

**O COME, LET US WORSHIP XIX:
“O LAMB OF GOD”**

There is a wonderful convergence this year between the Jewish and the Christian liturgical cycles, so that Passover falls on Maundy Thursday, or, more accurately, so that Maundy Thursday falls on Passover. The two always occur at the same time of year, of course, but given the way the Church determines the date of Easter and the Holy Days related to it, it is rather infrequently that the celebrations occur on the exact schedule that they do this year. This is a wonderful convergence, as I said, because this is exactly the way the calendar fell out in that very first Holy Week. When on Palm Sunday our Lord rode into Jerusalem humble and sitting upon an ass amidst cries of “Hosanna in the highest,” he and his disciples were coming to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, and as far as the disciples knew, that was the only reason they had come. When they gathered in the Upper Room the following Thursday evening it was to partake of the Passover meal in the room they had been instructed to prepare for the Passover. Thus, an understanding of the Passover is critical for our understanding of that Last Supper, of the institution of the Holy Eucharist that followed, and of the crucifixion that occurred that very same day by Jewish reckoning, the day lasting from sunset to sunset.

Those of you who follow the daily reading from the Prayer Book lectionary know that the Old Testament readings for Morning Prayer recently finished with the Book of Genesis and began the Book of Exodus, and you have already seen those readings begin to converge with the celebration of the Passover and of the Passion. The readings for Friday and Saturday of this past week were about the slaying of the Passover lambs and the anointing of the doorposts of the Jewish homes with their blood so that the angel of death would passover them. It is interesting that in this passage the lamb itself is called ‘the Passover’ (Ex. 12:21). In this chapter the people are instructed to keep this feast in perpetuity on the 14th day of the month, the Jewish month of Nisan (12:6), and to explain to their children when they ask its meaning, “It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when he smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses” (12:27). It is this Passover festival that is clearly

brought into focus when our Lord sat down with the twelve. His first words to them according to the Gospel of Luke were: “With desire have I desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer, for I say unto you, I will not any more eat thereof, until it be fulfilled in the kingdom of God” (Lk. 22:15-16). Thus did he quite pointedly bring the meaning of the passover and the meaning of his death into the very closest connection. At the beginning of the meal Jesus took the bread and broke it, speaking the words we have repeated ever since. Then after supper he took the cup and did the same. It is interesting that Luke passes over the meal itself with the barest mention because now the lamb is our Lord whose slaying is depicted in his words and actions with the bread and with the wine.

There is also a convergence, so we intended, between these events and the study we are making of the Mass. We spoke last week of the fracture, the breaking of the host, of Christ’s body, over the chalice. The unleavened flat bread they used in Jesus’ day would have cracked, signaling audibly the breaking of his body. The liturgy then proceeds almost immediately with the moving anthem in which we address him whose body was just broken, “O Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.” Traditionally this line would be sung repeatedly for as long as it took the priest to break all of the bread for the congregation. We are not that many in number, but it is during the *Agnus Dei* that the large host is broken into small pieces for distribution. We hymn the Lamb of God as his body is broken into the particles of which we will partake. He is the true Passover Lamb of which all others were but a foreshadowing. He is slain so that by refuge in his blood all the world may be passed over and know the deliverance of God. Only when we understand Christ’s presence in the sacrament in this way, can we glimpse the true devotion that wrote such great anthems of the Church as the *Ave verum corpus* or the *O Salutaris hostia*.

“O Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world.” Thus far the liturgy of the Mass has drawn upon the angels’ song to the shepherds for the *Gloria in Excelsis*, upon the hymn of angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim for the *Sanctus*, “Holy, holy, holy,” and upon the praises of the children on Palm Sunday for the *Benedictus*, “Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.” Now, of course, the words are borrowed from the Forerunner, John the Baptist, for the *Agnus Dei*,

“O Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.” Dom Prosper Gueranger observes, “Thus it is that Holy Church is want to seek everywhere the most lovely things in order to blend them together in one beautiful whole in the great action of the Holy Sacrifice.”

We noted last week that the Fracture is followed by the salutation, “The peace of the Lord be alway with you.” It is in his cross that we find peace. It is this that we echo in the closing line of the *Agnus*, “O Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world, grant us thy peace.” The priest prays then silently that this peace might rest upon Christ’s whole Church, “O Lord, Jesus Christ, who saidst to thine apostles, Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you; regard not my sins, but the faith of thy Church; and grant to it that peace and unity which is according to thy will, who livest and reignest God, world without end. Amen.” On this day when there rings in our ears the cries of both “Hosanna in the highest” and “Crucify him,” let us pray that the true and only peace of which the crucified Lord spoke to disciples after he rose from the dead may fill our hearts and all his whole Church, who lives and reigns with God the Father in the unity of the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.”

Sermon preached by the Rev’d Fr. Voris G. Brookshire on Palm Sunday, April 5, 2009, at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL. Copyright © 2009.