

Prayer

Thank You, dear Jesus, for bringing us through our times of trial to defeat the Evil One. Fill us now with Your power and love, so that the enemy cannot gain a foothold within our lives and distract us from Your pathway. We celebrate the triumph of good over evil not just because You have already done it Yourself, dear Jesus, but because You continue to do it through Your people every day. We praise You for our liberty; Alleluia!

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Read a topical news article in a newspaper, a magazine, or on the internet. Pray about the issues raised.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the witness of the church** Pray for all Christians who seek to spread the Good News of the Gospel. Pray they will 'love each other'.
- Give thanks to God for the protection of law enforcement agencies
- Pray for those affected by abuse within the Catholic church

Meditation

You stand by us, O Lord, in the midst of our daily needs:

Your love sustains us,
Your peace heals us,
Your mercy covers us,
Your power enables us,
Your justice protects us,
Your mission challenges us,
Your vision guides us,
Your future invites us,
And Your promise never fails us

May we take our stand in Your presence, now and always.

Bible passage – Matthew 26:26-35

²⁶ While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, blessed it and broke it, and gave it to the disciples, saying, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' ²⁷ Then he took a cup, gave thanks and gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; ²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹ I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until the day when I drink new wine with you in my Father's kingdom.' ³⁰ When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

³¹ Jesus then said to them, 'You will all be shocked and stumble because of me this night; for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'" ³² But after I have been raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.' ³³ Peter replied, 'Even if everyone is shocked by you, I will not stumble.' ³⁴ Jesus said to him, 'Amen, I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' ³⁵ Peter said to him, 'Even if I must die with you, I will not disown you.' And all the disciples said the same.

Bible Study

Review

After the tragedy of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas (26:14-25) the theme of suffering changes dramatically in this reading, as Jesus shares the Passover meal with His disciples. It seems that Judas had now left the group of disciples (something confirmed by John – 13:30), and Jesus was able to be more intimate with them now that the betrayer had gone. The disciples would hardly have understood what Jesus said when sharing the bread and the wine, but they were deeply moving, and they have become sacred to Christians throughout the ages. However, the moment passed, and after speaking to the disciples yet again about what was about to happen (26:31f.), Jesus was drawn into a dispute with Peter. Did Peter not understand yet that his Master knew best and could tell him the truth about what would happen?

There is something powerfully simple about the way Matthew describes Jesus' action of breaking bread and drinking wine. We do not know exactly where this might have happened within a Passover meal (see later), because we do not know much about the practice of the Passover in first century Judaism. However, it was traditional for the senior figure in a group, or the father in a family, to 'break bread' and give thanks at the beginning of a meal, and it is best to imagine this setting. Alongside this, the Jewish Passover meal has a number of places where it is appropriate to drink a small portion of wine, so this would be expected to accompany the breaking of bread. The two were entirely complementary, and should remain so in the way we think about them today.

Remarkably, Jesus identified personally with the bread and the wine. In the Passover, the bread was a symbol of God's provision in the wilderness ('manna' Ex 16:31) and the wine was drunk in the Passover meal as a sign of the new life God gave His people through His redemption (from Egypt into the new life of the 'Promised Land'). At this point, it helps if we go back to the beginning of Matthew's Gospel and recall his words at the birth of Jesus. Matthew wrote of Jesus *'He will save His people from their sins'* (1:21). So here, in this simple meal, Jesus explained to the disciples that the salvation He was bringing would be the sacrifice of His body; He would die for the salvation of the world! Moreover, the shedding of His blood would establish a new *'covenant ... for the forgiveness of sins'* (26:28). As if this was not enough, Jesus then made it clear that the time had come for the Messiah to be revealed; *'I will never again drink this fruit of the vine until the day when I drink new wine with you in my Father's Kingdom'* (26:29).

Exactly what each of the disciples felt as they went out with Jesus to the Mount of Olives, singing a hymn, we shall never know. Perhaps they thought that Jesus would do as the prophet Zechariah said, and stand on the Mount of Olives in majesty to claim His own (Zech 14:4)? When Jesus spoke to the disciples, He certainly did not confirm this idea! In a few simple words, Jesus told the disciples that after the night's work, the disciples would be scattered (26:31). He then redirected the disciples to a different quote from the same prophet we have just mentioned; Zechariah, *'awake, O sword, against the shepherd ... strike the shepherd that the sheep may be scattered ...'* (Zech 13:7). In the light of this prophecy, Jesus told the disciples to go back to Galilee, where they would find that He had gone ahead of them (26:32)!

In the setting, such words must have been incomprehensible, and it was Peter who took the lead, yet again, in challenging Jesus; he said that whatever happened, he would not stumble! Jesus warned Peter that he could not stand above God's plans, but Peter swore to stay with Jesus. How remarkable that God's plans could take account of such misunderstanding! Jesus would go and do what He had to do, and Peter would have to learn again to trust what Jesus said.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The details of the Passover meal
- The sharing of the bread
- The sharing of the wine
- Jesus' instructions to the disciples, and to Peter

Going Deeper

The details of the Passover meal

The message of a New Covenant of Salvation came within the eating of the Passover meal by Jesus and His disciples, which may well have included the twelve and other close friends, including women, who would form the nucleus of God's new community, the Church.

Many commentaries depend for their interpretation of this famous meal upon the assumption that we know what was done at a Passover festival meal in the days of Jesus. The ancient Jewish texts used for this were, in fact, written many years later than the time of Jesus, also, many years after the destruction of the Temple in 70AD. This is when the Israelites were forced to re-work their liturgies and festival practices

because they could no longer happen at a central Temple, or indeed at Jerusalem. It is therefore unsafe to assume too much about Jesus' Passover meal by basing it upon these later texts. This is extremely important. For example, it is well known amongst Christians today that structure of a Passover 'seder' (meal) consists of a liturgical re-telling of the story of the escape from Egypt in which four cups of wine are drunk, and a piece of bread known as the 'afikomen' is broken, before a good meal of lamb. This structure, however, is all much later than the first century, so we simply do not know which of the four 'cups' (traditionally identified with; sanctification, the 'plagues', blessing, and praise) was blessed by Jesus as 'His blood' (v27,28), or whether these definitions were even in use in Jesus' day.

Many Christians have been blessed by taking part in a Jewish Passover meal, and this is a good thing. But I do suggest that despite the well intentioned sentiments of such occasions, the only texts a Christian can be sure of are from scripture itself. Scripture does not provide us with anything more than a basic description of a Passover meal in the Old Testament (Ex 12), and texts such as we have here in Matthew, which point us to the Good News of God's New Covenant.

The sharing of the Bread

Jesus said and did two things that would have been totally different from a Passover meal, and Matthew 26:16-19 is built around these two things, mentioning little else of what was eaten or what was said. The first of these comes in the blessing of the bread, done during the meal and not at the beginning ('while they were eating ...' 26:26). Jesus broke the bread and said 'take, eat, this is my body' (26:26).

This was Jesus' extraordinary invitation to His beloved disciples. Yet what did Jesus really ask them to do? Sharing bread at a meal was one thing, but were they supposed to 'eat' Jesus in some way? Some feel that the implications of this are all too much, and they suggest that Jesus only means these words symbolically. They argue that for grammatical reasons, this must have been what Jesus said originally in Aramaic, His mother tongue. Unfortunately, we have no way of proving such theories, and all we have is Matthew's Greek text, of which the above is a very accurate translation (26:26). It is best to read Matthew's Gospel as a good representation of what was done in the early church of the mid first century AD, as recalled by the first disciples. To say more is presumptuous on the facts.

However, we should not need to try to do the impossible in order to find an interpretation of this passage, and we must remember that the whole Passover meal was celebrated as an allegory; this means that it is a drama full of words and actions which explain the deep truths of God's relationship with His people. With this in mind, Jesus was asking His disciples to eat the bread and so share spiritually in His coming death. He knew they would abandon Him at His time of need, but in this meal, He nevertheless invited them with extraordinary generosity to take part in His saving death by eating the broken bread of 'His body'. This was an invitation to do something that was more than symbolic, and neither was it covert cannibalism. By eating the bread that was broken and shared, they took part spiritually in Jesus' suffering and death in a way that because of sin, they could not do physically.

John, in his Gospel, reports Jesus as calling the disciples to eat 'my flesh' (John 6:51f.) and I will explain my views when I write about this text. I believe John presents a more strongly worded version of our text in Matthew, which, essentially, says the same thing.

The sharing of the Wine

Jesus went on to take a cup, one of a number of possible occasions in the Passover meal when wine was shared (today's Passover has four, and this scripture is often linked with the third 'cup of blessing'). The offer for everyone to drink was normal, as was the reference to the 'Covenant'. Moses talked of the 'blood of the Covenant' (Ex 24:8ff) when He established a new Covenant with the people of God based upon the Law that he received from God on Mount Sinai; and that Covenant was sealed by a sacrifice offered in worship to God. Although it sounds gruesome to us, the blood was sprinkled on the people as a sign that everyone shared in this covenant relationship with God (Ex 24:8).

But the Covenant Jesus was talking about was different, as He went on to explain. The second set of new words in Jesus' Passover says this; '*Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*' (26:28). Jesus, the Messiah, the new Redeemer, was establishing a New Covenant based upon His forgiveness of our sins. Remember that the word 'Covenant' is simply a way of describing the relationship between God and people, so the 'New Covenant' established by Jesus means a new relationship with God based not upon Law (as with Moses) but on the love of Jesus who forgives our sins. Verse 28 is supremely 'good news'!

It is important to remember that the blood of the Covenant is Jesus' blood which, as in Isaiah 53 (v10ff) was 'poured out' for the forgiveness of sins, and Jesus' blood would not be poured out unless He died (see also Hebrews 10:16-19; 11:15 and Romans 11:26,27), as Jesus continued to try and explain to the disciples (26:31-34). Jesus, then and now, saves His people by dying for them; His death, like the lamb in the Passover meal, is the vital sacrificial ingredient that makes everything possible.

There is so much more to discover within these verses; but this, I believe, is the heart of it. Why then, should this be a meal that we continue to celebrate as the 'communion' to this day? One reason is to do with Jesus' talk of not drinking the fruit of the vine until He was in the Kingdom (26:29). If we think of the church as being the Kingdom of God on earth awaiting the final End Times, then by sharing the meal today, we fulfil Jesus wishes from within this text. It is little wonder that the continued the celebration of this meal means so much to so many.

Jesus' instructions to the disciples and to Peter

The rest of the verses in our passage (30-35) read like a prophecy of all that would happen from that point in time to the end of the Gospel. After the memorable Passover meal, the disciples celebrated by singing together, probably using the final hymns of the Passover, the famous 'Hallel' (praise) psalms 115 to 118. Jesus continued to emphasise that He would Himself be a stumbling block to the disciples, and prophesied this by referring to a little known passage of Zechariah (13:7) in which a shepherd is struck by the Lord and some of His flock die, but a third are saved (v31). How easy it would be for us to say that the disciple's abandonment of Jesus would be their own fault, but Jesus here claims that the fault lies with Him, He is the stumbling block. This is an astonishing act of mercy and compassion by our Lord, and one that is little mentioned in most expositions of the Passion of Christ.

In verse 32, Jesus prophesied that He would 'go ahead' of the disciples; a prophecy of resurrection if ever there was one! Jesus was now confident in declaring what would happen beyond His death; calling the disciples back to where their journey of discipleship had begun, in Galilee, to start the work of the New Covenant of God's Kingdom on Earth, the Church.

The final scenario of this passage is the tragic conversation of Jesus with Peter. His reply to Jesus smacks of what Calvin calls 'the intoxication of human self confidence', but although Peter had taken part in the Passover meal with Jesus and maybe even begun to understand something of what was going on, His understanding was still very partial, and His brash personality was still intact! He declared to Jesus that He would not stumble. Jesus told him very forcefully ('Amen, I tell you ...' v34) that He would fail this test dramatically, a prophecy that would soon unfold. Peter was still unable to accept Jesus' word (v35), and thereby led the disciples into a further tragic denial of their own inadequacies.

Application

The words of Jesus at the 'Last Supper' are extraordinarily powerful. They are best reflected upon by thinking about the many other passages of scripture with which they connect, for there are many (see John 15, 1 Cor 11:23f. and more). They are also valuable when used in the liturgies of the church, for what else would Christians wish to hear other than the words of Jesus Himself? Each of us will find out how they best speak to our souls; they point to the heart of the Gospel message, and to Jesus' work of Salvation for all.

At the heart of Christian faith is the claim that Jesus is God and that He alone has done what is necessary for the salvation of the world through His death on the Cross and His resurrection from the dead. This is the Church's message, and however many times throughout history people have tried to suggest a different foundation of Christians faith, such tinkering is doomed to failure. A great many people of considerable intellect have tried it! However, if God's people return to the heart of the Gospel they will find it expressed in the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross, and this is remembered in the meal of the 'Lord's Supper'. This is God's provision for sinful humanity to receive the forgiveness of their sins, and so find a new relationship (Covenant) with Him.

This, the very heart of the God's work of Salvation, is to be found within our verses today with that strange combination of great clarity and deep mystery which so often marks special texts from the Word of God. It is not possible for me to work through every theological point from this text, or give a full account of every passionately argued dispute that has accompanied these verses over centuries. All I can do is attempt to clarify what I can, and offer to you the plain meaning of the text as I see it. The Holy Spirit will undoubtedly speak to You in His own way as you study this passage.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this passage of Scripture say to you about the Lord's Supper? Has it explained something that was otherwise a mystery to you? If so, share this.

2. Why is it important that bread and wine are used to celebrate the Lord's 'Last Supper', or 'Passover'?
3. In what ways does Jesus provide for the disciples' weaknesses, so that they may meet Him again after His death? How does He help us now?

Topics covered by this text

- *The Lord's Supper*
- *The breaking of bread*
- *The 'New Wine' of God's Kingdom*
- *Faithfulness in the face of pressure*

Personal comments by author

Everything we do as followers of Jesus Christ is surely to be measured against the amazing generosity of God in providing His new Covenant through Jesus' forgiveness of our sins. How can we make forgiveness the heart of our discipleship? I have frequently realised that unless I can forgive others myself, my ministry is utterly compromised. It does not depend on whether anyone else repents or responds to my forgiveness. It is a matter of my spiritual approach and attitude to others. I have to ask myself, does it match up to the sacrificial generosity of Christ?

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Attend a communion service and dwell on the words of Jesus spoken here in Matthew's Gospel. Let the power of these words direct your mind and spirit as you take part in the service, and let the Holy Spirit explain it to your spirit.*
- *Pray for those who find it hard to receive the bread and the wine of the sacrament of the Lord's supper. Some people feel they are not worthy of this great forgiveness of Christ, and stand back from receiving God's grace. Pray for them.*

Final Prayer

Lift us out of the ordinary, Lord God, and show us the mysteries of heaven, even at a distance, or 'as in a mirror'. Draw us near to You in the mysteries of faith whenever we receive them in bread and wine, and give us the gift of new life through the birth of Jesus Christ. Thank You Lord God AMEN
