, for the motif only has meaning in the context of the Jewish thirst for freedom and God’s miraculous provision and the promise of a Messiah. But Jesus now supplies the sacrifice that unlike the lambs slaughtered in the Temple year after year, actually brings forgiveness once and for all. The meal in its Christian version is also taken in anticipation of sharing the meal again with Christ in heaven at the wedding feast of the Lamb.

Well, we may differ on whose chronology we favour, but the meaning behind what John is telling us, is surely the heart of the Gospel.