

Holy Week: Maundy Thursday

By Anand Peter

Passover is a Jewish festival that commemorates the story of the Exodus, when the ancient Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt. Scripture tells us that God brought about their escape by inflicting ten plagues upon the Egyptians, until Pharaoh at last let them go. The tenth and most terrible of these plagues was the death of every Egyptian firstborn, both man and beast. The Israelites were instructed to mark the doorposts of their homes with the blood of a young, unblemished lamb, so that the spirit of the Lord, on seeing this mark, would pass over their homes and spare their firstborn — hence the name "Passover." Exodus 12:1-20 sets out, in full, the process prescribed for that first Passover, and the manner in which it was to be commemorated by every generation to come; it remains, to this day, one of the most widely observed of the Jewish festivals.

The observances of Passover are fascinating in their own right. Though a Jewish custom, we as Christians ought to remember that Jesus Himself held fast to the values He taught. Maundy Thursday commemorates the events of the Last Supper, and the most significant change Jesus made to the ancient custom was to institute the Eucharist, or Holy Communion, the Sacrament now practised, in one form or another, by almost every Christian denomination — a constant reminder of the reconciliation and renewed communion between God and man.

It was on this same occasion that Jesus washed the feet of His disciples, to the visible objection of the impulsive Peter, demonstrating the very teaching He gave in Matthew 20:25-28: "But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." We would do well to ask ourselves, today, to what extent we practise this teaching in letter and in spirit. We continue, all too often, to want to lord it over others, and to ridicule those who consistently serve them; we live in a world of every man for himself. The washing of feet that Jesus carried out at the Last Supper is a picture of true Biblical servanthood — loving acts, performed by the help of the Holy Spirit, to meet the temporal and spiritual needs of those around us, leaving the results to God. In recent times, God has shown us afresh how fragile the human race truly is, and how helpless and ineffective we can be. Whether a spiritual revival yet awaits the world, only time will tell.

The third addition Jesus made to the Passover practice was His instruction that we love one another — not merely in word, or in empty gesture, but unconditionally, our neighbours included, exactly as He went on to demonstrate upon the Cross. In its own context, this was, after all, a fellowship supper; and it remains good practice to eat together, after the manner of a shared meal among friends, since this promotes both servanthood and fellowship alike.

The wider Christian world has, over time, taken up only parts of the Last Supper, while claiming to observe the Passover as Jesus did. My charge to you is this: we fail in the details. We have no time for

God; we want only a quick foot-washing and love-feast ritual, and to be done with it. My question, then, is simple: if Jesus, our Lord and Saviour, our ultimate Teacher, observed this in form and in substance, why should we not do likewise?

For those who wish to understand the fuller Passover observance Jesus Himself was keeping that night, it may help to know something of the Jewish Passover Seder, the order of service held in Jewish homes as part of the Passover celebrations, generally observed on the first night of Passover (and, in some homes, on the second night as well), concluding with a meal. Participants follow a book called the Haggadah — from the Hebrew for "the telling" — which sets out the order, the blessings, and the Passover story itself; indeed, the word "Seder" simply means "order," or "arrangement." Traditionally, the service unfolds in fifteen parts, all built around the coming Passover meal: an opening sanctification over wine; the ritual washing of hands; the dipping of a green vegetable in salt water, recalling the tears of the enslaved Israelites; the breaking of the unleavened bread, or matzah; the retelling of the Exodus story itself, led by the youngest child present asking the Four Questions; a further washing of hands; the blessing and eating of the matzah; the eating of bitter herbs, recalling the harshness of slavery in Egypt; the "Hillel sandwich" of bitter herbs and a sweet fruit-and-nut paste called charoset; the meal itself, taken at leisure and reclining, as a sign of freedom rather than bondage; the eating of the afikomen, the reserved half-piece of matzah, as a kind of dessert; a further blessing over wine, with a cup set aside and a door opened for the prophet Elijah; songs of praise; and, finally, a closing blessing expressing the hope, "Next year in Jerusalem!"

It was at just such a Passover Seder that Jesus declared the meal to represent Himself, and that He was instituting the New Covenant foretold by Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah — a covenant that has become the Christian Church's own ordinance of Communion. At the end of the meal, Jesus took the unleavened bread, broke it, and said that it represented His body. Then He took the cup of wine — almost certainly the third cup of the Seder, the cup of redemption — and said that it was the New Covenant in His blood, shed for us. It is through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that we are declared clean before God, so that all who choose to accept His pardon may commune with Him, now and for evermore, through the eternal life He offers.