

## The Hymn of Our Lives

Matthew's retelling of the last supper is positively spartan. It all starts with telling the disciples to find a place to observe the Passover – the famous “Upper Room.” When the night comes Jesus warns of being betrayed, and almost immediately we stumble into the passage in today's reading. These words are the famous *words of institution* that are part of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper – our communion and the very way we practice it, is based on this promise that Jesus makes in these words.

We remember. When we break bread together and share the cup with one another, we remember the life that changes all lives.

We are fed. [People do not] live on bread alone, our Lord tells us earlier in this story. This meal is so much more than daily sustenance. It is the sign of God's very life supporting and sustaining us; the promise of a love that will not let us go coming true.

We are prepared. When we take this shared meal, when we commune and live as Beloved Community together – even in these days when it seems we are apart – our lives are being knitted together and we are being prepared; for what? We are becoming the presence of something holy for a world hurting. Just as this meal is a sign of God's loving presence in our lives, we are becoming a sign of God's loving presence in every dark corner of this world. Our lives can become healing.

So, how do we jump from *words of institution* to full transformation? Again, it goes back to the carefully selected, sparse language of Matthew's story.

Jesus tells his followers that he will not take this cup again until he sees them in his Father's kingdom. This one line is so full of meaning, layers and layers of signs

pointing to who Jesus is, the purpose of God's will and work in this world, our place in the whole thing. Here Jesus is named as the Pascal lamb of the Passover. Here Jesus is naming the result of his betrayal. Here he is pointing to a future of hope beyond suffering. The drama of both the Passion and Resurrection live in this one line, "I will not taste again the things of this world until the new kingdom has arrived."

There is another nugget playing in the background of Matthew's story that is almost always skipped over because we focus either on (1) other versions of this story, like John's; or (2) the primacy of this Passover meal becoming the communion of our tradition.

For Jesus and his disciples this is the Passover meal, and they would have celebrated in a very different way than us. The meal itself is ritual with certain songs sung in particular order, at particular moments of eating and drinking. Matthew gives just a nod, just a glimpse of this world, which would have been so well known to the church he served so long ago. You see, Matthew served a church made up of a lot of people who grew up Jewish and were struggling with being increasingly isolated from family and friends for thinking differently about their faith. The "nod" Matthew gives to the Passover is this:

*"When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives."*

"When they had sung the hymn..." Which hymn? Well, the tradition states that this is the famous Hallel hymns of Psalms 113-118 being sung in sequence as part of the ritual meal at Passover Seder and other major celebrations and religious observations. T.F. Torrance, a famous Scottish theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century once wrote an article on this exact line saying, "At the Passover season private families as it were joined in singing it (Psalm 113-118) so as to be 'in harmony' with its being sung in the Temple."

These psalms were sung in such a way that Psalm 113 and 114 would have been sung at the beginning of the meal, while 115-118 would have been sung at the very end as Matthew notes. They are important because on this night where a nation would have been recounting the faithful redemption of God. The first two (113-114) recount Israel in Egypt and their release from bondage. The final psalms (115-118) now turn and for these early believers in Jesus the praise is focused on him as the sign of God's assistance, as being the very saving presence of God for them, and the whole world – all the nations, with thanksgiving to God in Christ both personally and for all people everywhere. The tiny inclusion of the disciples singing this hymn of praise (*Hallel*) signals that the entire mystery of God's redemption of the people and all creation is wrapped up in this one man.

In essence, Matthew wanted his first readers and listeners to get something profound about the Last Supper, and he said it with as few words as possible. Jesus gets his followers to prepare for Passover. They sit to eat and he says that he has been betrayed – Jesus has been named the Pascal Lamb. He then recontextualizes the entire meal to say, whenever you sit and have this Passover meal, now think of me. He goes on to say that he will not again partake of the basic things of this world until God's kingdom is established, he will soon be sacrificed, but it is not the end. The final cup of the Passover meal is drained and Jesus and his followers sing the final hymns of the Hallel, Psalms 115-118. It is then that they leave to go to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus will be arrested.

The Last Supper, with its establishment of communion for the followers of Jesus Christ, is a reliving, re-remembering and embodying of Christ's presence in this world. In this shared meal we remember, we are fed, we are prepared. In this

meal our very lives join this ancient hymn giving thanks for God's redeeming love. As we now turn to eat dinner in our own homes, we remember that even in the simplest moments of sharing and breaking bread we can experience and relive this grace.