

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

In Remembrance Parish Seder Meal Thursday, March 21, 2002 7:30 p.m.
Church Hall (Coming together as a people)

I will give you a short explanation of what we are doing; it might help you appreciate its importance. First of all, what is a Seder? A Seder is a Passover Meal. It is a ritual. What is it for? It's used to initiate children into the mystery of the history of the people. That's its actual purpose—to initiate children into the history of the people so that they feel that they are part of the whole tradition of Israel. It is a family celebration. It is not a temple celebration. It does not belong to the synagogue. It does not belong to any sort of large assembly. It's actually a family gathering. This is actually too large for a true Seder. It should only be one or two families. So it's in a private place, and it's a way of gathering together and remembering who we are—when I say “we” I'm talking about the Hebrew people.

Now in regard to what it is all about, actually I don't know and no one does! Well, we have to go on what the Bible says, but what the Bible says is not necessarily historical facts. Back in the late 1800's, early 1900's this became obvious, and Pope Leo XIII issued a wonderful document on biblical inspiration. And in that document he said that the biblical inspiration guarantees the message that the Holy Spirit wants to convey which is a form of religious truth. But he said that it really does not guarantee the historical facticity—although he didn't use that word, but that's what he meant, the historical facticity—the validity of the historical details.

But when you think about it, when we talk about Exodus it's an historical event that is being discussed, not religious truth. So what does it really mean? Again, we don't know exactly; we don't know what really took place at the time of the Exodus. What we do know is this: there were various times over a long, long period in which Canaanite people, people from Palestine, went down to Egypt to eat. We know that for a short period of time, perhaps two hundred years, perhaps slightly longer, the Canaanite people actually took over Egypt and ruled there. And they were called the “Hyksos.” We also know that at a certain point the Egyptians threw them out, and we think that was around 1500 BC. That we have historical verification for.

Now it is possible that a certain large number of Canaanite people remained in Egypt, although there is no historical verification for this. On the other hand, it is obvious that the name Moses is Egyptian. It is also clear that the biblical authors, when they did write, were writing about stories that they had received in tradition. What is unclear is what was the origin of the stories. There are obvious exaggerations. For example, it says that 600,000 people departed from Egypt on the night of Exodus. This is highly improbable because it's highly improbable that there were that many people in that area at that time. It also says that in the course of the Exodus that Pharaoh's army and Pharaoh himself were totally destroyed. This is also improbable because there is absolutely no record of it in the annals of Egypt. It would be rather hard to explain such an absence if it had actually taken place exactly as it's described.

There are further extremely improbable stories that are tied to the Exodus event, and the forty years of wandering. Again, forty is a round number, of course. For example, the story of the golden calf. Well, how would a group of people that escaped from Egypt with just a few belongings—how would they be able to make a golden calf? How would Moses be able to fashion a bronze serpent? These are obviously symbolic stories full of true meaning, but that doesn't mean they are historical facts. So we always have to be aware of the difference between an historical fact and a religious meaning. And we can get a lot of religious meaning out of the golden calf because we know the latter history of the people, and they did worship golden calves, and they did commit idolatry. And this did undermine the unity of the people. This was the primary objection of the prophets and the religious teachers. So was it true? Yes, it was true. But did it happen in this particular way? Well, no, not really, and not then. So that is why we have to have some knowledge of this as a background.

Now tonight we have various forms of food. The two chief ones are matzoth, which is exactly where we get the Eucharist bread. Matzoth is unleavened bread. Now where does unleavened bread come from? Well, the Bible tells you a story, but it's not exactly the original. The original story is this: in olden times the Hebrew people celebrated the barley harvest, and it was a great festival. And part of the celebration was to throw out all the old bread. Now how was bread made in the ancient world? It was all sourdough. All ancient bread was sourdough. They didn't have little packages of yeast to throw in their dough. The only way they could make dough rise was to let it sour, and yeast is a natural enzyme occurring in various grains and also grapes. So it naturally comes about. As the dough sours, it rises. Then as you take some out, then you add some more fresh dough; and then that gets sour, and that will rise. But at the time of the spring festival they would throw out all the old stuff and start all over again. That's the origin of the matzoth, the original meaning of it.

The second big food tonight is the lamb, the pasach. Okay, now where did that come from? Well, the Hebrew people originally were pastoral people; that means they were nomads. And they had a ritual associated with the birth of the spring lambs. When the lambs were born in the desert, as they were nomadic wandering around, they would slaughter one of the lambs and eat it. And they would take the blood and they would sprinkle it on the door posts and the lintels, of their tents. And this was to ward off evil spirits. So these were two ancient rituals that the people of Canaan had.

Now what the Bible author does—and this writing happens 500 years after the time of Exodus, so we are talking 700 BC approximately. The Bible author takes the stories—which are, again, 500 years old—and therefore not historical in the modern sense of history, which has an emphasis on the veracity of data. They did not have any way to verify data, and they weren't interested in data anyway. They were interested in meaning. They were not journalists. You know, “journalist” comes from the word “jour” in French; that means today or day. And the “journal” is a daily publication. So the idea of journalism is keeping people abreast of daily events. But that has nothing to do with this. This has to do with remembering meaning. And the very idea of

remembering has to do with the word “member,” as a finger is a member or a hand is a member of a body. So “remembering” means “put together.”

Their experience was that they felt that their bodily life, their corporate life, had been divided and cut up; and the whole idea of remembering and coming together in memory was to put themselves back together—“re-member,” rejoin. And to remember meant to also share in the experience of. So they really believed that through the power of the story itself they transcended time so the people could say, “I experienced Exodus; I left Egypt. The Lord saved me from Pharaoh.” Not that they had a particularly self-awareness; it was “us”! But I feel part of “us” because I did Passover. So when the Bible says 600,000 Hebrews left Egypt, that’s true if you take into consideration the number of people who shared the Passover and count all them, because that’s what this Passover is about. It’s about experiencing redemption from Egypt.

Now further, the real identity of the authors of the Old Testament has to do with the southern kingdom called the “kingdom of Judah.” And Judah is in the highlands of Palestine, modern-day Israel. And Judah is very poor, always was. Now to be honest with you, the authors of the Scripture exaggerate how well off they were and say that, for example, Solomon was very rich. There is no sign that Solomon was rich. There is no sign there was a great, wonderful temple. There might have been a very simple temple, not a grand one! They didn’t have any money. They were not rich at all. However, the lowlands, which was Israel to the north—that was a wealthy farmland. But what we see in the history is that the wealthy people in the north—this will shock you—were very secular. They were very much open to the world; they were worldly. They were willing to make alliances with other nations to promote their own welfare. But the people in the mountains, who were very poor, let’s say emphasized more this idea of fidelity to the tradition and the authentic identity that they had. At least there was a group strong enough to write the Bible and to promote authentic worship. And they probably were not the totality of the people either, because even they complain about the “high places,” meaning places where foreign gods, alien gods, were worshiped.

So whatever happened at the time of the Exodus happened approximately 1200 BC or maybe even slightly earlier, but it’s very hard to pinpoint. How it was interpreted by the authors of the Bible is that this is the event that made Israel special; this is the event that gave Israel identity. And they took traditional festivals like the festival of Matzoth and they reformed it into a time to remember the event that made them special. They took a traditional ritual of Pasach and they reformed it to make it remember this event of redemption. And they elaborated!

Now what were the plagues? Well, I don’t know what the plagues were. No one knows what the plagues were! But it is possible that there were some, you might say, apparently natural disasters, which is what a plague is, that they interpreted as God’s hand stretched out to help them leave Egypt. However, the way the author talks about this, it would seem to be exaggerated because if it were really as bad as they say it was, I really do think Pharaoh would have been pushing them out much faster! So it’s a matter of interpretation, which meaning is. Meaning is interpretation.

We need to keep that in mind today. As you look at the world, you can see the world as the product of a loving Creator who has a purpose in mind to create a wonderful home for his family. Other people look at the world and they see nothing but misery or they see nothing but matter or they see nothing but dog eat dog. It's all in what you see. And that is the mystery of our contact with God, and our spirit.

Now the Jewish people were able to keep alive for thousands of years, two thousand years after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, precisely because of this ritual meal called the "Seder"—because it was a family affair, because it depended upon the father of the family, the abba, not on the priest and not on the rabbi, but on the abba of the family. It allowed Judaism to survive in every kind of situation; wherever there was a family, Judaism could survive. But we also have to recognize that as it survived it changed, because everything changes; it's the very nature of life.

The purpose of our gathering tonight is to grow in an understanding of the meal that Jesus offered the night before he died. Now Matthew, Mark, and Luke say that was the Seder. John does not. So we're not even sure that was a Seder. John doesn't mention at all of anything Passover. In fact, John says that when Jesus died on the cross that was the day of preparation. "As the lambs were being slain in the temple, so Jesus was slain on Golgotha." That's what John says. Now again, this is, again, the whole idea of meaning. Meaning was more important for John than facts. Was it really a Seder or wasn't it a Seder? I don't know. Matthew, Mark, and Luke thought it was, and they wrote about it.

Now the Seder can be offered twice: on the first night of Passover and the second night. Some theorize that Jesus offered the Seder the night before Passover, and then the next day was the day of preparation. Well, I don't know about that, and I don't care to try to figure things out in that way. I don't think we can do that. But it's clear from the point of view of the Synoptics that Jesus gathered his disciples together for a Seder meal, and that in this Seder meal he took the matzoth, which as I said is the most original symbolic food, and he took it and he used it to interpret something—his coming death. He said—out of character, and not in the ritual—he said, "Take and eat this." He broke it and he said, "Take and eat this; this is my body, which is broken for you." Now whether his disciples has a clue what he was talking about is very unlikely! I've seen pictures where they are all kneeling receiving Holy Communion—Oh, no! They had no idea what he was saying. We have to realize how utterly dependent we are on the Holy Spirit to actually teach us the meaning of Christ and what he said and what he did. But then at another point—there are four times when there is a kiddush, a blessing cup. In one of them Jesus took the cup and he said, "Take and drink; this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for many so that sins may be forgiven." Again, this is very out of character. There is no such prayer or even similar prayer. But he was interpreting, again, his own blood that was going to be poured out the next day. And he mentions that it is the blood of the new covenant.

Now that was not a new idea because Jeremiah and Ezekiel had said that a time would come when there would be a new covenant, and it would be written in the hearts of people, not on stone like the first one. So Jesus was saying, "Well, now the time has

come for the new covenant. Here it is, and it's going to be sealed in my blood." Well, Moses sealed the first covenant in the blood of various animals, bulls. Why that was, it's hard to say. Believe it or not, the symbol of blood had a purifying significance. Now to us blood is yucky and it's the worst thing because you can't get it out with detergent or anything. But for them it had a purifying significance because it was the life stream. And Moses sprinkled it on the people, meaning sealed them with this. They said, "We agree. We accept this covenant." And then he sealed it—okay, now here is the seal. Now normally what we used to seal documents with was wax—wax and the signet ring. No, for a covenant, it's blood, the blood of an animal offered to God who is authoring the covenant. So Jesus says, "This is the blood of the new covenant." So we're sealed in his death. His death affirms this new covenant. And it's not a covenant that waits for our approval. He made it in his humanity with the Father, and we are privileged to join with it. And that's really the meaning of Baptism, but I don't want to get into that now.

So all these various symbols are here. I want to show you for a minute the plate. The plate has—this is called the "Seder plate." It has first of all, bitter herbs. Here it is horseradish—I guess that's bitter enough. Symbolizing what? The bitterness of slavery. Then there is the karpas, which look/looks like parsley. Symbolizing (the dipping of the hyssop into the salt water symbolizing the tears of the slaves.) And then there is lettuce, which is also called "chazeres"—signifying? (More bitterness, but then it's dipped into the charoses, which symbolizes the mortar that they used to make bricks.) Right. That's actually the best tasting thing of all. And then there is the hard-boiled egg, which is the origin, of course, of the Easter eggs. This symbolizes new life. Okay. And then there is the shank bone, which symbolizes the Passover lamb that was cooked whole and entire. Remember the story in the Exodus? Whole and entire.

Now take your little book and open it up to the back because we're reading in Hebrew here, so it's backwards to us. Now other items on the Seder table are three matzoth—well I already told you that is the unleavened bread. The wine—self-explanatory. Salt water. So you all need salt water on your table. That's in the dish. The cup of Elijah. You see, Elijah was awaited. Before the Messiah would come, Elijah was due. So every Passover has a place for Elijah.

Now this is also important from a Christian viewpoint because when Jesus entered Jerusalem on what we call "Palm Sunday," and they yelled and screamed and said, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna to the Son of David," they were acclaiming him as the coming anointed one, the Messiah. And it was believed that the Messiah would come during Passover. So you see, Pontius Pilate and the Roman authorities got very upset when they saw this huge acclaim being made for Jesus.

Now a pillow—I really personally think that was just added during Roman times because they used to eat lying down. They would recline on their stomachs and lean a little bit over to the left. You may do so if you like.

So now we will begin the Seder. On page four you can follow along. I'm not reading this in Hebrew. I only had one year of Hebrew, and I didn't master the language. Now

we have to skip parts because the first part of the kiddush is for only sabbath. Okay, now hold up your kiddush cup.