

Homily for the Feast of Corpus Christi

June 6th 2021***There in Jerusalem and here in Calgary***

Imagine you are in Jerusalem for the Passover Festival., along with 500,000 pilgrims who have entered the city for the eight day celebration called The Festival of Unleavened Bread. During these days the Jewish people would eat unleavened bread to remember the haste with which they had to leave Egypt.

Over the past three years you have become a disciple of Jesus, and as a devout Jew you have come to Jerusalem for the Festival. So here you are in Jerusalem for the Passover Celebration which marked the beginning of Unleavened Bread. You notice all the men coming from the temple have slaughtered lambs on their backs. But there is something peculiar about how they are carried. Justin the Martyr – this means he was killed for his faith, the meaning of martyr, who lived in the early 2nd century had left this account:

For the lamb, which is roasted, is roasted and dressed up in the form of a cross. For one spit is transfixed right through from the lower parts up to the head, and one across the back, to which are attached the legs of the lamb.¹

So why are they dressed up in the form of a Cross you wonder. You discover that all these lambs, which had to be without blemish and a year old male had been sacrificed at a low wall in the Jerusalem Temple. The blood was caught in a basin by one of the Jewish priests, after which the blood was poured out on the altar. Now if you happened to witness the sacrificial ceremony between 3 and 5 PM on Passover, you would hear bleating everywhere. In that two hour period 25,000 – 30,000 thousand lambs were slaughtered. Can you imagine what it would have sounded like, what it would have smelled like, what it would have looked like? And literally you see rivers of blood flowing from the Temple. There was a saying at this time that you would smell the Temple and hear the Temple before you would see the Temple. And then after the sacrifice everyone one of these lambs was skinned and spitted in the form of a cross.

One other detail about the Passover Meal. It had to be eaten within the confines of the walled city. Every meal would have no fewer than ten and no more than 20 people present. You can imagine the practical dimensions of this. If you've got all these pilgrims gathering in Jerusalem and they all have to eat their lambs within the city because the Bible says it has to be eaten in Jerusalem, you are going to have people literally bursting at the seams, coming out of the rooftops. You will have people eating in every room of every house in every building throughout the city in order to celebrate the Passover. So it would have been an amazing and unforgettable evening of feasting within the walls of Jerusalem.

Now as you journey through the city you come upon two of Jesus' apostles, Peter and John, who are instructed by Jesus to make preparations for the meal. These Jewish men would have participated in the Passover every year. However, this Passover was going to be unlike any

¹ Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho, 40; trans. ANF

Passover they had shared in previously. Having been to the Temple, they acquire their lamb, sacrifice it, skin it, spit it and take it to the Upper Room where they prepare the meal.

You follow them to the place and wonder what this evening will be like for Jesus and the twelve who will sit down with him. You happen to be attending a Passover that is close by and while you sit at your table your mind is drawn to the Upper Room. For while the form of the meal with the prayers, songs and food will be the same at every Passover Table, you sense there will be something different about what will happen in the Upper Room.

One of the differences will be how Psalm 116 will be interpreted. After every Passover meal this psalm would be sung, along with Psalms 113-115; 117 and 118. You can hear the voices of half a million people joining in the Psalms that had been sung at the Passover for hundreds of years.

Then you think again of the Upper Room and Jesus leading in Psalm 116, the psalm we prayed at today's Mass. Three verses stick out in your mind.

I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD, ²

O LORD, I am your servant;
I am your servant, the son of your handmaid.
You have loosed my bonds. ³

I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice
and call on the name of the LORD. ⁴

At the Passover meal four cups of wine were shared:

The four cups of Passover are an integral part of the Passover celebration. They stand for each of the four promises the Lord makes to His people in Exodus 6:6-7.

The Cup of Sanctification

“I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.”

The Cup of Deliverance

“I will rescue you from their bondage.”

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Ps 116:13). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

³ [*The Holy Bible*](#). (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Ps 116:16). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Ps 116:17). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

The Cup of Redemption

“I will redeem you with an outstretched arm.”

The Cup of Praise

“I will take you as My people.”

The Cup of Salvation was the third of four cups shared at the meal, also called the Cup of redemption. It was with this cup that you would find out subsequently, that as Jesus raised it at that Passover said: “Take and drink, this is my blood of the Covenant which will be shed for many” Now think of all that blood poured out as the lambs were sacrificed and how the blood of Jesus poured out on the Cross will then be subsequently shared at every Mass.

Remember I said there were four cups. At every other gathering that night the fourth cup, the cup of praise would be raised, but not at Jesus’ Passover table. Instead he would say these words:

Amen, I say to you, I shall not drink again the fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”⁵

Remember I said the cup of praise would be when God affirms “I will take you as my people”. When would Jesus drink this cup? After his Resurrection, when there was reason to praise and for the followers of Jesus to know they were his own people. His death had not been his end, nor theirs because with his Resurrection he established his people – the Church.

What about the next verse from our Psalm? At Jesus’ Passover meal the reference to the son of your handmaid would take on special significance, for this is none other than Mary who called herself the handmaid of the Lord. Jesus would be that servant who would be the true Lamb that was slain by being affixed to a Roman Cross on Good Friday. All those spitted and crucified lambs served in the sacrificial offering of the Passover were a foreshadowing of Lamb of God, Jesus, going to the Cross Good Friday – on the morrow you would see Jesus hanging there from 12 until 3 PM

We now come to the last verse in our Psalm:

***I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice
and call on the name of the LORD. ⁶***

At that Upper Room Supper something happened that would forever change the meaning of the Passover meal. For here the thanksgiving sacrifice would become what we now call the Mass – the Eucharist – the word for thanksgiving in Greek

⁵ Healy, M. (2008). [The Gospel of Mark](#) (p. 283). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version](#). (1989). (Ps 116:17). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

What does this all mean for you, who was in Jerusalem for the institution of the Feast of Corpus Christi? Just this, that what we are participating in today at this Mass is the continuation through space and time of that unique Passover shared in the Upper Room over 2000 years ago.

What I have hoped to present you with today is an insight into the origins of the Mass so that as we prayed in the Collect:

O God who in the wonderful sacrament have left us a memorial of your Passion, grant us we pray, to revere the sacred mysteries of your body and blood that we may always experience in ourselves the fruits of your redemption.

It the seeds of these fruits planted in Jerusalem 2000 years ago. And so it is the same fruit we taste now when we receive the one who is the subject of Psalm 116, our Lord Jesus Christ. And no longer is it in Jerusalem alone where the continuation of the Passover is celebrated but at every altar where we hear the words: This is my body, this is my blood, take and eat and drink this in memory of me”.