

The Feast of the King

Date: 5 March 2023

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Matthew's Passion

Texts: Exodus 12:1-13a, 26, 27; Psalm 117; Matthew 26:17-35

“Why is this night different from all other nights?”

When our children were little, one of the absolute highlights of the church calendar for us was Maundy Thursday, the night before Good Friday. You might think that's a strange day to pick out, but what made it so special was getting together with other families and re-enacting a simplified Passover meal. As we ate and drank together, each step of the meal provided a tangible opportunity to think and reflect on God's faithfulness to his people at the first Passover, and to see that God is unchanging in his faithfulness to us in Jesus, as those parallels to the last supper were really brought home. You couldn't help but leave those nights feeling the remarkable love of Christ, and knowing you are part of a bigger story, an age-old story of a God who wants to redeem his people.

Here is a very brief overview. The host read the words of explanation for each part.

1. We began the meal sitting quietly as the hostess lit candles and prayed: “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, who has kept us alive by your word. May our house be consecrated by the light of your face, shining on us in blessing and peace.”
2. Then we drank the first cup of wine or grape juice for the meal - the cup of Sanctification. It reminded us that we've been set apart to serve Jesus. There would be 3 more cups to come.
3. We would then each wash our hands in turn, as the host brought around a basin and towel, and when we had finished
4. the youngest child in the room would pipe up by asking the question **“Why is this night different from all other nights?”** So, the host told the Passover story, the story of how God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt, with illustrations in those days on the overhead projector.
5. The Sederⁱ plate, with its symbolic foods, helped the children particularly enter into the experience of Passover. So, the youngest child had another question. “What do these special foods mean?” Then, as the host explained what each food meant, we had a small taste of it.

- Matzah (unleavened bread) because the Israelites had to leave Egypt in a hurry and there wasn't time for bread to rise.
- Greens represented life, but were dipped in salt water that reminded us of the tears of the people's life of suffering in Egypt.
- Bitter herbs symbolised the bitterness of their life as slaves in Egypt.
- Harosis (a sweet paste) reminded us of the mortar used in their brickwork, sweet because even the bitterest labour is sweetened by the promise of redemption.
- A roasted egg is a symbol of life. The oldest sons were glad to be alive.
- The lamb bone represented the Passover lamb.



6. The second cup was the Cup of Praise. "We praise the Lord because he has brought us from bondage to freedom."
7. Then we ate the Passover meal. It was a real feast.
8. The third cup was the Cup of Redemption. It reminded us that only God can redeem us. It was here that we celebrated Holy Communion.
9. Then we said one of the Hallelⁱⁱ psalms, the psalms of praise. Usually it was "The Great Hallel" – Psalm 136 that we read responsively.
10. The fourth cup was the Cup of Hope. It reminded us that we look forward in hope to Jesus coming again in glory and majesty and power.

Each year, as the youngest child asked "**Why is this night different from all other nights?**" it was a striking invitation to reflect on Christ's love. So, as we come to the scriptures this morning to reflect on the night before Jesus' death, we too can ask "**Why is this night different from all other nights?**" and see afresh the faithfulness of God.

First, "**Why is this night different from all other nights?**" when Moses first gave instructions for the Passover meal in the Old Testament.

²⁶ [So] when your children ask you, "What does this ceremony mean to you?" ²⁷ then tell them, "It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians."

Exodus 12:26-27a

Pharaoh would not let God's people go. God sent nine plagues on Egypt. Each time pharaoh was going to let the Israelites go, but then he changed his mind. He would have had to acknowledge that the God of the Israelites was more powerful than the many gods of Egypt, and he himself was seen as a god. It would have overturned the whole fabric of the Egyptian philosophy and way of life.

It was only with the final plague, the night when the Angel of Death passed through the land and the first born of the Egyptians all died, that Pharaoh finally let the Israelites go.

How were the Israelites spared? Each family sacrificed a lamb and painted their door frames with its blood. Its meat was roasted that night and was eaten with bitter herbs and unleavened bread, eaten in haste with staff in hand and long robes tucked into belts. When the Angel of Death came through, he saw the blood and passed over that house. This is what is commemorated in the festival of Passover. The Israelites were delivered from death by the death of the lamb.

The Passover meal developed to include special food and four cups of wine, but smearing the doorposts with blood was a once-off event. The special foods reminded the people that God had rescued them from the bitterness of the life of slavery in Egypt.

Quoting Tom Wright, from his book, *The Meal Jesus Gave Us*ⁱⁱⁱ, “Even the funny way they sat at table – they didn’t sit really, they leaned sideways, ‘reclining’ they called it – was supposed to say that they were God’s free people. Slaves stand; free people recline. The whole meal seemed to say, in a hundred different ways: this is who we are. This is who we were. This is who we will be. And coming through all of it like the strange music of the story: this is who God was, and is, and will be.

Second, “**Why is this night different from all other nights?**” in our Gospel reading this morning.

¹⁷ On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?’
Matthew 26:17

This night, the night before Jesus’ death, when he celebrated the Passover with his closest friends, this Passover that was so different. Would they see, as Jesus applied the symbolism of the Passover lamb to himself, that **he** was the Passover Lamb? If we had been there, would we have understood Jesus would become the lamb slain for the people?

Probably not. The familiar, comforting words of the Passover about the escape from Egypt, the unleavened bread, the cups that celebrated their freedom. The words their fathers had said every year. Jesus turned it all upside down. Everything was confused and confusing. It was only much later that they would come to understand.

²⁶ While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take and eat; this is my body.’

²⁷ Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. ²⁸ This is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.' Matthew 26:26-28

This was probably the third cup of wine, significantly the Cup of Redemption.

His blood shed on the cross would take away sin. Salvation would be available to anyone who chose to follow Jesus. In the same way that the ancient Israelites had to paint the blood of the Passover Lamb on their doorposts, we need to respond to Jesus' death for us, his offer of forgiveness, and freedom from the guilt and power of sin. The Israelites experienced freedom from bitter slavery in Egypt. In the same way, we can experience freedom from the bitter slavery to our sinfulness and its horrible consequences.

Jesus wasn't just another Passover lamb - but he is the final reality that the Passover lamb had always pointed to. Before Jesus, the lamb would be sacrificed year after year, but with Jesus as the lamb, this was the final, decisive sacrifice we desperately need, and this is how the New Testament speaks about Jesus.

²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' John 1:29

This was John the Baptist at the Jordan River, before Jesus' baptism.

¹⁸ For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. 1 Peter 1:18,19

Here the apostle Peter identified Jesus as the "lamb without blemish or defect". Jesus was without sin.

For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; "he will lead them to springs of living water."^{iv} "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."^v Rev 7:17

In Revelation, Jesus is identified as both the Lamb and our shepherd.

Also, the restrictions that the Lord gave Moses and Aaron for how the Passover was to be celebrated included

⁴⁶ 'It must be eaten inside the house; take none of the meat outside the house. Do not break any of the bones. Exodus 12:46

Remember, at the crucifixion, how the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, so the soldiers broke the legs of the thieves on either side on Jesus.

³³ But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. ... ³⁶ These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: 'Not one of his bones will be broken,^{vi} ...' John 19:33, 36a

After the temple was built, Passover celebrations became centred in Jerusalem, and people brought their Passover lambs to be sacrificed at the temple. Jesus died outside of the city wall at the same time that those Passover lambs were being sacrificed at the temple.

But, in this story of the Passover that became the Lord's Supper, there is the tragedy of Judas who had accepted 30 pieces of silver from the chief priests to betray Jesus. He was one of Jesus' closest friends, one of the twelve, and Jesus knew his heart.

²⁰ When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. ²¹ And while they were eating, he said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.' ...

²⁵ Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, 'Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi?' Jesus answered, 'You have said so.' Matthew 26:20, 21, 25

Also, at the end of our gospel reading today, we heard how Jesus predicted that Peter would deny him three times before morning.

³¹ Then Jesus told them, 'This very night you will all fall away on account of me, ...

³³ Peter replied, 'Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.' ³⁴ 'Truly I tell you,' Jesus answered, 'this very night, before the cock crows, you will disown me three times.' ... Matthew 26:31a,33,34

When Peter heard the rooster crow, he realized what he had done. He wept bitter tears.

But after his resurrection, Jesus restored Peter. He asked Peter three times if he loved him, corresponding to the three times that Peter had denied him. Peter was restored and went on to become one of the greatest leaders in the early Christian church.

What are some similarities and differences between Judas and Peter?

- Both Judas and Peter were handpicked by Jesus and ministered with him.
- Peter understood who Jesus was, we assume that Judas did not.
- Judas planned to betray Jesus, Peter did not.
- Both deeply regretted what they had done.
- Peter repented; Judas just regretted.

But what about us? How are we like Peter and Judas? Each one of us must eventually come to understand that Jesus "died for me". Sometimes, it is easy to ask for forgiveness when we realise that we have done something wrong. But sometimes it is really hard. We can't forgive ourselves; we hold on to guilt and it eats away at us. But our Lord Jesus is gracious and loves to forgive and restore us when we come to him in sorrow and repentance.

Third, when we come to Holy Communion each Sunday, how do we answer the question “**Why is this night different from all other nights?**”

It is a question that we will keep asking for the rest of our lives. One that will draw us deeper into the mystery of Christ’s love for us, his sacrifice for us as the Passover Lamb in his death on the cross.

²⁸ so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.
Hebrews 9:28

As we remember Jesus’ death for us once and for all to take away sin, we enter in to it and make it our own, and we look for his coming again in glory – the experience of past, present and future rolled into one.

In communion, the words Jesus spoke his first disciples, he speaks to us, today. “Take and eat. This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And “Drink from this, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

Our reply: We eat this bread and drink this cup
to proclaim the death of the Lord.
We do this until he returns.
Come, Lord Jesus!

So, what is our response as we remember the great love the Lord Jesus has shown for us in his sacrifice on the cross as the Passover Lamb? When we celebrate this regularly in Holy Communion? As we come as the family of God here at St George’s? As Jesus invites us to give our lives in worship, thankfulness and praise?

Let’s pray. Lord Jesus, how can we ever thank you for pouring out your life on the cross as the Passover Lamb of God? Help us give our lives to you in grateful service as we come and as we recognise the special relationship that you offer us. We see this so wonderfully demonstrated in the Lord’s Supper, Holy Communion, the Eucharist.^{vii} Amen.

ⁱ The word “seder” means “order” because the Passover celebration/feast was highly structured.

ⁱⁱ Psalms 113-118

ⁱⁱⁱ Tom Wright, 1999, *The Meal Jesus Gave Us: Understanding Holy Communion*, Westminster John Knox Press, London, p12

^{iv} Isaiah 49:10

^v Isaiah 25:8

^{vi} Exodus 12:46; Num. 9:12; Psalm 34:20

^{vii} “Eucharist” comes from the Greek word for thankful.

Seder plate:

<https://forward.com/life/422614/of-sacred-items-and-gorgeous-tchotchkes-the-seder-plate/>
<https://thejewishlady.com/matzo-toppings-45-options/>