

Exodus 12:43-13:16

⁴³ The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'These are the regulations for the Passover meal:

'No foreigner may eat it. ⁴⁴ Any slave you have bought may eat it after you have circumcised him, ⁴⁵ but a temporary resident or a hired worker may not eat it.

⁴⁶ It must be eaten inside the house; take none of the meat outside the house. Do not break any of the bones. ⁴⁷ The whole community of Israel must celebrate it.

⁴⁸ 'A foreigner residing among you who wants to celebrate the Lord's Passover must have all the males in his household circumcised; then he may take part like one born in the land. No uncircumcised male may eat it. ⁴⁹ The same law applies both to the native-born and to the foreigner residing among you.'

⁵⁰ All the Israelites did just what the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron. ⁵¹ And on that very day the Lord brought the Israelites out of Egypt by their divisions.

13 The Lord said to Moses, ² 'Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether human or animal.'

³ Then Moses said to the people, 'Commemorate this day, the day you came out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery, because the Lord brought you out of it with a mighty hand. Eat nothing containing yeast. ⁴ Today, in the month of Aviv, you are leaving. ⁵ When the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Hivites and Jebusites – the land he swore to your ancestors to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey – you are to observe this ceremony in this month: ⁶ for seven days eat bread made without yeast and on the seventh day hold a festival to the Lord. ⁷ Eat unleavened bread during those seven days; nothing with yeast in it is to be seen among you, nor shall any yeast be seen anywhere within your borders. ⁸ On that day tell your son, "I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt." ⁹ This observance will be for you like a sign on your hand and a reminder on your forehead that this law of the Lord is to be on your lips. For the Lord brought you out of Egypt with his mighty hand. ¹⁰ You must keep this ordinance at the appointed time year after year.

¹¹ 'After the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites and gives it to you, as he promised on oath to you and your ancestors, ¹² you are to give over to the Lord the first offspring of every womb. All the firstborn males of your livestock belong to the Lord. ¹³ Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem every firstborn among your sons.

¹⁴ 'In days to come when your son asks you, "What does this mean?" say to him, "With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ¹⁵ When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed the firstborn of both people and animals in Egypt. This is why I sacrifice to the Lord the first male offspring of every womb and redeem each of my firstborn sons." ¹⁶ And it will be like a sign on your hand and a symbol on your forehead that the Lord brought us out of Egypt with his mighty hand.'

Luke 22

¹⁴ When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. ¹⁵ And he said to them,

'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. ¹⁶ For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfilment in the kingdom of God.'

¹⁷ After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, 'Take this and divide it among you.

¹⁸ For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.'

¹⁹ And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying,

'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.'

²⁰ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying,

'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.'

One of the frustrations for us as Christians during the last 12 months of Covid restrictions, has been the difficulty of celebrating communion together. Yes, we've had services on Zoom but it's not the same, the congregation cannot share the same bread or drink from a common cup. We have just today at 8am started again to have small communion services together, but inevitably we are aware of those who are not able to join us. This frustration will be felt more keenly by some rather than others. Some may even have asked themselves: *Does it really matter?* Well today's readings remind us why we have communion, what is its purpose and why it is important.

Last time we were thinking about how for Jews, especially in the time of Jesus, the great event that shaped their whole identity, was *the Passover* – when their ancestors were dramatically and miraculously

rescued from slavery in Egypt and how this gave us great insights into the meaning of our great historical rescuing event – the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In today's readings we have been reminded how, right from the very beginning God commanded Israel to commemorate their great rescue every year by celebrating the Passover with a special meal. In the same way, Jesus has commanded us to commemorate our rescue through his death on the cross, by eating the bread and wine of communion in remembrance of him.

Why is this so important? Because as human beings we forget things so easily – even really really important things. *The second world war* ended just 75 years ago in 1945 and yet by the 1990's there were those who denied that the *Holocaust – the mass slaughter of 6 million Jews in Nazi concentration camps* – had ever happened. Even though there will still 10s of 1000s of survivors still alive at the time. If this happens within people's lifetimes, what hope do we have of remembering the really important things down through the centuries and of them being passed on to our grand-children's grand-children? Well, the fact that after nearly 3.5 thousand years, Jews still celebrate Passover and that Christians after 2000 years still remember Christ's death and resurrection through Holy Communion, bear witness to God knowing what he was doing when he commanded his people to celebrate Passover and then *Holy Communion*.

Jesus instituted *Holy Communion* at the last supper which was a Passover meal. We can see how Jesus re-shaped the Passover meal to commemorate our rescue through his death on the cross. So, in a similar manner to last time, I want to explore what God's instructions about celebrating the Passover, have to teach us about *Holy Communion*. And I want in particular to look at 4 key words which come up in our first reading:

Celebrate, Commemorate, Consecrate, Communicate

1. **Celebrate** – We talk about celebrating Holy communion and the word comes twice in our first reading: *Exodus 12:47 The whole community of Israel must celebrate [Passover]*
The word *celebrate* comes from the Latin *celebrare*, "to assemble to honour."
So gathering seems essential. Passover was to be a family meal – not an individual celebration. All the people of God were called to share in it. Why because it is to remind the children of Israel of who they are as a people. Primarily they are those who are the children of God because their ancestors were rescued by him in the great *Exodus* from Egypt. Although it could include any foreigner who was willing to show their commitment to God by being circumcised.
In the same way, we need to remember that communion is not just a private affair, about my personal relationship with God – even though that is important – it is a communal celebration, reminding us of who we are as the church, the family of God, the community of those who have been rescued by the death and resurrection of Jesus.
This is why we share the peace just before we take communion – because in that we are expressing our unity as the people of God. This is why in Chelsey, before *lockdown* at least, we used to join hands to sing together the *Lord's prayer – the family prayer* – and I pray to God that one day we shall be able to do that again.
2. **Commemorate** – *13³ Then Moses said to the people, 'Commemorate this day, the day you came out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery, because the Lord brought you out of it with a mighty hand. Commemorate means to bring to remembrance. Passover would remind them of God's deliverance and protection because God knew how easily they could forget.*
We too can very easily forget what God has done for us and the depth of God's love for us. *Holy communion* provides us with a constant reminder that God loves me unconditionally because he died in my place on the cross and that in his grace, he has invited me to be part of his family, to have a personal relationship with him and it is only his grace that sustains me
- a. In the Passover meal the Jews don't just remind themselves of the events of the distant past, although it includes that, one of the central purposes of the Passover celebration is "remember" - in other words as if this is something that has happened to them. *5 When the Lord brings you into the land... i.e. the next generation... 8 On that day tell your son, "I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt."* They remember that their very being and identity is deeply connected to those ancient Israelites who were freed from slavery — redeemed — by God; they remember that they are one and the same people.
And for Christians, our very being and identity is deeply connected to those disciples who sat in the upper room with Jesus and shared in that meal;
If you traced back through the chain of the people who shared the gospel with you and who shared the

gospel with them, back and back and back. Where would you end up? With those 11 disciples in the upper room with Jesus. What happened on that night and over the next few days, Good Friday to that first Easter, has made us who we are and so we are part of them. What happened at the last supper and on the cross is part of our history. It has had and continues to have a direct impact on who we are today.

- b. So remembering is not just thinking again about something that happened a long time ago – it is remembering, it is reminding ourselves that we are members of that world-wide family that stretches back to the first disciples of Christ and even beyond that to Moses and Abraham.
 - c. In our communion the minister says: *We break this bread to share in the body of Christ.* and all respond: *Though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread.* “the one bread” has a double meaning. On one level it refers to the communion bread that we all share in. But at a deeper level we are saying we all share in “the living Bread, the Bread of Life” – we all share in Jesus, we all believe in him, trust in him, have committed our lives to Him.
3. **Consecrate** – 13² ***Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether human or animal.*** At the original Passover meal each family had to sacrifice a lamb or a kid, *a year-old male without defect*, in order to avoid all first-born male children and livestock from suffering the judgement of the angel of death.
- a. In all the commemorations of Passover each year: 13¹²
Each household was ***to give over to the Lord the first offspring of every womb.*** *All the firstborn males of your livestock belong to the Lord.* 13¹³ ***Redeem every firstborn donkey with a lamb...Redeem every firstborn among your sons*** – with a lamb. This was to remind each family that they had been bought with a price. The ancient Israelites believed that the price was simply the death of a lamb, but we know that lamb was just a symbol or token of the real price which was the death of God’s own first-born Son, Jesus the Lamb of God.
 - b. In response to God’s great rescue, each family was called to dedicate their first-born son to God – this is what Joseph and Mary were doing when they took the 40 day old baby Jesus to the Temple and they met Simeon and Anna. And so for us, Holy Communion is a time when we remember we have been bought at such great cost, the death of Jesus, and we consecrate ourselves, renew our commitment to the Lord. And so we often at the end of the service say: *Almighty God, we thank you for feeding us with the body and blood of our Son Jesus Christ. Through him we offer you our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice. Send us out in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory. Amen.*
4. **Communicate.** This word doesn’t come as such in our reading but: 13⁸ ***On that day tell your son,*** (i.e. communicate) *“I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.”* and again: v¹⁴ *“In days to come when your son asks you, “What does this mean?” say to him (again: communicate) “With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.* Those of you who have been involved in our Passover suppers will know that at the supper the younger members ask a series of questions about the meal:
*Why do we eat lamb on this night? Why do we eat unleavened bread on this night?
Why do we drink wine on this night? Why do we eat bitter herbs on this night?*
And the older members give answers which tell the story of the first Passover.
- a. In the same way in Communion, we tell the story of what God has done for us in Jesus. And maybe sometimes our children ask us *Why do you have bread and wine at this service?* And it gives us an opportunity to share with them once again what Jesus has done for us.
 - b. It is so important that we continue to teach one another the centrality of what God has done for us in Christ, so that ***we never ever forget or devalue it.***
So often we want new teaching to titillate us. But woe betide us if we ever forget that the hope of the gospel – our hope – is rooted and grounded in what Jesus has done for us on the cross.
- It has been so frustrating during lockdown not being able to share together the bread and wine of communion together and meet face to face – but the reason why we have continued to hold the communion service over Zoom is because, even in this limited format, it is so important. We need Holy Communion: to celebrate who we are as a people, to commemorate what God has done for us in Christ, to consecrate ourselves - renew our commitment to Christ, and to share that story with each other and the next generation.
- As we come out of lockdown and it becomes easier for us to meet together, some may feel tempted still to stay at home – it’s easier, more convenient.
But I encourage you, as soon as it is safe for you and you are able, to take the opportunity to return to meeting face to face in church and especially to take communion.