

# The Passion of Lent: The Last Supper

## by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

### Prayer of Illumination

Send your Spirit among us, O God,  
as we meditate on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.  
Prepare our minds to hear your Word.  
Move our hearts to accept what we hear.  
Purify our will to obey in joy and faith.  
This we pray through Christ, our Savior.  
Amen.

### Background

The Jewish Passover remembered two things:

- The Hebrews' deliverance from slavery in Egypt, and
- The hope of a coming Messiah who would gather Israel into one nation again.

Jesus was doing something radical with the Last Supper in the Upper Room—he was comparing himself to the Passover lamb that would be sacrificed. And he was letting his disciples know that just as God delivered Israel from Pharaoh, so would Jesus deliver the world from their bondage to sin by his death on the cross. He was the Messiah the Jewish people had been waiting for.

*So let's hear now Mark's account of the Last Supper:*

### Scripture: Mark 14:12-25 (NRSV)

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, "Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?" So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there."

So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

When it was evening, he came with the twelve. And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me." They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, "Surely, not I?" He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. For the Son

of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.”

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

## SERMON – The Last Supper

Tintoretto’s 1594 painting of the Last Supper is bustling with activity and loaded with characters:

Angels swooping in, Jesus’ with a large halo. Eleven of the disciples have more understated halos. The halo-less Judas hunches behind Jesus, set apart from the other disciples. Things aren’t symmetrical—notice how the table runs at an angle.

There are more people than just Jesus and the Twelve in the Upper Room: Some serve the disciples, others are busy doing their own tasks, another longs for a place at the table with Jesus and the disciples. A servant appears to be distracting one of the disciples from hearing Jesus’ words. A cat pokes her nose into a basket of dishes. I think all of us can relate to one of the characters. And maybe at different times in our lives we might feel different in our relationship with Christ:

*Aglow or glowering  
Connected or cordoned off  
Distracted or distracting  
Attentive or apathetic*

Yet by God’s grace, all are in the picture. Jesus gives even Judas the Betrayer and Peter the Denier a place at the Lord’s Table in that Upper Room.

It’s a good reminder that we can only come to the table by God’s grace—no matter who we are.

Our gospel reading about the Last Supper has three movements that I’d like us to look at this morning:

*Preparation, Confrontation, and Institution.*

...

First, **Preparation**.

Earlier in this chapter, we've been given some behind the scenes information: preparations are being made against Jesus. The religious leaders and Judas have already begun conspiring to destroy Jesus. But Jesus is not in the dark. He too is making preparations. He knows what the Hebrew Scriptures testify over and over about prophets who boldly speak the Word of God—suffering and death.

Mark's gospel is known for highlighting the disciples' blunders and failures more than any other gospel. *But not in this first scene.*

Here the disciples take the initiative with a valid request—asking Jesus for directions about Passover preparations. They not only listen, they have great follow-through. Jesus sends out two of them and they trust and obey Jesus's strange and elaborate directions; they find everything just as Jesus told them, and they successfully prepare the meal.

The disciples followed the Boy Scout motto to a tee: *Be prepared.*

But we also see the divine wisdom of Jesus at work here, preparing the way for his divinely appointed task. Jesus' rather unusual directions reveal something important about him:

- *He sees the future.*
- *Everything turns out just like he said.*
- *All is going according to God's plan.*

We can trust Jesus' authority, prophetic knowledge, and guidance in our lives.

There's a great prayer that highlights this in our *Book of Common Worship*:

*Eternal God, you call us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us the faith to go out in courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

The second movement in our reading: **Confrontation**.

It's no accident that Mark sets the stage by saying it was evening. There is a darkness at work. The scene has a much different feel than the previous scene—vulnerability is in the air.

*"Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." (Mark 14:18)*

Another translation says, "Verily, verily, I say unto you." Literally, the Greek word is "Amen I say to you."

Whenever Jesus, who is the Truth, says "truly I say to you," our ears better perk up. We've got to remember God's words to Him from last week, at the Mount of Transfiguration:

*LISTEN TO HIM! (Matthew 17:5)*

*"Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me ..." (Mark 14:18)*

This is a teaching moment, literally a "come to Jesus" moment. It's a time to pay attention, to do some soul searching. The disciples should have responded, *"Is it I, Lord?"* Instead they put a positive spin on it: *"Surely, not I Lord?"* expecting Jesus' reassurance: *Of course it's not you!*

It's all too easy to brush over or sluff off the important challenges of Jesus in our lives. But the truth is, we can't fast forward the crucifixion ... to get to the resurrection.

The only way you can exit the empty tomb, is first to enter through the cross. Instead of defending or denying the painful truth—Christ calls us to discern what he's saying:

*"... one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me." (Mark 14:18)*

It's ironic: eating together usually signals friendship. But here eating together signals betrayal. Trust is about to be breached. And so it's a good reminder for us: there are forces within and forces without that would have us trade our loyalties to Christ for personal gain. None of us are too good for that. So watch and pray—resist the lure of the siren call to take spiritual short-cuts individually, as citizens, and as a church. Stay faithful to Christ. Our ultimate allegiance is pledged to him.

When we play the part of Judas—we hurt not only those we betray—we *hurt ourselves*. We lose friends and loved ones, lose our mission, lose our way. We subject ourselves to shame, guilt, and self-loathing. But there is good news in the midst of all this:

*Jesus understands.*

*If you've been betrayed*—Jesus can sympathize; he literally bears the scars of betrayal. He gets what you've been through.

*If you've been the betrayer*—Jesus forgives. As one public bathroom graffiti message put it: JUDAS COME HOME—ALL IS FORGIVEN!

The power of the gospel is this: The death-defying grace of Jesus is stronger than the reality of human wickedness.

And so this leads us to our third movement: ***Institution***.

The simple words of Christ in Mark are powerful:

*Take; this is my body.*

*This is my blood of the covenant—poured out for many.*

Whenever Jesus touches food in the Bible, we see the same beautiful pattern:

Take → Bless → Break → Give

This happens in his miracles and meals.

Take → Bless → Break → Give

Jesus doesn't keep it for himself—he gives and feeds others. This is the pattern we should take in our interactions with food and people: Take → Bless → Break → Give

These words and symbolic actions of Christ take us back to the Prophet Jeremiah:

*The days are surely coming says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with [my people]. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt—a covenant they broke, though I was their husband.*

*But this is the covenant that I will make with [them ...]:*

*I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they will be my people. (Jeremiah 31:31-33)*

The history of us human beings from the very beginning is a sad story of betrayal—breaking faith with God and one another:

- The serpent betraying Adam and Eve.
- Adam and Eve betraying God.
- Cain betraying Abel.
- Jacob betraying Esau.
- Joseph's brothers betraying him.
- David betraying Uriah.
- Absalom betraying David.
- All of us betraying Christ.

*And this is why Christ came!* God in Christ came to earth to:

- forgive humanity
- restore the covenant
- and counteract our betrayals that have wrecked humanity.

Each time we eat the bread and drink the cup, we look to the crucified and risen Christ to do for us what we can't do for ourselves: to break the cycle of unfaithfulness, and to heal our disloyalty, so that we might be reconciled—to God and to one another.

Immanuel, we all can come to the Table. Not because we're worthy, but because we all need Jesus. We trust in the forgiveness we receive from Christ's sacrifice for us.

Christ's death brought the kingdom of God to us—and we look forward to the day, when the kingdom will come in all its fullness—and we'll celebrate at Christ's banquet together for all eternity.

*But that time has not come yet.*

After Jesus and the disciples finished the Last Supper in the Upper Room—they all sang a hymn from the Psalms, and then made their way to the Mount of Olives.

**Amen.**

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