

HOLY THURSDAY

From time to time, we read of the way some prisoner or other escaped from his cell, some of these ways being very ingenious. The simple motivation, of course, is that everyone wants to be free, to live freely. For the ancient Israelites enslaved in Egypt, their escape to freedom began with what we heard in our first reading. Each family took a year-old lamb and, after slaughtering it, sprinkled some of its blood on the doorposts and lintels of their houses. That assured their safety, for the passage in the Book of Exodus says that the Lord's destructive blow would fall only on the houses of the Egyptians, houses that were not marked with the blood of those lambs. Our reading then ended with this sentence: "This day shall be a memorial feast for you, which all your generations shall celebrate with pilgrimage to the Lord, as a perpetual institution."

Those words describe what became the major feast in the Jewish calendar, Passover. But what was it like? We can thank the work of contemporary archeologists for giving us some of the details. An article published a few years ago in the *Journal of Archeological Science* and co-authored by a man named Gideon Hartman described animal bones found outside the walls of old Jerusalem in a massive dump that had been used for about a hundred years from the start of King Herod's reign until the great revolt against Rome in the year 66 A.D. Professor Hartman analyzed nitrogen and carbon isotopes of these bones and thereby determined that many of the animals had come from areas such as Arabia and Trans-Jordan, hundreds of miles away from Jerusalem. This gives just one more proof of what we already knew: that it was only in the temple at Jerusalem that animals could be sacrificed to the Lord, so pilgrims wishing to sacrifice often had to bring their animals a great distance to get to the holy city. This had gone on for centuries, both during the First Temple era and then, after the Babylonian Exile, during the time of the Second Temple. The Jewish religious text known as

the Talmud has passages that speak of the temple priests wading up to their knees in the blood of these animals, thousands of whom would have been slaughtered on a single day during Passover. All this suggests that the economic heart of the city was its slaughtering operation, a very gory business indeed.

Even though the Jewish people understandably regretted the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in the year 70, surely both they and we would admit that in some obvious ways the loss of the temple led to a genuine purification of their religion. No longer were priests with their sacrificial knives needed at the one place, the temple in Jerusalem. Instead, there were now rabbis teaching in synagogues far and wide, which can well be seen as a fulfillment of a famous verse in which the Lord says through the prophet Hosea: “My judgment shines forth like the light, for it is mercy I desire, not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hos. 6:5-6). These very words were taken up by Jesus himself at the end of the account of his calling of Matthew: “Go and learn the meaning of the words, ‘It is mercy I desire, not sacrifice.’ I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mt. 9:13).

All this tells us something important about our own way of worshipping the Lord. Like the Passover festival described in our first reading as “a memorial feast,” our Eucharist is likewise literally a memorial. In our second reading, St. Paul refers explicitly to Jesus’ desire that we eat the bread and drink the cup “in remembrance of [Jesus].” In some ways, this can be remarkably easy. There’s no need to travel hundreds of miles on foot while carrying a sacrificial animal, the way some ancient Israelites used to do. To come forward at Communion time to receive the consecrated host is easy, so easy that one can fall into doing it routinely and mindlessly, not really aware of what it signifies and what it asks of us. That’s why today’s Gospel is an absolutely essential complement to St. Paul’s account of that first Last Supper. In his account of Jesus’ washing the feet of his disciples, the

evangelist John is telling us in the most direct terms what is the real calling of the Eucharist: not simply to receive Holy Communion but to live it out in service to others. In John's day, and still when St. Benedict was writing his monastic Rule six centuries later, the washing of feet was not something merely ceremonial. In societies where people normally just wore sandals without socks and where paved sidewalks and asphalt streets were unknown, feet easily became dirty, dusty, and—yes—even smelly. Jesus went around the Cenacle washing the dirty feet of his disciples, just as St. Benedict twice in his Rule speaks of washing the feet of others. Probably the better-known passage is on the reception of guests, where he writes that after the guests have arrived and been invited to pray, “the abbot shall pour water on the hands of the guests, and the abbot with the entire community shall wash their feet. After this washing, they will recite this verse: ‘God, we have received your mercy in the midst of your temple.’” (RB 53.12-14). Somewhat less well known is what Benedict says about the weekly kitchen servers. He writes: “Both the one who is ending his service and the one who is about to begin are to wash the feet of everyone.” It's worth noting that since baths were seldom available in that era apart from those who were ill, this weekly washing of the monks' feet was no doubt especially appreciated.

For us, of course, the rite is more symbolic than realistic. I even expect that those who were asked to participate will have made sure in advance that they are wearing clean socks over feet that are already quite clean. But let that not be a problem. Symbols matter, and both those having their feet washed and those watching and singing the assigned music as the rite is being done should really take to heart what it tells us all: only by serving one another in whatever ways possible might we dare hope to be with the very non-sacrificial sheep on the King's right hand at the final judgment. May our celebration of the Eucharist this evening make us ever more mindful of this fundamental truth of our faith.