

When we listen to Bible texts like the gospel we have just heard, there can often be a word or a phrase that stands out for us. We then listen to the text in the light of that phrase. There were two phrases that struck me in today's gospel where Jesus is at Supper with his disciples. The first is right at the beginning: "It was the feast of Unleavened Bread when the Passover lamb was sacrificed".

That phrase tells us that the meal Jesus was having with his disciples was the Passover meal. This was the most important day in the Jewish calendar. It was the memorial of the liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. The ritual of that night was celebrated every year in every Jewish home. They would tell the story of what had happened in Egypt, of how every family sacrificed a lamb and wiped its blood on their doorposts. They then ate the lamb roasted. As devastation was brought down upon the Egyptians, those people with the blood smeared on their doorposts were set free and began the long march to freedom.

This is the Passover that Jesus was celebrating with his disciples. But during the meal, when it came to the blessing over the cup of wine, Jesus said that it was his blood, the blood of the covenant. He was telling them that through his blood, God established a new covenant with them. The disciples would have known very well that despite God's gracious action over all those years since the first Passover, the people had often broken their side of the covenant and had alienated themselves from God. Jesus was drawing them into a new relationship with God. Because this relationship – this covenant – was sealed in his blood, it could never be broken.

The is where the second phrase that struck me in the gospel is helpful. It comes right at the end: "After they had sung psalms Jesus and his disciples left for the Mount of Olives". This sets the scene for what will happen later that day and the next day. Jesus will be arrested there at the Mount of Olives; he will be put on trial; and he will be crucified on Calvary. It is as though what he had just done at the Supper with the bread and cup was a prophetic gesture pointing to what would happen to his body on the cross. On the cross his blood would be poured out, and his body would be broken. But by linking his action with the bread and the cup to that miserable death, he was pointing to the true meaning of his death. His death was the sacrifice that would free those who were sinners, or who were suffering, or who were weary. His death would bring life to the world. His death would establish the new covenant – a new relationship with God.

Each time we gather for Mass we celebrate the memorial of the Last Supper. We do what Jesus did at the Last Supper with the bread and the cup of wine. Like the Jewish people who celebrate the Passover, each time we celebrate the Eucharist we hear the story of what God did – in this case what Jesus did at the Last Supper. We hear his words, “take this and eat it, take this and drink of it”. This memorial action reaches its high point when we receive holy communion. Have you ever thought why we call the Eucharist “holy communion”? There are three things we can say about this.

The first is that by our eating and drinking of the Eucharist we are drawn into communion with God. We are united with God in that new relationship established by Jesus. As people in communion with God we are assured that God does not forget us, and that God has prepared for us a place at the banquet table of the kingdom. When we eat the Body of Christ we are joined with Jesus in his response of love to his Father. We open ourselves to be part of the love between Jesus and his Father.

The second thing to say about holy communion is that we usually receive communion with other people in the community. In the early centuries of the church, one bishop instructing his congregation told them that as they come to communion the priest will say to them “The body of Christ”, and they will respond, “Amen”. If their “Amen” is to be true, they should live as members of the body of Christ which is the church. Our communion with Christ in the Eucharist establishes our communion, our fellowship, with each other.

The third thing about holy communion is that we are called to live in communion with Christ who gave his life in love for others. To receive the Body of Christ is to take on a way of life that is marked by service to others.

May this feast of the Body and Blood of Christ draw us more deeply into the mystery of God’s love for us and for the world.