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# This is my Body

Mark 14.12-25

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 13 2006 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

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Imagine the scene in Jerusalem in the days following Palm Sunday. 250,000 lambs clustering into gateways, bursting down tight passageways, pouring into close barns and shelters. Each lamb was set to furnish one Passover meal. At least ten people were required for each meal. Which means around 2 million people teeming through the holy places and cheap hotels of Jerusalem, squabbling over tent space on the Mount of Olives, and all searching for bread, water, and ingredients for the great meal.

Imagine, if you can bear it, the scene in the Temple. Every single householder bringing his lamb and killing it with his own hands yet not strangling it. Two long lines of priests receive the blood of each slaughtered lamb in a cup, then pass it up the line till it is splashed on the altar, and flows out down pipes into the River Kedron, which forms a red moving sludge. The lamb is hung, skinned and opened, then carried home and carefully roasted. Think of the smell, the noise, the chaos. And all this is contained in Mark's simple words 'they prepared the Passover meal'.

And then move from the pandemonium of the Temple to the relative quiet of the upper room. The upper room was the guest-chamber, constructed either permanently or temporarily on the flat roof of a house. Mark tells us that the guest-room that Jesus had booked was a large one, big enough for the 13 people who would share supper together. It was by no means the first meal the 13 had shared together, for Mark names a number of other meals at which Jesus revealed different aspects of his character and saving purpose.

And in the center of the circle on the table would have been the four ceremonial cups of wine, the brick-shaped concoction of fruits, nuts and vinegar representing the bricks the Hebrews made in Egypt, the bitter herbs representing slavery in Egypt, the unleavened bread, representing their hasty departure, and the lamb itself, whose blood sprinkled on the doorposts delivered the Hebrews from the angel of death.

The host blesses the first cup and all drink. Then come the bitter herbs, which are blessed and eaten. Then the bread, the dried fruit and the lamb are brought in. The second cup is poured, and the story of the Israel's exodus from Egypt and crossing of the Red Sea is told. The second cup is drunk and the bread is broken. The host blesses the bread mixed with herbs and fruit and eats it along with some of the lamb, saying, 'This is the body of the Passover'. All feast. Then they drink the third up and say some psalms before drinking the fourth cup.

At least, this is what is supposed to happen. But on this occasion, the host is Jesus. After the second cup Jesus takes the bread, offers the thanksgiving, breaks it and distributes it. And instead of saying 'This is the body of the Passover' he says 'This is my body'. And then when the time comes to take the third cup Jesus says 'This is my blood'. And he adds, 'I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.'

What on earth is he talking about? This was surely the reaction of the other 12 people present. It's still a controversial question today. But I think what I have said so far contains the broad outlines of what Jesus meant by saying 'This is my body'. I suggest he meant four things, and that these four things are as significant today about every celebration of the Eucharist as they were in the upper room in the sharing of the Last Supper.

The first thing he meant was 'I am the one who sets you free to be God's friends.' This is what it means to inherit the Passover tradition. Passover links together the three great themes of the Old Testament: God is the liberator who sets Israel free, a freedom represented by the parting of the Red Sea; God sets Israel free in order for his people to be his friends, a friendship represented by the Covenant made with Moses on Mount Sinai; and this setting-free-for-friendship God is none other than the creator God, the maker of heaven and earth, who established the whole creation for this central purpose. Passover is therefore about the creator, the liberator and the sanctifier, and by saying not 'This is the body of the Passover' but 'This is my body' Jesus is saying 'Everything the Passover means, I mean'. So Christians celebrate the Eucharist always remembering this is first of all an affirmation of God's faithfulness to the Jews, and of their place in that relationship made possible in Christ. The Eucharist makes us free for friendship.

The second thing Jesus meant was 'Eating together will teach you all you need to know about the Church.' The word 'companion' means 'the one with whom I share bread'. Jesus came to make us God's companions. Every meal in Mark's gospel portrays the new society made possible by Jesus. When Jesus feeds the 5000 he proclaims that God's abundance is more than enough for Israel. When he feeds the 4000 he proclaims that God's abundance is more than enough for the Gentiles too. These massive feedings depict the Eucharist as a social process through which everyone brings what they are and what they have to the table and there discover that it is not enough but, inadequate as it is, it is transformed by the story and action of Jesus such that it becomes far more than enough in the power of his Spirit. Likewise these 12 disciples come together and their combined resources of character are far less than is needed to stay with Jesus even to the end of the very same evening, yet the story and action of Jesus transforms them to be the bringers of the good news of Christ to the whole world. And whenever they seek to recall or be empowered transformed by the love of God in Christ, they sit down to share the Eucharist together and they are revealed once again for who they are yet are empowered by who Jesus is. The Eucharist gives us everything we need.

The third thing Jesus meant was 'The broken bread is my broken body; the poured wine is my shed blood'. In other words, the taking of the bread and wine is a prefigurement and a portrayal of the cross. One of the most harrowing Old Testament stories is Abraham striding up the mountain with his son Isaac, and Isaac saying 'Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the sacrifice?' Abraham replies, in words of multiple resonance and irony, 'God himself will provide the lamb for the sacrifice, my son'. You can imagine the disciples saying 'Here are the bitter herbs and the dried fruit, but where is the Passover lamb?' None of the gospels explicitly mentions the lamb at the meal. And why? Because you can almost hear Jesus saying, 'God himself will provide the lamb for the sacrifice, my beloved children'. The Eucharist celebrates that God did provide for Abraham, and does provide for us. And what he provides is, of course, Jesus: the lamb of God. Jesus, the sacrificial lamb whose death was the end of sacrifice, who died that the Kedron River and every other river the world over no longer be a red moving sludge. These are the moments we place at the center of our Christian faith: the body broken so that we may be united with God, the blood poured so that no blood might ever be poured again. The Eucharist is the cross of Christ.

And the fourth thing Jesus meant was 'this is how it will be with us, with God and God's companions, in glory forever'. People often discuss whether and in what form Jesus really rose from the dead – whether his resurrection body was broadly the same or completely different from the body that was crucified. But the transformation in Jesus' body did not begin on Holy Saturday: it begins here, when Jesus says, 'This is my body'. My body is people making and renewing friendship with God and one another. My body is people learning to want the things God gives us in plenty, and discovering that God gives them everything they need. My body is people voluntarily facing the cost of discipleship and outpouring love on the way of the cross. And all these parts of my body center on one definitive moment, the resurrection of my body on Easter Day. Glory, life eternal, the everlasting presence of God and our finding our true home in the life of the Trinity, these are all ways of rendering permanent the joy of the resurrection of Jesus' body. And that lasting joy is most frequently portrayed as a banquet, a constant sharing of the bread of everyday life and the wine of eternal life. That banquet is a constant moment of worship, of companionship, and of sharing food. It is what we call heaven. The Eucharist is a moment of heaven on earth.

So when he said 'This is my body' Jesus embodied the promises of God to Israel, grounded the Church in a simple practice, depicted the significance of the cross, and anticipated the heaven his resurrection would bring. But we must never forget the circumstances in which he said these words. He was being betrayed by one disciple, about to be denied by another and deserted by the rest. All around was the chaos of a religious festival and the stench of the slaughtered lambs. This was no sentimental piety, no tasteful, cozy and comfortable evening in with friends. And so we shouldn't expect our Eucharists to be cozy and comfortable, tasteful and sentimental. If our Church is in turmoil, our campus in distress, our personal life in tatters and our national politics in disgrace, we may share the Eucharist in good company, for such was the situation on the night of that first Thursday.

So next time you come to the Eucharist one Sunday, and later that day you speak to a friend and they say, 'How was church this morning?', you may reply, 'Oh, it made me free for friendship with God and others; it give me everything I need to be God's companion; it brought me face to face with the cross of Christ; and it was a

prefigurement of heaven on earth: otherwise, nothing special, I suppose.' And all of this is possible because Jesus took bread, and said, 'This is my body'.