

## 26 The Passover Meal

22: 1 - 38

The celebration of unleavened bread, which is called the Passover, was near, and the chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way of doing away with Jesus. But it would not be easy. He was too popular, and there was no saying how the people might react if they tried to arrest him openly.

Judas Iscariot, one of his inner circle, the twelve, went to the chief priests and the temple police with a plan for handing Jesus over to them. It was the breakthrough they needed: someone who was close to him and trusted, who would know where he was at all times, who would be willing to contact them at the right moment, when he was unguarded and arrestable. They agreed to pay him for the job.

Luke's gospel, like Mark's, changes profoundly as it comes to the end of Jesus' life. In Mark, it is the change from Jesus moving through the events of his life with impressive authority and always in control, to Jesus now subject to the hostile control of his enemies. With Luke, it is a change of pace and a change of focus.

Unlike Mark, whose story races from start to finish with all the energy of the breaking kingdom of God, Luke's account of Jesus' deeds and teaching throughout Galilee and on his journey to Jerusalem has proceeded at a measured, almost leisurely pace. But now that it comes to a conclusion, events begin to rush forward with unexpected speed, moving quickly towards a mighty and comprehensive fulfillment. Yet it's also as if time itself has slowed down and acquired new dimensions, so that much, much more is now declared and completed in a small space of time.

It's as if Jesus' predictions about the sudden but unmistakable coming of the Son of Man are now being fulfilled. His own imminent death (for the plan to betray him is already laid) means that there is no more time to accomplish the many things that surely have to be accomplished if the kingdom is to be established as promised, now, for this generation, in Jerusalem; and yet, what he now brings about with the small group of his closest followers reaches further and establishes much more than any former act of his.

The focus changes with the Passover meal. Everything is smaller, and immeasurably larger. Thruout Luke's gospel, the "apostles" have been an important part of the story, but they have not been the whole of Jesus' following. There are many others, who represent the wider following of Jesus: the seventy-two who were also sent out ahead of him, the women, and Miriam in particular, and a convert like Zacchaeus. There are many who follow him as their teacher, and, on his arrival in Jerusalem, acclaim him as Israel's expected king.

But in the end the focus is on Jesus with his closest circle of disciples, those who are called his "apostles" because they are to be sent out with his authority.<sup>1</sup> It is they who celebrate the Passover together, eating the sacrificial lamb to commemorate the liberation of Israel from Egypt. This celebration was perhaps the greatest in the Jewish calendar, and the one which was placed most of all within the household and family. So it was Jesus' most intimate family who now shared it with him.

He sent Peter and John into the city to prepare a room, telling them that as they entered they would see a man carrying a pitcher of water. They were to follow him right into whatever house he entered and the owner of that house would show them the room for their Passover gathering.<sup>2</sup> He was proceeding cautiously, his movements covered for secrecy. He knew the authorities would be watching for a chance to capture him away from the public eye, and the Passover meal, of its nature a more private gathering, mite be their opportunity if they knew where he was. (Nowadays, the authorities would wait for a moment when other big news stories were distracting the public attention. Or they would grab their victim in a foreign country and render them off to some third country, where the media mite not be so intrusive.) As a good Jew, Jesus would celebrate the Passover with joy and conviction, and, in spite of the danger, he had decided to celebrate it within Jerusalem. It was his city, where he and the coming kingdom belonged.

So the nite of the Passover found them together at table, Jesus and his apostles. He sed to them:

"I have longed to eat this Passover meal with you before I suffer. I tell you, I shall not eat it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God."

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<sup>1</sup> "Apostolos" is a Greek word meaning "one who is sent".

<sup>2</sup> It shows us that Jesus had, in fact, more substantial contacts in Jerusalem than the gospel has told us of, trusted friends who were in the picture and willing to help him. John's gospel, makes it clear that Jesus went a number of times to Jerusalem. Both Mark and Luke have limited their account to the one final journey, in order to bring home its unique significance.

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Then he took a cup of wine and gave thanks, saying to them "Take this and share it among you, for I tell you, from this time on I will not drink the juice of the vine until the kingdom of God has come."

(22: 15 – 18)

The Passover! Who can exhaust the depth and power of meaning in this solemn celebration of the Jewish people? The Passover celebrates the nite when God brought death to the oppressors of Israel, passing thru their towns and dwellings to slay the firstborn of every household. But he passed over, omitted from the terrible destruction of life, the houses of the Israelite people.<sup>3</sup> They had been commanded to kill an animal from their flocks and to eat it in their own homes with all their household sharing. The blood of that animal, brushed on the doorposts of their house, would tell God that this was a house of Israelites, a house to be spared. The blood was a sign of exemption, and the meal was a sign of solidarity, of belonging together as the nation of Israel, and to God as his people.

Later regulation put particular emphasis on this. Only the circumcised men of Israel, and the women and children of their households, could celebrate the Passover and share the meal. Strangers and foreigners mite join them, but only if the men were circumcised, making them partners and sharers in Israel.<sup>4</sup> This intimate family and national dimension of the celebration takes us back to the one other occasion when the ritual of sacrifice was part of this gospel. At the beginning of his life, Jesus' parents had taken him to the temple on the day of his mother's purification, offering the required sacrifice for his redemption as the possession of God. Now, at the end of his life, the Passover sacrifice is enacted<sup>5</sup> and Jesus shares the meal with those who are his family.

He had drunk and partied often in the course of his teaching, but of many meals described in the gospel, this will be the last, and it is shared intimately with his closest followers. They are not only Israelites with him, and the family that supersedes all his natural family; they are, pre-eminently, the ones he will send out with word of the kingdom, his apostles. It will be his last Passover, until the Passover itself is fulfilled in the kingdom of God. He will not drink wine again until the kingdom of God has come, for the kingdom, and the fulfilment of the Passover, is near. The rule of God is soon to begin.

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<sup>3</sup> The event, and the rules for its commemoration every year, are described in Exodus ch 12 and 13, Leviticus 23: 5 – 8 and Deuteronomy 16: 1 – 8.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 12: 43 – 51

<sup>5</sup> 22:7

Then he took some bread and, giving thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying “This is my body, [given for you. Do this in memory of me.” And after the meal, he took the cup in the same way, saying “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for you.”]

(22: 19 – 20)

At this point, we come up against a textual issue. Usually, differences in the manuscripts on which we rely for our understanding of the original text are so slight that they make no difference to the ongoing story. But, in this case, there is a substantial difference. The words after “This is my body”, which I have put in brackets, [ ], are well attested in several of the oldest and most reliable manuscripts, but they are not included in several others, also old and reliable. Moreover, those words closely resemble Paul’s description of the event,<sup>6</sup> written at least a generation before Luke, and it’s possible that Paul himself was quoting an even earlier formula by which Christians recalled the words of Jesus at his last meal.

If the words were added after the original text was published, it is clear they were added from sources as old and reliable as those that Luke was using. (It is possible, I suppose, that Luke himself made the change.) At any rate, I intend to treat them as part of the text, part of the whole account of Jesus’ death, because it is important to see that, even with the inclusion of these words, which move the interpretation a little in the direction of Paul’s, we still have an account of Jesus’ death which is different from the idea of atonement which we commonly build out of Paul’s teaching.

But the “problem” of the variant readings in the manuscripts is not really a problem at all. The scriptures were not dictated by an angel but were the reflections of the earliest generation of Christians upon their experience of Jesus, collected and edited by such a writer as Luke. The work of reflecting on the original script and adding to it from the oldest memories of the community – which is what we see here – is itself part of the process we call “inspiration”. The revelation of God is not a magic set of words, but an event, and the person, Jesus, at the heart of the event. What is remembered of him has been written down, and what is most strongly remembered of him, in the practice of the community itself, has been added to complete the picture. What we have here is not a troublesome text but the living process of recollection itself, and we are properly guided by it.

The bread which is Jesus’ body was broken and given to them. He shares himself, gives himself, as God gives the kingdom and deeply desires to give

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<sup>6</sup> I Cor 11: 24 – 25

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the kingdom, to those who will receive it without fear. The broken body, his death, is for them, and for us. We have been told often enough that his death lies ahead of him almost as a goal, that it is inevitable, the certain result of his prophetic confrontation with the authorities, that it is the only way for him to come into his kingdom. Now, for the first time, he tells us that it is a personal offering, a sacrifice like that of the Paschal lamb. The surrender of his body is for them. And it is for them as his apostles, the intimate family with whom he shares the Passover, but also the ones whom he will send out with the word, the life and energy of the kingdom.

But why? how? If someone dies rescuing a friend in danger or dies in battle defending their country, it's clear what we mean when we say that they gave their lives, that their death was for others. But what can it mean in this case? What can Jesus mean when he says that the broken bread he gives them is his body? We must not rush in with the answer that his death atones for our sins, for that is not what Jesus said, and it is not what Luke is telling us.

It is for them as the only way to inaugurate the kingdom: presenting and claiming it in Jerusalem, where power already opposes it. For the kingdom will not come except by facing, with its power-less authority, those who have power to kill, by meeting in its vulnerable but inexhaustible reality, the reality of hostile power. It is for them because they look for the kingdom, because the kingdom is to be from now on their rationale and their life. It is for them and for us because they, and we, can be saved only as the rule of God is established around us, among and within us.

They are given the bread to eat as God gave his people the Paschal sacrifice to eat. Now the kid or lamb that was offered at the Passover was not an offering for the expiation of sin. It is not suggested in the books of the Law that the lamb was the price of salvation or deliverance, an offering in return for which God saved his people. Rather, it was a kind of communion, a sharing of food that symbolised, in a profoundly committing way, their solidarity with one another and their solidarity with God – God's solidarity with them. It was this that won their salvation, their rescue and safety when the angel of death struck down the Egyptians: that they stood within the protection of God, who had committed himself to them.

We should not assume that there is an easy and longstanding fit between the blood of the covenant and the blood of atonement. There were sacrifices that took away sin, but the Passover sacrifice was not one of them. The Passover was a celebration of the covenant. When the blood of the lamb was sprinkled on the doorposts of the Israelites, it was not a sacrifice to

purchase salvation, but a sign of the covenant in which they were saved, a sign of their belonging to God.

When Jews celebrated the Passover, they were celebrating their bond with God, the covenant by which God had committed Godself to be their God, and in which they inherited their identity as God's people, and on this nite, the eve of his death, Jesus gave his followers a new celebration like the Passover, because a new covenant was being inaugurated. They were to share the bread which is his body, and to drink from the cup which is the new covenant in his blood. The prophet Jeremiah had told of this new covenant long ago, when the last tribe of Israel was facing extinction:

See, the days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel. ... Deep within them I will plant my Law, writing it on their hearts. Then I will be their God and they shall be my people.

(Jer 31: 31, 33)

That new covenant had been bound up with the hope that the lost nation of Israel (the "ten tribes" who had disappeared into the Assyrian Empire) would be recovered, returning to their land and their God.<sup>7</sup> Similar hopes for a covenant yet to come had been voiced by the prophet Ezekiel who had seen the revival of Israel thru a new covenant with God, under the rule of God's chosen King, as nothing less than resurrection from the dead, life returned to a people as lost and dead as bones bleaching in the desert.<sup>8</sup>

Great as the Passover is, mity and eternal as is the bond between God and God's people established in the Passover covenant, the new covenant is greater. Established in Jesus' blood, it will write the Law of God on the very hearts of his followers. In the Passover meal, you ate the body of the lamb that had been sacrificed, and by this you were counted among the people of God, protected in danger by the very bond of God, you and your people safe in God's hands. Now, in this new celebration, we are to eat the bread which is the body of Jesus, "given up for you" and so be counted as Jesus' followers, children of his Father, managers of that vast estate which is God's kingdom coming to be in this world and its history.

We drink from the cup in which the blood of Jesus is the seal of the new covenant. Blood is the powerful stream of life, which Israel had been forbidden to eat. Whenever they ate the meat of animals, it had to be carefully drained of blood. They were not to presume to devour life itself,

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<sup>7</sup> Jeremiah ch 31

<sup>8</sup> Ezechiel ch 37

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which was the very energy and prerogative of God, given and taken by God alone.<sup>9</sup> But in this new ritual, – for ritual it is: “Do this in memory of me” – the old prohibition is done away with, and we may drink the stream of life itself.

The Israelites had been told in the Law that when they offered an animal in sacrifice, tho they and their priests mite eat the meat, they were to pour away the blood and never to consume it, because the blood is the stream of life. In sacrifice, and indeed whenever a creature is slautered, the life returns to God. He alone receives it, as it comes from him, the essentially living God. But now, in this new ritual, Jesus reverses the command. We are to consume the blood, his blood, for we are to receive the life he gives. It will not go back to God, to stay there, but flows to us, to be life and strength and adventure in us.

Here at last is the positive drive of the kingdom, its true energy, vitality, and (provided we can give a new meaning to the word) power. It is the culmination of his mission. In healing, compassion and forgiveness, in earnest and patient teaching, in the warning of danger, he had been giving himself all along, and now he gives his life. The great lack of the kingdom, that it has no power, that even the King is at the mercy of those who rule with power, is in fact the beginning of its great strength: that here, in the new covenant, life flows from God, endlessly, relentlessly. There are those who rule by the taking of life, and they will soon show their hand; but God rules in the giving of life.

The kingdom, the positive rule of God will not come about except it meets and encounters God’s people in all its reality, nothing hidden or disguised, nothing avoided. There cannot be a half-hearted or concessionary kingdom of God. And in all the inexhaustible strength and energy of it, there is no trace of what we call power, the power to compel or force. So long as it remains a question of power, the reality is that the men of power can put Jesus to death, and in Jesus’ acceptance of that reality, that Godself will not deny or avoid it, stands and is established at last the rule of God, which alone is the salvation of Israel and of all the nations. That is why Jesus’ death is for them and for us. What comes of it now is in the hands of God.

The new ritual is an explanation of the coming death of Jesus, not just a written explanation, as here in the gospel, but an explanation to be enacted by his followers ever after. The time will come when his death will be behind

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<sup>9</sup> Leviticus 17: 8 – 14; Deut. 12: 23 – 25

them, and they will look back to it interpreting his death in this celebration, as the Passover meal interpreted the original great acts of God.

What we have in this account of the Christian “Communion Service” is an interpretation of the death of Jesus, in terms of a new covenant between God and the followers of Jesus, a covenant that is the very source and giving of life. What we do not have is an interpretation of Jesus’ death as an act of atonement for sin. The Passover celebration was not the Feast of Atonement. The shedding of blood, a central and powerful feature of the act of covenant, sealing the bond between God and God’s people, is not here a punishment for sin, nor is it the appeasement of God’s anger against sin, but it is the sign of the covenant and a hitherto unheard of access to the very streams of life.

We must not rely upon some idealised interpretation of temple rituals and atonement sacrifices to explain the death of Jesus. Such an imaginative interpretation has been made,<sup>10</sup> and it will enrich our understanding, but we must not rely on it. It is not basic. Its value is to expand, in certain directions, what the gospel accounts tell us, but if we let it replace the gospel, it descends into blasphemy. In fact, we are not to call on any of the history or rituals of sacrifice to fully interpret the death of Jesus, for the death of Jesus is the making of God’s new covenant with God’s people, a mighty event that dates and interprets all the history and ritual that went before it. Tho the Temple and its history tells us something about the death of Jesus, it is the death of Jesus which will show us the meaning of the Temple and all its rituals.

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And the death of Jesus is an act of betrayal. At the very moment he declared the new covenant, the hand of his betrayer was on the table with his. He told his apostles so and they were deeply shocked, but could not imagine who would do it. Jesus had this warning for the traitor:

The Son of Man takes the road that is laid down for him – but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed! (22: 22)

We take the betrayal by Judas a bit too much for granted, as if it had to happen anyway. It did not. But it was the way Judas chose to go, and it was the way that God chose for the Son of Man to go forward. When Jesus now asserts that he himself is the Son of Man, he does so in the sober

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<sup>10</sup> The Letter to the Hebrews ch 1 - 10

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knowledge that the way of the Son of Man is thru betrayal and death. Now, with disaster imminent, he claims the title unequivocally.

That God is in control, is not driven off course or taken by surprise when we strike against his plans and fite against his intentions for us, means that the Son of Man, when he is betrayed and put to death will still be going the way that God has chosen for him, altho it is so unlike the glorious triumph predicted by Daniel. It does not mean that we who resist the plans of God and fite against him are mere puppets carrying out an irresistible will. It means that the omnipotence of God is also God's resourcefulness and agility, and that even the worst we do is caut up and built into the deeper, wider fullness of God's work for us. But the evil we commit is still evil, and woe to the one who commits evil!

The friends to whom Jesus was speaking, with whom he was celebrating this final Passover, giving them the new rite that would commemorate his death and the new covenant, these closest disciples, were not equal to the occasion. They somehow got into an argument over which of them was the greatest (presumably with the highest claims in the kingdom that was about to be launched). So he sed to them,

“The kings of the pagans lord it over them and the person who holds power over them is called a Benefactor. You are not to be like them. The greatest among you must be like the junior; your leader must be your servant. Who is the most important – the one who is placed at table or the servant waiting on him? Surely the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the servant.

“You are the ones who have stood by me in my trials, and I invest in you the kingdom which my Father has invested in me, so you shall eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and you shall sit upon thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

“Simon, Simon, you have to know that Satan has been given his wish to sift you all like wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. When you recover, you must strengthen your brothers.”

Simon answered him, “Lord, I am redy to go with you to prison and to death!” But he sed to him, “I tell you Peter [Simon] the cock will not crow today before you deny three times that you even know me.”

He sed to them all, “When I sent you without purse, pack or boots, did you run short of anything?” “No,” they sed, “nothing.” “But now,” he sed, “if you’ve got a purse, take it, and a pack as well. And anyone who lacks arms should sell his cloak and buy a sword. I tell you, this scripture is going to be fulfilled in me: ‘He was counted as an outlaw.’<sup>11</sup> What scripture says of me is all coming to a conclusion.”

They sed to him, “Look, Master, we’ve got two swords here.” “That’s enuf,” he sed.

(22: 24 – 38)

The gospel challenges us to believe, and we have reached the point in Luke’s gospel where it makes its most profound challenge to our faith – a challenge we avoid by substituting our own more manageable challenges. We tell ourselves that Jesus is about to offer his life in atonement for sin, and that if we believe in that atonement – believe in him – we shall be saved. Which is true, but not what the gospel is saying; not what Luke is telling us and not what Jesus sed to his apostles at that last Passover.

The challenge that was about to break upon Peter, the very sifting of Satan, was not going to be the psychological one of whether he could believe in his heart the atoning value of Jesus’ death and rely on that for his salvation, nor even whether he could believe it enuf to recommend it to others. It was going to be the very public one to take his stand when the political, legal, religious authorities moved against Jesus, and to risk the wrath of an establishment powerful enuf to arrest, try and condemn the Lord.

You cannot separate the kingdom from the new covenant; you cannot say that the new covenant has been given, but the kingdom still waits for a future day. Set incongruously in a framework of betrayal and failure, the kingdom, as the active intervention of God into the history of this world, to establish finally God’s rule over human history, is now inaugurated, with the ritual given to Jesus’ closest followers. He has spoken of the one who will betray him and so undo all his careful work in Jerusalem; he speaks of

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<sup>11</sup> Isaiah 53: 12 If Jesus, or if Luke reflecting on his words, had wanted to depict his death as an offering of atonement for sin, scriptures were at hand. In the passage of the Book of Isaiah from which Jesus has just quoted there is a full description of the Servant of God whose suffering is an atonement for the sins of his people. But Jesus does not take it up – only the one point, that he is reckoned an outlaw, showing again the conflict between the prophet, or himself, and the community’s rulers in law, whose sanction is their power.

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Peter running scared and denying all knowledge of him; and between the two he appoints his followers rulers in the kingdom.

He takes two symbols of rule, of the exercise of authority in a country. One is the court banquet (in our society it would be perhaps the diplomatic dinner) where those who have been chosen to work with the King share his meal and the opportunity of intimate and familiar access, of relaxed and comfortable participation in the privileges of rule. The other is the traditional role of “judging”, which meant much more than presiding in a court of law. It meant governing or ruling as the ancient “Judges” ruled the tribes of Israel, hero-leaders who by their valiant deeds in the power of God’s spirit won acknowledgement as rulers over their tribes.

Jesus was not talking about some role in the “Last Judgement” and he was not talking about an authority to be realised only after their death or after the end of history. Neither was he setting up a religious hierarchy, inaugurating priests and bishops. He was inaugurating a civic, political, religious, social and economic order in line with the way of the kingdom he had been proclaiming all along, and appointing this band of his most intimate followers as its leaders. But in case they had any illusions that this meant power, that they would exercise power as world and national leaders do, he made it clear that they were to rule as servants and juniors.

And it’s not to be a matter of taking some exemplary title, like “Servant of the Servants of God” and attaching it as dressing to a role that is overweening, overbearing and condescending all the same. There were already kings and dictators who basked in the title of “Benefactor” deigning to represent their rule as all for the good of their subjects. Jesus warned them against any such polite cover-ups. They were to be in reality juniors and servants.

Jesus may draw images from the traditional exercise of power, because as we have seen he is not fussy about the origin of his images, provided they make the point. And the point is that his followers are to exercise the authority of God, ruling in the kingdom God establishes, that they are to be, as foretold, managers of the estate, giving to all God’s household their food in due season. But if they have any illusions of power, they have only to look to the one they follow: “I am among you as a servant.” Following him they will be good servants and good managers.

This is a strange inauguration of the kingdom of God, but it is the kingdom of God. There is no more power in it, and no more power promised to his apostles than Jesus had shown on his entry into Jerusalem. He had come

acclaimed as King in God's name; he had gone to the Temple, the heart of the city and the very courts of legitimate government, and there he had taut the people of Jerusalem. He showed authority, but not power, confounding the priests and other established leaders, whose privilege was power.

Now, as the kingdom itself is launched, a new covenant between God and God's people, it is no more than a small family meal, friends coming together to celebrate the Passover. It's as if the kingdom has shrunk and declined ever since Jesus' triumphal (if small-scale) approach to Jerusalem. Unwelcome to the powerful leaders of Israel, he has argued, but has not persuaded them, and the more often he made his point without managing to win them over the more dangerous his position became. Now, as he declares the new covenant and appoints those who will govern in the kingdom, he has left behind the enthusiastic audience of the temple courts and speaks only to his closest circle of disciples, and he has to speak to them of betrayal and failure.

It's as if the kingdom itself is already failing.

And yet, whatever is happening, it is happening immediately and urgently. They have run out of time to plan, to learn, to wait on the gentle, reliable provision of God. The final encounter has broken upon them and it's time to make good use of whatever resources they have. It's time to arm themselves for the crisis. The apostles take his images quite literally, and he has to tell them that two swords will be enuf, for the challenge they face.