

Sermon Notes for Easter

Christ our passover is sacrificed for us (canticle at Morning Prayer)

This is one of the years in which the Jewish passover more or less coincides with the Western Christian Easter (the Eastern Church has a rule that this must not happen). So it is perhaps more than usually appropriate to understand Paul's point.

Passover was not originally a sacrifice. It is more closely related to the rules of redemption in Exodus 13. A first-born male animal should be killed as the property of the Lord, but may be "redeemed". A first-born male child must be redeemed. And Israel was redeemed at the Exodus, when God made good his claim against the Egyptians in the last of the plagues. This "redemption" does not seem to be a sacrifice and does not involve either priests or levites. Nor do the oldest texts about Passover. However, as part of the centralisation of sacrifices in the last years of the Judean monarchy, passover became assimilated; the pascal lamb had to be killed by levites in the temple (and so Passover could only be fully celebrated in Jerusalem). Pedantic scholarship has calculated how many lambs could be killed in the time available and so how many households could keep the feast. Like much ancient ritual, it is not to our squeamish taste. Perhaps Paul had taken part in the full Passover ritual; perhaps he had even witnessed the killing of the lambs. But for his readers this was not an experience but something they only knew from scripture – ideas more than actions.

Crucifixion was of course not a sacrifice. Anything remotely like it polluted the land, and so there was an accepted obligation to get the bodies buried before sunset. Rome was tactful enough (in Judaea) to allow this. The rabbis in later theorising about the death penalty under Jewish law tried to make it into a religious event; but crucifixion is a peculiarly Roman (and secular) act.

Unlike the passover lambs, Jesus is a conscious and willing victim. He is taking charge of the crucifixion and making it into a religious event. This is not to say that he is persuading the Father to change his mind, or that the Father has to be bought off by somebody paying him a price. The new Testament always assumes that there is one purpose common to Father, Son and Spirit. And that purpose is our redemption. We were under the domination of the powers (which includes our fallen nature but much more besides) and corresponds to slavery in Egypt. But now we are brought out - a new and greater Exodus. Not that there is an immediate and total escape. "Our citizenship is in heaven", but that does not protect us from many (and increasingly evil) demands of our militant secular society.

Passover leads immediately into the week-long feast of unleavened bread. A new beginning, a life without the old pollution (of malice and wickedness). But of course neither Israel nor we can sustain this. The Church has tried to make something of Easter week, and even something of the whole fifty days up to Whitsun, but there is never as much enthusiasm for this as there is (however misguided) for Lenten observances. I will not try to rouse your enthusiasm for Easter observances; I cannot rouse my own.

We know (or think we know) how badly damaged goods we are in God's sight. So, though we try to be faithful, it is hard to rejoice. But the Holy Trinity knew our sinfulness when He determined the "scheme of our salvation". We are not saved, Christ did not die for us, because we deserved it. The apocryphal Acts of Pilate are quite right to make the first person to enter Paradise the penitent thief! "Christ our passover is sacrificed for us", and we are among those he died to redeem. To deny the status he has obtained for us is to deny him. So we have to keep the feast. It is not always easy to sing the hymns of triumph, but we should do so as members of the Church, the redeemed body. There was plenty wrong with the Corinthians, but Paul does not turn them away or even forbid them to rejoice at what Christ has done for them. At the least, we can give thanks even if we do not feel them; if we cannot rejoice, we should hope. From Newton (How sweet the name):

Weak is the effort of my heart
And cold my purest thought
But when I see thee as thou art
I'll praise thee as I ought.