

Sermon, St. Paul's Fairfield  
Sunday, August 20, 2006  
The Rev. Alice Mindrum  
Lectionary B, Proper 15, Proverbs 9:1-6  
Psalm 34:9-14, Ephesians 5:15-20

### Holy Communion and The Last Supper

John 6:53-59

So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

In the name of God: Creator, Savior, and Inspiration. Amen.

On the night he was handed over to suffering and death, the synoptic gospels tell us that our Lord Jesus Christ celebrated the Passover festival with his disciples in Jerusalem--the Passover, of course, being the principal Jewish festival of the year, commemorating the freeing of the ancient Israelites from slavery in Egypt. We all know the story: that on that historic occasion, God ordered the blood of a lamb sprinkled on the doorposts of the Israelite houses--and God "passed over" the places which were so marked. The Israelites were to eat the lamb with unleavened bread--no time to let the bread rise, they had to go at a moment's notice.

From now on, "This day," said the Lord, "shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to (me); throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance." (Exodus 12: 14) And so the Jews have. Today, the ritual meal of the Passover Seder continues to remind the Jews of God's actions to free them from destruction and bring them into new life—actions which included sustaining them with manna in the wilderness as they journeyed, manna which was understood as the bread which came down from heaven; the life gift of their God.

In this morning's reading, Jesus offers himself to his listeners as a continuation of this cycle. He is the new and never-ending bread of life which comes down from heaven; he is God feeding God's people. By claiming himself as the bread of life, Jesus asks his listeners to understand him not only as God's revealer, but also as the fulfillment and re-definer of Torah. He is the "new manna, the bread of life that satisfies both physical hunger and our deeper communion desires."

When we partake of the bread and wine in holy communion with God and with one another, we are to be mindful of this. "Do this in remembrance of me," Jesus instructs. As we take in the essence of Jesus, we accept and consume the essence of the divine. The Lord Jesus, our High Priest, becomes the Passover Lamb, the new Paschal victim in

the sacrifice. "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us" we say, during the eucharist. (BCP, p. 364) God's saving act for the Jews in Egypt, is followed by Christ's saving act for the world. The old covenant has become the new. The heavenly bread which God gave the Israelites becomes, for us, the new, living Bread from Heaven; the bread which brings not only new life here on earth, but life forever.

If you find this concept challenging to understand, you echo the struggles those first disciples had with it. In Torah, ingesting blood is forbidden; and now here came Jesus, the charismatic rabbi, claiming that people needed to drink his blood and to eat his body. No wonder many of those who first persecuted the Christians did so because they believed Christians were cannibals.

But Jesus continues to proclaim this message, even during that last meal in the upper room with his disciples. That night, he used not only verbal teaching, as he does in today's lessons; that last night he also employed the material objects of bread and wine; and we can reasonably assume that he used the ritual gesture of thanksgiving as he blessed the bread and wine.

We know today that the more modes in which a teacher can present a concept--especially a difficult concept--the more likely it is that the students will be able to grasp it, and will remember it. Because people learn differently. Some learn kinetically, through movement; others are very visual, and having seen something it will stick, whether it's the shape or the texture or the color or all of the above that makes an impression. Following the example of the Jews, and of Jesus, the church has traditionally used this wisdom in its worship. Our rituals offer many modes of approach to the divine. In this way, the complex intangibles, the "big ideas" if you will-- such as sacrifice, humility, thanksgiving, salvation, or grace, become more accessible to us inwardly, through the outward forms and symbols which we can see and touch.

Week after week, we gather here, in this space and around the world, as a community. We listen to the words of scripture, we lift our voices in song and in prayer, we think and reflect during the sermons--I hope--and we watch as ritual movements are used. We move to the altar rail for eucharist, and then back to our seats again, thanking God for having "fed us with spiritual food in the Sacrament of (Christ's) Body and Blood." This is our communal ritual. It is meaningful beyond mere words. It is grace-ful, filled with grace. But it offers a particular challenge.

Ritual, by its very nature, repeats the gestures, the words, the symbols, in a particular order and a particular style. And when it is a weekly ritual, as our eucharist is, it becomes very familiar. A good thing--but problematic as well. Because through its very repetition, there is the very real possibility that the sacrament might become rote. Something we go through on automatic pilot; our bodies moving obediently at the right places, our mouths speaking the right words; our minds somewhere else entirely. Those of you who drive know that it's entirely possible to get into the car and drive somewhere yet have almost no memory of the actual trip. Ritual can be like that. Automatic and unconscious. The burden is on us, through our spiritual discipline and our openness to

the Spirit, to allow ritual to live again each week--to bring it to life again each week, so that it may bring life to us.

In his book, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that perhaps the Last Supper--our eucharist--should be known instead as the "First Supper" because following such a sacred meal everything will be fresh and new. What a lovely way to express an old truth.

The Buddhists have a spiritual practice which they refer to as "mindfulness." It involves bringing awareness into each moment of life. It is similar to our Christian understanding of the sacredness of everyday life; the understanding that God is present in everyday objects and everyday moments. Jesus told parables using wheat and weeds and seed and sheep and water and wineskins. He offered people a new awareness, a new mindfulness, of these homely, familiar everyday objects. They were made fresh and new to look at and to live with, and the listeners were reminded that the divine doesn't only happen— isn't only present--in a temple or a synagogue or a church.

Mindfulness is like looking at a flower through a microscope or a magnifying glass. It's the same flower we have seen before, but the experience of it is completely different. Mindfulness is a useful spiritual practice to bring to our weekly eucharist. Looking deeply into our ritual helps us to experience the grace--the new life--which the sacrament offers.

"This will be a day of remembrance for you," God told the Israelites. And Jesus has made each Sunday a day of remembrance for us. "Whenever you do this, do it for the remembrance of me."

This morning, through the practice of mindfulness, perhaps we might taste and smell and touch in new ways. Together, we might remember and be nourished by Jesus, the Bread of Life, in order that we might live in ways that are fresh and new. Together, let us celebrate this First Supper.

Amen.