

THE EUCHARIST

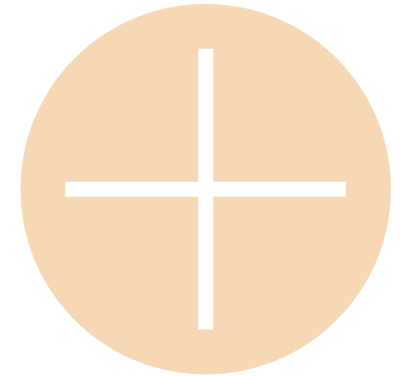
Jews continued to offer a lamb as a thanksgiving sacrifice each Passover. They remembered God’s mercy in the past. But their annual act of worship and celebration also renewed the relationship God had made with them then, releasing fresh mercies. What God had done in the past became dynamically present for them.

Jesus took the bread and cup at the table that night to institute a new form of the Passover. He took the bread and explained that now it would be his body to be given for them. The cup of wine would become his blood, poured out for them to secure a new and eternal covenant with God. He commanded that his disciples bless the bread and cup “in remembrance of me,” so that his great saving act would also become present for them. They would offer bread and wine, but these gifts would be united to his perfect sacrifice, present before God in heaven. This transformed meal would impart the “innumerable benefits” that his death and resurrection would bring: forgiveness, renewal in the Holy Spirit, strengthening grace, everlasting life.

But Jesus’ direct language spoke of more than a relationship with his deeds; as he said, “This is my body” and “This is my blood” (Luke 22:19-20). The banquet of a thanksgiving sacrifice deepened the bond between God and his people, establishing a form of Communion. Jesus promised still more: his very presence, intimately with his people, his body and blood hidden yet truly present in their food and drink. In this meal, he binds together all his people with himself and with one another. They become one body together, nourished in common by his life (1 Cor. 10:16-17).

The Eucharist is then also a foretaste of the eternal life in communion that Jesus promises to all who believe in him. In the world to come, we will see him face to face. Those saved out of all nations, speakers of every race and language, will gather around his table. We will feast in a joyful banquet that celebrates his great victory over sin and death, and seals his eternal love for us (Rev. 19:6ff).

The Eucharist is our sacrifice, “the pure offering” raised up from East to West (Mal. 1:11) in praise of God’s greatest act of mercy, the death and resurrection of his only Son. It is the heart of the Church’s worship, and a foretaste of joy to come.



THE LIVING CHURCH

We are a Christian ministry based primarily in the Episcopal Church, a member of the Anglican Communion. Since 1878 we have published educational resources of various kinds and *The Living Church* magazine.

To know God is to desire to praise him, to give back from what he has so graciously given to us. This deep impulse lies at the heart of all authentic religion, inspiring countless acts of heroic service and a vast array of beautiful buildings and works of art. We would adore God, return his love with something of our own, praise him by making a worthy offering. We long to sacrifice.

God also delights in sacrifice. He welcomes the offerings of his people, the expressions of their love and commitment. Sacrifice was at the heart of the great acts by which he created the people of Israel (e.g., Gen. 9:20, 15:9ff). The bond between God and Israel was sealed by sacrifice, and the law contained instructions for a variety of offerings (Ex. 24).

The thank offering was among these, a sacrifice made to God in response to a particular mercy. The offering was presented at the altar but then handed back to the giver, to be consumed in a special banquet (Lev. 7:12-15, 22:29-30). God and the giver were at peace, the ceremony declared, bound closely by a shared meal.

Sacrifice could be grand and beautiful, but even when made according to God's law, it remained incomplete. The prophets often criticized Israel's perfunctory and shoddy sacrifices (Amos 5:21, Mal. 1:6ff). But the problem lay still deeper. No object is precious enough to honor God fully. No words can truly describe his goodness. No deeds are completely free from pride and selfishness. We would offer sacrifice, a pure giving of thanks, but our hands are unclean. Our sacrifices fall short, incapable of securing lasting peace with God (Heb. 10:18ff).

But someone has made a perfect sacrifice, in a single human life oriented fully to God's purpose. The Son of God, Jesus, alone worshipped God "in Spirit and in truth" (John 4:23), and he brought the offering of his life to completion when he gave it back to God in thanksgiving and devotion on the cross. Raised anew on the third day,

God the Father proclaimed that Jesus was found worthy. His sacrifice reconciled God and humanity, releasing the power of renewing grace into the world. Through his offering, we have true peace. Forty days later, Jesus ascended into heaven so that he might stand before the Father's throne, presenting his eternal sacrifice as our great high priest.

The night before Jesus made his offering complete, he set apart his apostles to make sacrifice. At his Last Supper, Jesus instituted the Holy Eucharist, the Church's new sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. He commanded the apostles to take bread and wine, and to offer them in his remembrance (Luke 22:19). To use the language of St. Augustine and the catechisms of the Anglican tradition, it would be "a visible sign of an invisible grace." A 16th-century Anglican homily elaborates what this means:

[I]n the supper of the Lord there is no vain ceremony, no bare sign, no untrue figure of a thing absent, but as the Scripture says: "The table of the Lord, the bread and cup of the Lord, the memory of Christ, the annunciation of his death," yea, "the communion of the body and blood of the Lord" in a marvelous incorporation, which ... is through faith wrought in the souls of the faithful, whereby not only their souls live to eternal life, but they surely trust to

win to their bodies a resurrection to immortality. ("An Homily of the Worthy Receiving and Reverent Esteeming of the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ," *The Second Book of Homilies*)

The apostles would receive the bread and wine, as Christ's body and blood, to be shared with all his people. This precious gift would bind them more closely to him and fill them with the new life he had secured by his death and resurrection. "Thus we come to carry Christ in us, because his body and blood are diffused through our members; thus it is that, according to the blessed Peter, 'we become partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1:4)" (St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis IV*).

When Jesus commanded his apostles to "do this in remembrance of me," he was using language closely connected with the Passover, Israel's annual festival that celebrated God's liberation of their ancestors. For the first Passover, God had instructed the Israelites to offer a lamb in sacrifice and to spread his blood on their doorposts. When the angel of death moved through Egypt that night, he spared the homes marked with the blood. The Israelites ate the lamb that night, in a solemn meal that celebrated God's salvation from death and slavery (see Ex. 12:1-28).

