

Homily for the 18th Sunday after Trinity

*“Our Lord did institute, and in his holy Gospel **command us to continue, a perpetual memory**
of that his precious death and sacrifice...”*

+ “Why is this night different from all other nights?” At a certain point during the Jewish observance of the Passover, the youngest member of the household is ritually obliged to put this question to the master of the house. Before we go on to consider the appropriate answer, it’s worth reminding ourselves that the Christian Eucharist was instituted in the context of this Passover Feast. Our Lord came among His people to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, and it was to be expected that this fulfillment would extend to the highest and holiest observances commanded by God in the Old Testament. The Eucharist is Christ’s fulfillment of the Passover Feast, as His precious death and resurrection were the fulfillment of the Passover itself, Israel’s deliverance from the oppression of evil. There was a meaning and purpose connecting God’s deliverance of His people from slavery in Egypt, and the yearly Feast that He ordained to be kept for its remembrance. We should expect the same or a similar connection between Christ’s oblation of Himself upon the cross, and that Feast which we, following His apostles, keep now according to the command of Jesus.

God speaks to Moses, before the tenth and final plague, the death of the Egyptian firstborn, at last accomplishes the release of the people of Israel: “This day shall be to you a memorial; and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord throughout your generations. You shall keep it as a feast by an everlasting ordinance. It shall come to pass, when you come into the land which the Lord will give you, just as He promised, that you shall keep this service. And it shall be, when your children say to you, ‘What do you mean by this service?’ that you shall say, *It is the Passover sacrifice of the Lord, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when He struck the Egyptians and delivered our households.*”

Later, after forty years of wandering in the wilderness, Moses re-educates the next generation of Israelites, as they prepare to enter the promised land. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One! You shall love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. When the Lord your God brings you into the land of which He swore to your fathers, then beware, *lest you forget* the Lord who brought *you* out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. When your son asks you in time to come, saying: “What is the meaning of the testimonies, the statutes, and the judgments which the Lord our God has commanded *you*, then you shall say to your son: ‘*We* were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Lord brought *us* out of Egypt with a mighty hand; and the Lord showed signs and wonders before *our* eyes, great and severe, against Egypt, Pharaoh, and all his household.”

I have emphasized some of the pronouns in that passage for a reason. We remember that, as punishment for their resistance to and complaining against God, that most of the generation who had crossed over the Red Sea had passed away during their 40 years of wandering. Moses delivers these words to a large group of people who have no *actual* memory of the events that they are describe to their own children, saying, “*We* were slaves of Pharaoh.” Something more than normal memory, as we think of it, is going on here. If there can be any doubt of that, let’s return for a moment to the child’s question at Passover: “Why is this night different than all other nights.” According to long Jewish tradition, what the head of the household is to answer takes the form of an ancient prayer called the Avowal, which once was recited by the Hebrews when they brought tithes and sacrifices of the first-fruits of the harvest to the Temple: “A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and

the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders.”

There is memory, and then there is memory. I’m going to resist the temptation to wax philosophical about the relationship between memory and our very selves—how we could easily be understood as living receptacles of memory, whose every act proceeds out of memory, the understood past coming into constant contact with an ever-changing present, a present which is constantly being converted into memory, and all directed toward a future which we cannot even image to ourselves without recourse to memory—well, perhaps I have not resisted. What we see at work in the divine ordinance of the Passover Feast, and what we ought also to look for in this Greater Paschal mystery, the Feast of the New Israel, is a *collective* memory. It is a memory of those bound together in relationship. It is this kind of memory that makes our life *together* truly possible. The memory of Passover, and the memory of the Eucharist, is a claim to participation in a shared identity, as well as a claim to communion with God Himself.

The technical term for this kind of memory—and here the word-nerd will not restrain himself at all—is *anamnesis*. The word means “a lifting-up of or to remembrance.” We see this at work, or once did, in secular contexts. It is acts of *anamnesis* that perpetuate human families and communities. Just last week, I attended a family reunion on my mother’s side. It involved both official and unofficial acts of remembrance—presentation of photographs and genealogical research, and conversations predicated by “Remember when?” Without these common memories, a family, a community, a nation is not a reality, but a thing of syllables alone. The *anamnesis* of a people is the lifting-up of shared experience and story, and an invitation to claim it as a collective possession, whether or no we ever were, so to speak, *there when it happened*.

What the Passover accomplished in Israel was this. By the keeping of this everlasting memorial to the Lord, the people of God were invited to claim a share in the fundamental experience of God's deliverance. This was to become the very people of the Exodus. On the night of the Passover feast, the house of every Hebrew was to become a hovel in the land of Goshen, its lintels sprinkled with blood, the baggage already packed for the journey, unleavened bread hastily eaten with staff in hand. To keep it as a memory was to claim kinship with the patriarchs, with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to rejoice in the crossing of the Red Sea, and to confirm the providence of God in His gift of the Promised Land.

But it was more than this. It was not only a lifting-up of sacred memory, and an invitation for individual members of the community to establish relationship and common identity by laying claim to it. It was also an *anamnesis* to God Himself, a Feast *to* the Lord. If it does not sound too strange, the Feast is also an appeal to God's memory. I'm reminded of the language of the Anglican litany, the oldest part of our Common Prayer: "O Lord, we have heard with our ears, and our fathers have declared unto us, the noble works that thou didst in their days, and in the old time before them. O Lord, arise, help us, and deliver us for thine honor." We first claim to be God's children, and then appeal to Him as our Father. Look through the collects of the prayer book some time, especially those for the great feasts of the Church year. You will find this pattern repeated time and again: *O Lord, you have done this mighty work—therefore, we are bold to pray for this grace.* We are asking God to remember.

The perpetual memory of the Holy Eucharist functions in the same way as the Feast of Passover which it fulfills. In this act of anamnesis, we are laying claim to a seat at the table in that upper room, where Christ has washed our feet, has called us friends, and has said to each of us: "Greatly have I desired to eat this Passover with you." In this remembrance, we claim also

to stand at the foot of His cross, to hear again that dreadful: “It is finished.” Here also the Risen Lord approaches us, saying: “Peace be unto you. As the Father has sent me, so I also do I send you. Reach your finger here and look at My hands; and reach your hand here and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving but believing.”

And we lift this memory up to God. By claiming a share in these holy things, we say to God: *Behold your people, for whom your Son hath given His Body and His Blood. Remember not, Lord, our offences, nor the offences of our forefathers; neither take thou vengeance of our sins: Spare us, good Lord, spare thy people, whom thou hast redeemed with thy most precious blood.*

Does God really need “reminding?” That language may strike some of us as discordant. Of course, we should not confuse God’s remembering with our own, as if He were subject to our limitations, and the dimensions of past, present, and future. But perhaps it is better to let God speak for God, in these cases. It doesn’t take long, reading through the Bible from front to back, to find God Himself employing the language of memory. God says to Noah, “I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. It shall be, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud; and I will remember My covenant which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh. The bow shall be in the cloud, and I will look on it to remember.” Like the sign of that covenant, the Eucharist is the work of God reminding God. He has ordained it, and we offer this memorial, this sacrifice of thanksgiving, only because of His mighty acts, and through the power of His Holy Spirit.

Let us keep, then, the perpetual memory which our Lord has established in this Holy Passover, rejoicing in our fellowship with the apostles and all saints, confident in the gift of our redemption and in the promise of eternal life. The Lord be with you.

Almighty Father, whose dear Son, on the night before He suffered, did institute the Sacrament of His Body and Blood; Mercifully grant that we may thankfully receive the same in remembrance of Him, who in these holy mysteries giveth us a pledge of life eternal; the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who now liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit ever, one God, world without end. Amen.