

Holy Thursday, March 28, 2024

**MARK 14:22–25.** (EHV)

While they were eating, Jesus took bread. When he had blessed it, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “Take it. This is my body.” Then he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them. They all drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood of the new testament, which is poured out for many. Amen I tell you: I will certainly not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

Put yourself in the scene. The Jewish Talmud describes a typical dining room as 15 feet long by 15 feet high by 15 feet wide. Fifteen feet is about the length of each of the pews you’re sitting in, so imagine that wide and that long, and then imagine them being stood up on their ends for the height. The room Jesus and his disciples were in may have been larger than that, since Jesus called it a “large upper room,” but it’s also possible that the typical dining room was large.

Mark also told us that Jesus and his disciples were reclining at the table eating. Jews in Jesus’s day—and people of other nations and ethnicities too, for that matter—didn’t typically sit at a table on chairs. They reclined on dining cushions arranged around a table in the center. They reclined on their left side so that they could eat with their right hand, and they reclined close together, so that if you were reclining next to, say, Peter, your head would typically be in front of Peter’s chest, and his head would be in front of the chest of the person reclining to his left. It was a much cozier and more intimate setting than we’re used to.

There were two parts to the Passover meal, food-wise—an appetizer or precourse consisting of the bitter herbs that God had told them to eat, and the main course, consisting of the Passover lamb God had told them to eat. The bitter herbs were typically dipped into a soupy fruit mash to make them more palatable.

At the very beginning of the meal, each adult participant was given their first cup of wine. There was usually someone on hand to mix the wine, and he or she usually mixed each cup with a ratio of one part pure wine to three to four parts warm water, because they didn’t have the kind of control over the fermentation process that we do today, and so pure wine would have been too thick and too strong for their liking and was usually associated with uncivilized manners and drunkenness.

The precourse would have begun with Jesus, the leader of the meal party, saying a blessing over the wine. The standard blessing went, “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe, you who create the fruit of the vine.” This was the ritual way that the Jews referred to wine, and it makes sense. “Fruit” here clearly does not refer to the grape, because Jesus later told his disciples to drink it, and you can’t drink a grape. “Fruit” is used in the sense of *product*, and “*the* [drinkable] product of the grapevine,” from ancient times up to the present, has always been wine. In fact, the Jews sometimes called it the winevine instead of the grapevine, because they viewed the production of wine as the grapevine’s chief purpose for existence.

Jesus probably had his interchanges with the disciples about one of them betraying him during the precourse, and he probably also dismissed Judas during that time. But now we are at the main course, which would have consisted, among other things, of more bitter herbs, unleavened bread, and the Passover lamb itself. The unleavened bread could be produced from any of the cereal grains of Palestine—wheat, barley, spelt, millet, or oats. The beginning of the

main course was marked by the meal company leader saying a blessing over the bread, which Mark tells us Jesus also did. But then the meal took a different turn, because after Jesus said the blessing, he distributed the bread with these words: “Take it. This is my body.”

First, note that Jesus did not say, “This represents my body.” He said, “This is my body.” One book I read said that Jesus could not possibly give his disciples his actual body since he was sitting right there, but I hope that none of us would dare to stand up and say that there is anything Jesus could not possibly do. We also know from other passages of Scripture that Jesus as true God was in heaven even as he said these words, even though the disciples saw him right there. How is that possible? I don’t know. I just know that Jesus says it’s true, just like he says, “This is my body.”

In fact, if Jesus really wanted to give his disciples something merely to represent his body, he didn’t need to institute anything new. There was something on the table that already did, and they were about to eat it—the Passover lamb. What could have represented Jesus’s body better? John the Baptist himself called Jesus “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Like the Passover lamb without defect, Jesus was without sin. Like the Passover lamb that had been slaughtered, Jesus would be slain. As the Passover lamb had to be roasted whole and its bones could not be broken, so none of Jesus’s bones would be broken when he was crucified. Yes, Jesus could have left well enough alone and simply said, “Continue eating this Passover lamb every year to represent my body,” or even, “Eat the Passover lamb even more often to represent my body.” But he didn’t. He instituted something new. He actually gave them his body with the bread.

And what more could he give them? He had humbled himself so completely that he really had nothing else to give them on the night before he died. Yet there was nothing better he *could* have given them.

Note, too, that Jesus did not say, “This is my body; now take it.” Then perhaps those who would accuse us of cannibalism might have a stronger argument. But Jesus said it the other way around: “Take it. This is my body.” It is only his body in connection with us taking it and eating it. When we take the consecrated bread, Jesus gives us his actual, physical body together with the bread at the same time, yet not in such a way that we tear apart his flesh with our teeth, but in a miraculous way.

Since according to the other Evangelists, Jesus also said, “Do this *or* continue to do this in remembrance of me,” and Jesus also broke the bread, perhaps we should also talk about why we don’t break the bread. When we read that Jesus took the bread, we want to keep his intention in mind. We are able to know his intention because Luke and Paul tell us that Jesus later took the cup “in the same way” that he took the bread. Now even though Jesus had broken the bread, he did not take the cup in the same way by breaking it, by smashing it, for instance, on the floor and telling his disciples to slurp up the wine that was spilled there. No, he took the cup in the same way by giving to them in such a way that each of them could have some, just as he had done with the bread. That was therefore his intention in breaking the bread. So whether we have a loaf and break it into smaller pieces like Jesus did or distribute bread that has already been pre-broken, so to speak, by being baked in smaller individual wafers, we are still keeping the Lord’s institution.

Let’s now move on to the wine. Luke and Paul tell us that Jesus took the wine after the

supper, that is, after the main course was over, when the third cup of wine at the meal was customarily drunk. Since the Grace after Meals was commonly spoke in connection with the third cup, it was called “the cup of blessing”—an appropriate cup for Jesus to use to give us special blessings indeed.

“Then he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them. They all drank from it. He said to them, ‘This is my blood of the new testament, which is poured out for many.’”

Again Jesus tells us very clearly what we are receiving. He later identifies it from an earthly point of view as “the fruit of the vine,” but the other invisible reality is that it is also his blood of the new testament, that is, the blood that would be shed for the full and free forgiveness of sins. He says that blood is poured out for many. This is not “many” as in a select multitude, but “many” as opposed to just a select few. Isaiah used “many” this way: “For he bore the sin *of many*, and made intercession for the transgressors” (53:12). Jesus used “many” this way: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom *for many*” (Mark 10:45). John tells us just how many that is when he says that Jesus is “the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins *of the whole world*” (1 John 2:2).

According to Mark, Jesus then added: “Amen I tell you: I will certainly not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” Thus, when we receive Jesus’s real blood together with the wine in the Lord’s Supper, we are not just receiving the assurance that we will inherit heaven, but we are actually getting a foretaste of heaven. Jesus is peeling back the curtain, if only for a moment, to show us what joy and richness we will enjoy at his side in the eternal, heavenly banquet.

What a precious gift this is, brothers and sisters—not only when we consider what Jesus is giving in the Lord’s Supper, but especially when we consider to whom he is giving it. He institutes this supper “on the night he was betrayed” (1 Corinthians 11:23), on the night when humanity was at its worst, on the night when even his closest friends would desert and betray him. He institutes this meal and distributes it to those whom, when he says, “I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me,” *all* say, “It isn’t I, is it?” In other words, he institutes it and distributes it to those who all think that they *won’t* betray Jesus, but who all think that they *could*.

Still today, the Lord distributes his body and blood to sinners who, if we are honest with ourselves, admit that we *could* betray and fall away from Jesus, when we consider our old Adam. That is precisely why this meal is so good for us and so precious to us. In it Jesus forgives us our faults and strengthens our faith, so that we don’t betray him, but confess him and his love for us.

If there are so many different teachings about the Lord’s Supper out there, so that this is one of the main teachings that divides Christian denominations from each other, then the devil must have a special hatred for this teaching and this sacrament. He must be working overtime to make sure that this meal and its blessings get ruined for humanity.

Let’s not fall into the devil’s traps, brothers and sisters. Let’s believe and confess what Jesus clearly teaches about this sacrament in the Scriptures: It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ for us Christians to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

And let’s not just confess what Jesus clearly teaches about it. Let’s also receive it not just tonight, but regularly and often, to our eternal benefit. Amen.