

Holy Thursday + 28 March 2024 + Ex 12:1-8, 11-14 + I Cor 11:23-26 + Jn 13:1-15

Tonight, we enter into the “Sacred Paschal Triduum”, where *the Church celebrates the greatest mysteries of our redemption*. The best way to understand the “Sacred Paschal Triduum”, is to look at the very title itself. First of all, these days are Sacred, they are *holy*; that is, set apart from the ordinary to be made fit for worship of God. And what makes this *Triduum*, meaning “3 days,” the holiest days of the whole liturgical year? Well, they are the commemoration of the Lord’s *Pascha*, His “Passover,” hence “Paschal Triduum.”

So, it is important to begin the Triduum tonight with a meditation on the first Passover, the Passover of Moses, which is why the Church fittingly begins with our 1st reading from the Book of Exodus. God instructs each of the families of Israel, enslaved as they were in Egypt, to sacrifice a lamb, and apply its blood to the doorposts of their homes. When the angel of death saw the blood on the Hebrew homes, he would “Passover” the home and would not exact the life of the firstborn son. Egyptian homes would not fare so well.

This event would be so important for the Hebrews that Moses instructed the people to ritually celebrate this event forever, as a *perpetual institution*, with a memorial meal of an unblemished male lamb and unleavened bread. The Passover was to be a *memorial feast*, where the Israelites would remember not only how God set them free from slavery in Egypt, but also saved them from death. At least, that was the ideal. In reality, the People very quickly forgot all that the Lord God had done for them. In fact, when they became hungry on the journey to the Promised Land, they even went so far as to say they were better off in Egypt! And yet, as we know, faithful Jews still keep the Passover to this day.

Tonight, we are gathered to celebrate another Passover. We recognize that the Passover of Moses was a shadow of what was to come—the true and final Passover. As our Gospel says, Christ’s Passover *from this world to the Father*. So how do we understand Christ’s Passover? First, we can say that Jesus is the New Moses. He is the Son of God who, like Moses, Scripture says spoke to God *face to face* (Ex 33:11). He is the one who leads us from the place of slavery—that is, sin, to the Promised Land of those who have been bought back from slavery; that is, the redeemed. He is the only way to heaven.

But there’s more. Christ is the Paschal Lamb, whose blood wards off the just judgment of God on all of the false gods of our hearts. He saves us from eternal death on account of our sins. But for such blood to be present, the Lamb had to be sacrificed, and it had to be eaten, as did the unleavened bread. As we hear in our 2nd reading today from St. Paul’s 1st Letter to the Corinthians, the bread which is Christ’s flesh also has to be consumed. And this is possible by means of a Sacrament, meaning, a *mystery*: the Most Holy Eucharist that Jesus instituted at His own, final Passover. The Eucharistic Passover is also a perpetual institution; we are to *do this* until He comes again; until the Sacraments cease in Heaven.

St. Paul sums all of this up beautifully and applies it to our lives a little earlier in his letter, saying: *Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival (ie the Passover), not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (5:7-8).* And this also brings us to our Gospel today.

John is the only Gospel where we do not hear directly about the Lord's last Passover meal, His "Last Supper." Instead, he anticipates the coming institution of the Eucharist in the so-called "Bread of Life" discourse, where Jesus says to the children of Israel: *Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven... Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. I am the living bread that came down from heaven...And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh...Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.*

And so John instead focuses on another event at the Last Supper Passover: Jesus' shocking action of washing the disciples' feet. While this may seem somewhat detached from the Eucharist, in reality these two actions are very much related. One commentary says that such an action would have been performed by the lowest of the household slaves. And while today we rightly recoil at the very thought of slavery, this is exactly the point: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has made Himself our slave. The very One who is one in being with the Creator stoops below His creatures. Now this ultimate act of humility can be seen as a summary in miniature of not only all that Jesus *did* while on earth, but even more, who He truly *is*. Jesus is ever the 2nd Person of the Most Holy Trinity, who has stooped down to us and taken to himself a human nature, stripped for a time of His visible glory.

But then He stoops even lower: He dies for us, to wash away our sins. He has truly loved us *to the end*. It is truly love, because it is freely chosen. John says that Jesus was fully aware *that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God*, and yet He still *He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist*. We heard St. Paul reflect on this awe-filled mystery in our 2nd reading last Sunday, reflecting on how Jesus emptied himself, *taking the form of a slave...and humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*. And He repeats this self-effacement everytime He humbles Himself to be present in the form of bread and wine.

But we can't forget that such humility on the part of our Lord calls from us two solemn responses. First: *do this...remembrance of me*. In other words, keep my Passover. Given such love poured out for us, how could we ever dream of missing Mass? And 2nd, Jesus says, *I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do*. As if to say, serve one another. Be humble. Forgive each other. Replace malice and evil with sincerity and truth. Believe in me, no matter what may come. And you will know me.