

It is springtime, and another of God's major festivals arrives. This one, like most others, is commanded by God “as a day you are to commemorate for the generations to come... you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord.” It is one to which Jesus leads us, year after year.

Remember when Jesus was 12 years old and disappeared from the caravan after the Passover? Even in his adolescence, he was drawn to the temple. His parents had to search for him. However, where else would he be than in the temple, his Father's house? At his young age, Jesus was sitting with the teachers. Although the temple conversation is not recorded, one may imagine that at least *part* of it was about the feast of the Passover, which had just ended.

Scripture does record Jesus teaching about the feast of Passover, a teaching Christians celebrate on Maundy Thursday and every time they come to his supper at the altar. Jesus used this festival to prepare the disciples for his departure.

Passover is a defining event in Jewish life and history. At the Passover, God showed his power and majesty, his protection and love for his people, when, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, he brought them out of the land of Egypt. We are well acquainted with these events. Not only have they been recorded in Scripture, but I'm sure that Charlton Heston's Moses is dramatically leading the Israelites again this year in the classic movie *The Ten Commandments*, and that children are again watching the animated film *The Prince of Egypt*.

The exodus story is imprinted on our culture. The Passover is central to the exodus and has become the principal celebration of the exodus by the Jewish people. A primary component of the Passover is the Seder, the Passover meal, and the many traditions that developed around it through the centuries. Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper while he and his disciples celebrated the Seder. In a sense, Christians also recall the Passover every time they come to the Lord's Supper. The Passover celebrates freedom from physical slavery. The Lord's Supper celebrates freedom from slavery to sin.

The Seder, which simply means “order,” is the liturgy for the remembrance of the exodus. A major part of the seder is called the Haggadah, or the telling. Telling the story is most important to the Jewish people. Many elements of the Seder support the telling of the story. Ceremonial foods represent events leading up to the exodus. First, perhaps most important, is the matzo, unleavened bread called the ‘bread of haste’ because the Israelites did not have time to let their bread rise before they fled to the desert. They were prepared to leave at a moment's notice, and so matzo is eaten today in remembrance. In the tradition of the Seder, unleavened bread has come to represent purity. Therefore, the matzo represents something sinless.

Other ceremonial foods, explained in detail during a Seder, are bitter roots and horseradish to bring tears to the eyes. These tears recalled the tears of bitterness shed by God's people while they were in Egypt. Scripture notes that God commanded the bitter roots be eaten with unleavened bread. It was probably this dipping of the bread into the bowl of bitter roots that

Jesus referred to when he said of Judas, “the one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me” (Matthew 26: 23).

Charoset, a sweet mixture of nuts, lime, apples, and honey, has been added to the tradition of the Seder and represents the mortar used to build the cities of Pharaoh. Carpas, today parsley is substituted, was a green leafy plant with a long stalk called hyssop. Hyssop is the plant that David cried out to be cleansed with in Psalm 51 after his sin with Bathsheba. And it was a hyssop stick on which the sponge was raised to the cross to soothe the thirst of the dying Messiah. Hyssop represents life and cleansing. God said to take hyssop and dip it into the blood of a sacrificed lamb and paint this blood on the sides and tops of the door frames of the houses where the lamb was eaten. This sign, the blood of the lamb, identified God's chosen people to the Angel of Death when he passed through the land, slaying the first born of Egypt. The parsley, representing hyssop, is dipped into a bowl of salt water to recall the blood that was shed and the death that was spared the Jews.

There are food elements that represent the Passover lamb also- a roasted egg and a lamb shank. No lamb is served at a Passover meal because the temple was destroyed in 70 AD. The sacrifice of the lamb is no longer permitted. The egg represents a roasted lamb. Traditionally, the darkened shell is removed to find the white of the eggs symbolizing rebirth. Through Jesus, we know that although the lamb was sacrificed, the shell was darkened, and death was the result; it was not permanent. Rebirth came three days later. When the white egg is consumed and the darkened shell discarded, one can see a picture of being reborn in the image of him who was darkened and reborn for us.

The table is set with a place for everyone invited and Elijah's place, the vacant seat for one that the Jewish people hope will come but has not yet—the Messiah. It is tradition to invite a “foreigner” to the table, a Gentile or even a Gentile- Christian. Other accoutrements for this meal include the Seder plate for the ceremonial foods, wine goblets, linen napkins, and something called a *matzo tosh*.

A *matzo tosh* is a curious thing. It is one piece of linen with three sections. Before the meal, a sheet of matzo is placed in each of the three sections. How this tradition started is debated, but most agree that it predates the time of Jesus. Some scholars argue that it was started by Jesus' disciples to remember his last Passover. Most rabbis argue that the *matzo tosh* designates Israel and her patriarchy, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. From these men come one people. Other opinions link the *matzo tosh* to the worship of the temple- in the service of one God, there was the temple, the Levites who took care of the temple, and the priests. Jewish Christians consider these three parts of the *matzo tosh* symbolic of the Trinity, three persons in one God.

At one point during the meal, the head of the table will take the *matzo tosh* and remove the middle matzo. He will break this matzo in half. One half, called the afikomen, is wrapped in a linen napkin and hidden. Afikomen means “that which comes after” and has been interpreted to be the last piece of food consumed at the Seder. Following the meal, the children at the table search for the afikomen, and the one who finds it receives a gift. Usually that gift is the child's

first Hebrew scriptures, and it is a tradition to give that gift at the festival of Shavuot, or Pentecost, 50 days later.

Four cups of wine are consumed at the seder. Each cup has a name and corresponds to God's promises and Exodus 6: "I will bring you out from under the yoke... I will free you... I will redeem you... I will take you as my own people and I will be your God." The third cup, the cup of redemption, follows the supper of the Seder and is consumed with the afikomen. The afikomen and the cup of redemption recall God's promise of redemption.

Matthew records, "While they were eating the seder meal, Jesus took bread..." (quite possibly the afikomen) "...gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body..." Then he took the cup. Paul in 1 Corinthians 11: 25 notes it to be the cup after supper, the third cup of the seder, the cup of redemption. Jesus "Gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Holy Scripture has been compared to photo album. The pictures have frames and spaces between them. But the context of the Seder fills in some of the spaces for us. Jesus took the bread, matzo, that is prepared very carefully for Passover. It is unleavened so it does not rise; Therefore, it burns easily. The dough is rolled out in sheets and then a wheel with pins is rolled over it to pierce the dough so that the heat will rise through the bread, cooking it rapidly and not burning it. But the bread does have baking marks between the perforations. There are dark stripes where the heat does not rise through the bread.

When Jesus took that bread, he was telling the truth. It is his body. Sinless, pierced through, striped by heat, taken from the middle of the three-part linen. Broken, wrapped in linen, and hidden away, to be found not too much later.

When Jesus took the wine, he was being truthful. This cup, the cup of redemption, is his blood, the blood that would be poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. It is his blood that paints the doorframes of our hearts, and his words would bring to mind for the disciples a promise and prophecy spoken by Jeremiah six hundred years earlier. God would bring to his people a new covenant, not like the one he gave them when he brought them by the hand, out of the land of Egypt. No, in this covenant, God would forgive the sins of his people forever and remember their wickedness no more. Only the blood of God's own Son could accomplish this miracle, and on this night, Jesus tells them it is done.