

## HOLY THURSDAY

(Ex 12, 1...14 ; 1 Co 11, 23-26 ; Jn 13, 1-15)

Based on 2007 Benedict XVI homily

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“It is the Passover of the Lord”. This is what we heard in the first reading, and we see Jesus and his disciples celebrating the festival of the Passover. What exactly is Passover? It is more than a recounting of an event; it is an experience as all who join in becomes participants. The Passover celebration developed after the actual **exodus** from Egypt. It became absolutely core to Israel’s self-understanding & self-identity. What we hear in the first reading describes the Lord’s passing over the houses of the Israelites so that their first born did not die during the tenth plague.

This religious Passover celebration was a **reinterpretation** of an already existing Passover celebration. Originally, the Passover was a feast marking the passing over shepherds and their flocks from the winter fields to the summer fields. It was the spring equinox, and blood was originally placed on the entrances to the peoples tents as a way to ward off evil spirits who might affect the newborn sheep. And so this original feast became a celebration of God’s saving actions on Israel’s behalf. It was transformed into a memorial feast of thanksgiving and, at the same time, hope. The centre of the Passover meal was the lamb as the symbol of Israel’s redemption from slavery in Egypt.

The Gospels all pictures Jesus’ last meal as the Passover meal. At that meal Jesus once more gives another meaning of the feast in light of his own passing over through death to life. Jesus becomes the new Passover lamb whose blood gives life. On the night before Jesus died, he made it perfectly clear that he was giving his life.

The words of the memorial were surrounded by words of praise and thanksgiving. In Greek this thanksgiving is known as Eucharist. Praising God becomes a blessing for those who bless him. According to the Gospel of John, Jesus died on the Cross at the very moment when the Passover lambs were being sacrificed in the temple. The death of Jesus and the sacrifice of the lambs coincided. However, this means that he must have died the day before Easter and could not, therefore, have celebrated the Passover meal in person - - this, at any rate, is how it appears.

According to the Gospels of Matthew, Luke & Mark, the Last Supper of Jesus was instead a Passover meal into whose traditional form he integrated the gift of his Body and Blood. This contradiction seemed unsolvable until a few years ago. The majority of biblical scholars were of the opinion that John was reluctant to tell us the true historical date of Jesus’ death, but rather chose a symbolic date to highlight the deeper truth: Jesus is the new, true Lamb who poured out his Blood for us all.

In the meantime, the discovery of the [Dead Sea] Scrolls has led us to a possible and convincing solution which, although it is not yet accepted by everyone, is a highly plausible theory. We can now say that John's account is historically precise. Jesus truly shed his blood on the eve of Easter at the time of the immolation of the lambs.

In all likelihood, however, he celebrated the Passover with his disciples in accordance with the Qumran calendar, therefore, at least one day earlier. He celebrated it without a lamb, like the Qumran community which did not recognize Herod's temple and was waiting for the new temple. Consequently, Jesus celebrated the Passover without a lamb - no, not without a lamb: instead of **the** lamb, he gave himself, his own life, his Body and his Blood. Only in this way did the ancient Passover acquire its true meaning.

Jesus celebrated the Passover without a lamb and without a temple; yet, **not** without a lamb and **not** without a temple. He himself was the awaited Lamb, **the true Lamb**, just as John the Baptist had foretold: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn 1:29). And he himself was the true Temple, the living Temple where God dwells and where we can encounter God and worship him.

His Blood, the love of the One who is both Son of God and true man, one of us, is the Blood that can save. His love, that love in which he gave himself freely for us, is what saves us. The sacrifice of an innocent and perfect lamb found a response in the One who for our sake became at the same time Lamb and Temple. The Cross was at the centre of the new Passover of Jesus. From it came the new gift brought by him, and so it lives on for ever in the Blessed Eucharist in which, down the ages, we can celebrate the new Passover with the Apostles.

The paschal feast, the commemoration of God's saving action, has become a memorial of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ - a memorial that does not simply recall the past but attracts us within the presence of Christ's love. Israel's prayer of blessing and thanksgiving has become our Eucharistic celebration in which the Lord blesses our gifts -- the bread and wine - to give himself in them.

Brother and sisters, let us pray to the Lord that he will help us to understand this marvellous mystery ever more profoundly, to love it more and more, and in it, to love the Lord himself ever more. Let us pray that he will increasingly draw us to himself with Holy Communion. Let us pray that he will help us not to keep our life for ourselves but to give it to him and to work with him so that people may find life: the true life which can only come from the One who himself is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Amen.