

Talk 1: The Upper Room

The Lord's Gift

First letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians
Ch. 11, verses 18-27. (AD 56 or 57)

18 First of all, I hear that when you meet as a church there are divisions among you, and to a degree I believe it; 19 there have to be factions among you in order that (also) those who are approved among you may become known. 20 When you meet in one place, then, it is not to eat the Lord's supper, 21 for in eating, each one goes ahead with his own supper, and one goes hungry while another gets drunk. 22 Do you not have houses in which you can eat and drink? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and make those who have nothing feel ashamed? What can I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this matter I do not praise you.

23 For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, 24 and, after he had given thanks (Greek: εὐχαριστήσας; eucharistesas), broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. 27 Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord.

St. Mark Ch. 14, verses 22-25. (c. AD 70)

22 While they were eating, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, and said, "Take it; this is my body." 23 Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, and they all drank from it. 24 He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many. 25 Amen, I say to you, I shall not drink again

the fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

St. Matthew Ch. 26, verse 26-29. (c. AD 80)

26 While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, "Take and eat; this is my body."

27 Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you, 28 for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins. 29 I tell you, from now on I shall not drink this fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it with you new in the kingdom of my Father."

St. Luke Ch. 22, verses 14-20. (AD 80-90)

14 When the hour came, he took his place at table with the apostles. 15 He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, 16 for, I tell you, I shall not eat it (again) until there is fulfillment in the kingdom of God."

17 Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and said, "Take this and share it among yourselves; 18 for I tell you (that) from this time on I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."

19 Then he took the bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me."

20 And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you."

St. John Chapters 13-17. (AD 90-100)

John describes a supper before the Passover, clearly identified as being on the Thursday night, where Jesus washes the disciples' feet and talks to them at length but there is no description of the Eucharist, although the theology of the Eucharist is described fully in the discourse on the bread of life in Ch. 6

Synagogue and Temple Worship

Most of the early Christians were Jews, so they continued to go to the synagogue, just as Jesus himself had.

St. Luke Ch. 4, verses 16-20.

16 He came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the Sabbath day. He stood up to read 17 and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written:

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, 19 and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord." 20 Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him.

The early part of the Acts of the Apostles describes the first Christians who lived in Jerusalem. They went to the Temple to pray (although this stopped when the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70) but they also "broke bread" - perhaps a reference to the Eucharist.

Acts Ch. 2, verses 42 and 46-47.

42 They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers...46 Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, 47 praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. **Acts Ch. 3, verse 1.** Now Peter and John were going up to the temple area for the three o'clock hour of prayer.

Later in the Acts of the Apostles we see Paul (not a disciple of Jesus but individually converted from Judaism) going to the synagogues outside Palestine to meet Jews and try to convert them. Synagogue worship consisted of readings from scripture, psalms and prayers.

Acts Ch. 18, verses 1-4 and verse 19.

1 After this he left Athens and went to Corinth. 2 There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. He went to visit them 3 and, because he practiced the same trade, stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. 4 Every Sabbath, he entered into discussions in the synagogue, attempting to convince both Jews and Greeks.

.... 19 When they reached Ephesus, he left them there, while he entered the synagogue and held discussions with the Jews.

The Jews became increasingly annoyed and eventually, in AD 90, Christians were excluded from their worship (see **John 9, 22; 12, 42 and 16, 1** for reference to the exclusion). Synagogue worship was on the Sabbath (Saturday) but Christians would also meet on the first day of the week (Sunday) because it was the day of resurrection. This was the day of the Eucharist as we see in **Acts Ch. 20, verses 7 -11:**

7 On the first day of the week when we gathered to break bread, Paul spoke to them because he was going to leave on the next day, and he kept on speaking until midnight (*as a result a young man got sleepy and fell out of a window - Paul healed him*).... 11 Then he returned upstairs, broke the bread, and ate; after a long conversation that lasted until daybreak, he departed.

The Eucharist in the Early Christian Mind

The few references to the breaking of bread in the letters and the Acts of the Apostles indicate that Christians continued to do as Jesus had asked at the last supper. In addition there is indirect evidence of familiarity with the events of the last supper: when Jesus is described as blessing food in completely different settings the language of the Eucharist comes through.

For example when Jesus miraculously feeds the crowds:

Mark Ch. 6, verse 41.

41 Then, **taking** the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he **said the blessing**, **broke** the loaves, and **gave** them to (his) disciples to set before the people; he also divided the two fish among them all

Mark Ch. 8, verse 6.

6 He ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground. Then, **taking** the seven loaves he **gave thanks**, **broke** them, and **gave** them to his disciples to distribute, and they distributed them to the crowd.

Or after the resurrection when Jesus meets two disciples on the road to Emmaus:

Luke Ch. 24, verses 28-31.

28 As they approached the village to which they were going, he gave the impression that he was going on farther. 29 But they urged him, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. 30 And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he **took** bread, **said the blessing**, **broke** it, and **gave** it to them. 31 With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight.

The Final Composition of the Eucharist

By the end of the apostolic age (i.e. around AD 100) the shape of the Eucharist had been established. It combined the inherited and the new: the practice of the synagogue with which former Jews were familiar (and from which they were now excluded) and the four actions which Jesus had asked them to do in remembrance of him and which replaced the Temple sacrifices.

Part 1 (inherited from the synagogue pattern): for us The Liturgy of the Word

Readings from Scripture: these were originally just from the Jewish scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. Gradually stories of Jesus would have been added and readings from letters of Saint Paul or other apostles.

Psalms: these were used as the sung part of worship, as they were by the Jews. Gradually Christian hymns (e.g. **Philippians Ch. 2, verses 6-11**) or canticles would have been added.

Prayers: prayers of praise, confession, thanksgiving and intercession were common.

Part 2 (given by Jesus to replace the worship of the Temple): for us The Liturgy of the Eucharist

Taking: bringing bread and wine to the altar

Blessing: the Jewish way of blessing something was to give thanks to God for it. We still call the central prayer of the Eucharist the Prayer of Thanksgiving.

Breaking: this was purely functional, a way of dividing the loaf of bread for sharing. However, it took on additional meaning from the memory of the body of Jesus broken in sacrifice.

Giving: the elders, as successors of the apostles, gave the blessed bread to the people.

Summary

1. The first Christians continued to worship in the Jewish way, just as Jesus had, regularly attending the Temple if they were in Jerusalem, going to synagogue if they were elsewhere on the Sabbath day, Saturday, and saying the common Jewish prayers at home. In effect, they were a sect within Judaism (so there was debate about what to do with Gentile converts).

2. In addition they were obedient to the Lord's command "Do this in memory of me" and met for the Eucharist, called "the breaking of bread", on the Lord's day, Sunday. As with the Last Supper this was originally in the context of a meal but this was soon found to be impracticable.

3. Eventually the Temple was destroyed (AD 70) and Christians were excluded from synagogues (from 85 AD but later in some places, depending on the percentage of Gentiles in the local Christian community). The link with Judaism became weaker - as did respect for the Sabbath.

4. Christians brought together synagogue worship (The Liturgy of the Word) and the pattern of the Last Supper - the taking, blessing, breaking and giving of bread and wine - (The Liturgy of the Eucharist) on the first day of the week, the day of resurrection. Thus by the end of the first century (the end of the apostolic age) we have the basic shape of Christian worship that we Catholics are still following in the twenty-first century.