

The third Sunday of Advent is known as “Rejoicing” Sunday because of the words we hear in a number of today’s readings and prayers. We rejoice because we know our savior is near. That was the message of John the Baptist and he was crying out to all who heard him to prepare for the Lord’s coming by repenting of their sins. Our acts of repentance are always cause for rejoicing because the obstacles that keep us from God have been removed.

In addition to rejoicing because it is almost Christmas, we can also rejoice because our savior is already here among us now through his True Presence in the Eucharist. For the past couple of weeks we’ve been looking at Jesus’ words in scripture concerning the Eucharist, the Bread of Life, Jesus’ very own body and blood. The Bread of Life Discourse in John’s gospel gives us the theological background for the Eucharist but the teaching was incomplete until Jesus showed the Apostles what he meant at the Last Supper. At the Last Supper, Jesus showed the apostles how they would be able to eat his flesh and blood, he declared the bread to be his body and the wine in the chalice to be his blood. As God, Jesus’ words are effective and they do what he commands. If he can change water into wine, can he not change bread and wine into his body and blood? The Last Supper made it possible for the Apostles to eat the Bread of Life, but what about us today? We are on earth, Jesus is in heaven. How do we in the here and now participate in the events of the Last Supper in the Upper Room in Jerusalem? We need to understand what the Last Supper truly was and how it connects to the events on Calvary.

The Eucharist is prefigured in a number of ways in the Old Testament. I don’t want to overload you so I am only going to speak at length about one of them but I encourage you to look for some of the other ones yourself. A big hint for three of them will come in the Eucharistic Prayer when I will mention three names from the Book of Genesis: Abel, Abraham, and Melchizedek. Also, check out the omer of manna that was to be kept in a jar; you’ll find that in the book of Exodus. My challenge to you is to go home and try to figure out their Eucharistic connections.

We cannot understand the Eucharist, the Last Supper, and Calvary without understanding the Passover. The Passover was both an event and a meal. The event was the tenth plague: the death of all the firstborn humans and animals in Egypt. This was the plague that would force Pharaoh to release the Israelites from slavery and allow them to worship God the way he wanted them to worship him. God told the Israelites through Moses that if each household obtained a lamb, killed it and smeared its blood over their doors, the destroyer would pass

over their homes and they would be safe. Smearing the blood wasn't enough though, they had to eat the lamb. Eating is an essential part of a sacrifice. Sacrifice seals a covenant. By eating the flesh of the sacrificial victim, the people participate in both the sacrifice and the covenant. In this case, the covenant, sacrifice, and the eating of the sacrificial victim establishes communion between the people and the God who is saving them. God made the passover an annual feast for his people, not just the mere recalling of a past event, but the celebration of the passover made that past saving event present here and now.

As a faithful Jew, Jesus himself celebrated Passover. That is what he and his Apostles were doing in the Upper Room on the night of Last Supper but something strange happened. Jesus changed the ritual. As the Son of the God who established the original ritual, Jesus had every right to do this. At the Last Supper, Jesus established a new covenant. This new and eternal covenant required a new sacrifice and the members of this new covenant had to eat the sacrifice in order for it to be valid. Jesus declared the bread to be his body and the wine in the chalice to be his blood. Notice that there is no mention of a lamb. This probably answered many of the questions remaining from the bread of life discourse but not all of them. The big one for us is how do we participate in that meal?

At this point a disclaimer: I am not as familiar as I'd like to be with Jewish passover traditions so I am relying on notes provided by the archdiocese for the rest of this. Remember how I said that the Bread of Life Discourse was incomplete? According to theologians, so was the Last Supper. Jesus and the Eleven—Judas Iscariot was gone by then—went out into the Garden of Gethsemane without finishing the meal; they didn't drink the fourth cup which was the conclusion of the traditional passover meal. Jesus was then arrested, tried, scourged, and nailed to the cross. While on the cross he said: "I thirst." He was given sour wine which he drank and then said, "It is finished" and died. The sour wine was the fourth cup. Through these actions, Jesus linked the new passover (what began with the Last Supper) with his passion and death. The Last Supper and Calvary is one continuous event. That missing lamb I mentioned? It was on the cross, Jesus himself. The blood of lambs at the first passover helped the Israelites escape from slavery in Egypt. The blood of the one perfect lamb, Jesus himself, saves all people from their sins.

We need just a little bit more to maybe understand how we can participate in that one saving event. The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus is the eternal high priest, who offers the eternal sacrifice—himself—to seal a new and

eternal covenant. The important thing for us to understand is that while from our perspective this sacrifice took place on Calvary, it actually took place in the sanctuary of heaven.

Because it was instituted by Christ and he intended it to be eternal, every Mass is a participation in that one eternal sacrifice. We don't re-sacrifice Jesus. In a mysterious way we participate in that one eternal sacrifice which began at the new passover meal of the last supper and was concluded on calvary.

Let us prepare to go there now and rejoice that Jesus is always with us.