

## Holy Food For Holy People

*by Richard Fabian*

*The Prayer Book Catechism points out (page 579)  
that our Sunday worship features a symbolic  
meal bearing many names, each with a history:  
Sacrifice, Lord's Supper, Eucharist, Mass,  
Divine Liturgy, Great Offering, Communion.*

The last name strictly denotes only part of the service, when we consume the bread and wine that symbolize Christ's body and blood. But in Jewish and Christian tradition, eating is what completes the sacrifice: so Communion is the climactic name for the whole. Like the other names, it tells a truth about Christian worship.

Common parlance today uses "sacrifice" to mean giving up something valuable to get something even more valuable, as in a baseball "sacrifice play." Our sacrificial meal stems from three Jewish sources, and Jesus would have known them all. Two belonged to the Hebrew temple. *Todah*, the oldest, was a thanksgiving meal shared with a bountiful God, and typically meant eating harvested grain or fruit, though livestock might be eaten the same way. The "sin offering," or *chattath*, was an animal sacrifice involving a further gift from God: in addition to the flesh eaten at the meal, God gave the sacrificed animal's *life* to sinners, who had lost their connection with the God of all life, and so might expect to die. At first this sacrifice was eaten only on grave occasions; but as the Hebrew people returned from exile in Babylon, convinced they had suffered on account of the their forebears' sins, they multiplied their *chattath* sacrifices to prevent sin from piling up so disastrously in the future. By Jesus' era the sin offering ritual had been added to almost every sacrificial meal just in case so that the temple had become a slaughterhouse.

Jesus' own meals with his disciples bore little relation to those temple sacrifices, except on one highly charged issue. Rabbis were expected to model at all times the sort of purity required at the temple, in hopes of drawing the nation into faithful obedience, so that God might restore Israel's political freedom. The consequent kosher purity customs that would later restrict the *foods* on a Jewish family table were still forming in Jesus' time; legislators focussed rather on the purity of the *guests*, and wrote exclusionary rules that few modern Jews would recognize or accept. By contrast, Jesus ate and drank with people everyone knew were impure. This was his chosen teaching sign, expressing the central theme of his parables: God comes to you ready or not, beyond any hope that you might prepare or control the event you must respond, and your response is critical. Jesus' table fellowship showed what it was really like to live with God. So at St. Gregory's we follow Jesus' example, welcoming everyone to communion, ready or not.

Yet his dining with the wrong sort shocked Jesus' contemporaries, and above all his other

acts and words it led to his death. Afterward his followers continued to eat together as he had taught them and there they discovered that his Spirit was still present, was still theirs to share, and indeed to spread through the world as they spread this good news. From that discovery, St. Paul deduced a central tenet of Christianity: because of Jesus' faith, God had made his death a sacrificial, holy death, a *chattath* where God gave Jesus' life to sinners. Further, the powerful spread of Jesus' Spirit among gentile converts showed that his death had become a *chattath* for the sins of the whole world.

So our Sunday service (Liturgy in Greek) rightly carries all the Hebraic titles mentioned in the Prayer Book Catechism. It is both *todah* (Thanksgiving, or Eucharist in Greek) and *chattath* (Great Offering), and it climaxes in Communion, just as those temple sacrifices and Jesus' own rabbinical meals (the Lord's Supper) always did. Later Christians wrangled plenty over how Jesus was present in our services. (Does his presence come *in* the bread and wine? *alongside* them? in the *believers* who ate them? by repeating the *words* Jesus used to bless them?) But we can leave such insoluble disputes aside if we restore the reasoning that first made his banquet the heart of Christian worship. We do not revere the bread and wine as holy things because we believe Christ is present there. Rather, because Christ's Spirit makes him present when we consume these holy things in his memory, we believe God has given us Christ's life, and we can spread this through the whole world. Of course, like any sacrificial food, the holy bread and wine convey Christ's life completely only *when we eat them*. Therefore any reverence we pay to the consecrated bread and wine must anticipate eating them, or lose Christian meaning. Nor is any further sacrifice required of anyone in the world, ever again. Even the sacrificial deaths of martyrs Christian or otherwise now only share in Christ's sufferings and universal victory.

With so many Hebraic ideas underlying our meal, it may surprise readers to learn that our ritual comes from no Hebrew source, but is a Greek pagan form at least as old as Plato. Moreover, this is true of the Jewish Passover *seder* as well. Here lies the answer to a long-standing conflict. Scholars have debated whether the Christian Eucharist derived from Passover (St. Paul says, "Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us") or instead from the rabbinical *chaburah* fellowship meals widely documented a short century later. (St. Gregory's worshippers know that word as "Feast of Friends.") But recent Jewish historians have shown that in fact both meals are the same banquet, only caught at different stages of development. This banquet is not Jewish at all: it is the Symposium, a feast known throughout the Hellenistic world as a dinner preceding formal discussion and drinking. New Testament stories of Jesus' Last Supper present us an early form of Symposium; the modern Passover *seder*, the final historical form; and the *chaburah*, a form in between before the discussion was moved into the mealtime itself and focussed on the symbolic foods served, as happens at a *seder* today.

Early Christians ate the whole dinner in normal course, until churches grew too crowded to feed everyone properly, so that only the essential elements of bread and wine could be shared at once. At St. Gregory's we re-establish the original banquet context at our Feast of Friends services, especially on Maundy Tuesday, which commemorates the Lord Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples. And indeed even on Sunday mornings, when we bring further food and drink to the same altar table where we have just shared bread and wine, so that our coffee hour continues the eucharistic feast. Moreover, when Passover falls conveniently

outside Holy Week, we often celebrate the *seder* on its proper evening as well, under a Jewish rabbi's direction, so our people can share in the whole historical tradition of this sacrificial banquet.

Knowing the Hellenistic pagan origin of both Jewish and Christian meal rituals, we can see our Sunday Eucharist in a universal light. That is how the early Christians saw it, as they celebrated the worldwide impact of Jesus' life and death, which God had made a life-giving *chattath* for all humankind. And that is how we keep the Eucharist at St. Gregory's today: a feast where God pours Jesus' living Spirit freely on the whole world. In the words Byzantine churches sing before taking communion at vespers on the fast days commemorating Christ's passion:

*“Now the powers of heaven worship with us unseen,  
for behold the King of Glory enters,  
behold the mystical sacrifice, already accomplished,  
comes escorted: let us draw near with faith and love,  
and become sharers in eternal life. Alleluia!”*

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