

Passover of the Lord
Holy Thursday
(Ex 12; 1Cor 11; Jn 13)

Tonight begins the Passover of the Lord, and the deliverance of mankind from slavery which God had been preparing since the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. Tonight the scriptures are fulfilled, which tell of that plan, and one Scriptural event in particular comes to the foreground: the Passover festival.

Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem during Passover, which is the greatest of the three great festivals of the Chosen People. During these festivals, which continue a full week, the population of Jerusalem would swell to over a million, as faithful Jews, together with remnants from other tribes, would undertake pilgrimage to the Holy City from all parts of the diaspora, in the vast Greco-Roman world.

For a long time already, the Jewish leaders were looking for a way to arrest and get rid of Jesus, whom they considered a blasphemer, law-breaker, and false teacher. Again and again, circumstances prevented them, especially the crowds who followed and believed in his teaching, and the miracles he performed which amazed even soldiers and Roman pagans. But it was God's plan that His Son fulfill the world's salvation in a very specific way, at an exact time, and this was the Passover.

Passover was instituted as an annual celebration for Israel by Moses, to commemorate the Exodus. It is a sacred meal with many different courses, each of which is significant in the telling of the story. Bitter herbs and salt water recall the suffering and hardship of the Israelites in Egypt, when they were subjected to forced slavery by the Pharaoh. Unleavened bread recalls the haste with which they packed up and left in the middle of the night, before the dough had a chance to rise. And a lamb's blood recalls God's judgment upon the first-born of Egypt, and deliverance of His people, for when the angel of death saw the blood of the lamb upon the doors, he would "pass over" that house. During the course of the sacred meal, presided over by the head of the household, the story of the miraculous deliverance is remembered and retold.

But the Exodus is not the final Passover. It is an earthly prefiguration of the true salvation God wishes to accomplish, not just for the Israelites, but for all mankind. The Jewish Passover commemorates deliverance from slavery, and oppression by a cruel dictator. The Jewish Passover commemorates the deliverance through water from a kingdom of cruelty to a promised land of freedom. Year by year, as Jews celebrate and recount the past Exodus, they look forward to the coming of the Messiah, who will accomplish the definitive liberation. In the new

Passover, the anointed Son of God will deliver His people from the bondage of sin, liberate them from the cruel dominion of the evil one, and bring them through the cleansing waters to the eternal life of God's Kingdom. In this Kingdom they will no longer be slaves but sons.

When Jesus came to celebrate this particular Passover designated by the Father with his disciples – twelve men representing the 12 patriarchs of the new Israel – he knew everything prepared in Scripture was about to be accomplished. During the Last Supper Jesus recounts with his new family, the Church, the intimate details of that salvation: the love of the Holy Trinity, manifested by the Son coming into the world, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

As the various courses of the sacred meal are celebrated, Jesus explains their full meaning as they are fulfilled now in himself. For instance, the bitter herbs dipped in salt water represent the profound sorrow and tears of Jesus as he hands the morsel to Judas who is about to betray him. But it is the other, more central elements of the meal that take on their full significance in the Last Supper. With each course, there is bread (unleavened) and of course a cup of wine, accompanying the rest of the dishes. A prayer of blessing and thanksgiving is prayed over the bread and wine as each new chapter of the story begins.

During the third and final course, when Jesus takes up the bread and wine to bless and distribute, he completes the old Passover and makes it a new one. There is no need for an actual lamb at the Last Supper of Jesus, because it is not the flesh of an animal his disciples will eat, nor is it the blood of an animal that will be put on the lintels. Jesus himself will be the Lamb. As he blessed the bread and distributes it to the apostles, he tells them "This is my flesh, take and eat." Likewise with the wine, he tells them "This is the cup of my blood." Jesus inaugurates a new covenant, to supplant that of Moses. Jesus offers a new sacrifice – himself – to replace the animals and lamb. And he tells the patriarchs of the new Israel to celebrate this new Passover in commemoration of the deliverance he will accomplish: "Do this in memory of me."

What is presented and commemorated by means of the bread and wine on Holy Thursday, happens through the crucifixion on Good Friday, and the mystery of Easter Sunday. His death and resurrection bring about the new Passover of mankind, from sin to forgiveness, from slavery to sonship, from the dominion of Satan to the Kingdom of God, from death to life.

Let us then celebrate with joy, and remember with thanksgiving the Passover of Jesus, in which he becomes the Lamb whose Body gives us eternal life, whose Blood delivers us from death, and whose charity makes us brothers.