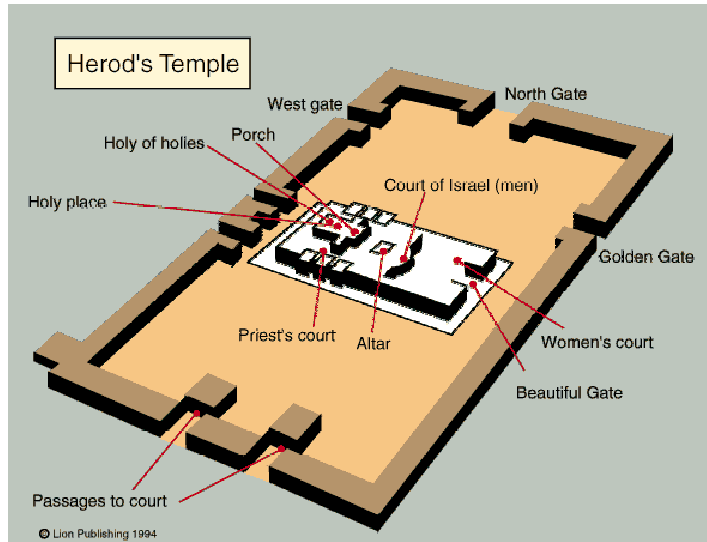


# THE LAST WEEK

A third of St Mark's Gospel goes into this one week of Jesus' life. It is the final drama. After entering Jerusalem in triumph Jesus goes to the Temple, the scene for much of what is to happen in the week ahead.



## How was Herod's Temple laid out?

The Temple was a kind of 'holy onion', getting 'more sacred' as you went in.

- The 'outer layer' – the Court of the Gentiles – tolerated the presence of foreigners (Gentiles). It was here that Jesus overturned the stalls of the corrupt moneychangers and traders (cf. Mk 11:15-19).
- Each inner layer is raised five steps. The Court of Women allows the presence of Jewish women; the Court of Israel Jewish men.
- Another five steps would take you up to the court of Priests and to the Sanctuary of God. Here was the altar on which the Priests offered sacrifices.
- Separated off by a curtain or veil of precious material was a small, empty, dark cubicle perhaps 9 metres high. Here was the Holy of Holies or the Most Holy Place. Here was the symbolic dwelling of God.

## The Cleansing of the Temple 11:15-19

***He upset the tables of the moneychangers and the chairs of those selling pigeons. (11:15)***

It was believed that a duty of the Messiah would be to purify the Temple. Jesus clears the Court of the Gentiles of moneychangers and traders in sacrificial animals. He also prevented people using a route across the grounds as a short cut. He harms no one, but sends a powerful challenge to the Sadducees, who control the Temple.

Jesus quotes Isaiah: *'my house will be a house of prayer for all the nations'*. This means that it is a holy place meant even for gentiles, and so the trading and profiteering going on in the Court of the Gentiles was an offence.

It is very likely that negative reports about Jesus had reached Jerusalem (Jerusalem scribes had travelled up to Galilee and accused him of being in league with Satan). In cleansing the Temple, Jesus has made powerful enemies – the chief priests - more determined to 'do away with him'.

## Chief priests question Jesus' authority 11:27-33

***'What authority have you for acting like this?' (11:28)***

The chief priests find their 'Temple-wrecker' back in the Temple grounds. They fire questions at Jesus, hoping to trap him. Their plan: to get Jesus to answer the question one way or



another. If he answers, 'from God' – blasphemy. If he answers 'on my own authority' – he's a dangerous lunatic. Either way, they can have him arrested and 'done away with' – as was their plan.

As usual, Jesus is one step ahead. He throws a question back at them: 'John's baptism: did it come from heaven or from man?' After getting into a huddle, his enemies decide it's too dangerous to answer. If they say, 'From heaven', Jesus can ask why they rejected John's message. If they say, 'From man', they will antagonise the people, who believed that John was a true prophet of God. They won't answer Jesus, so Jesus won't answer them. Jesus then goes on to tell the *Parable of the Tenants of the Vineyard* - a Parable that points a severe finger at the religious leaders.

### Question on paying taxes 12:13-17

**'Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar – and to God what belongs to God.'** (12:17)

Determined to nail Jesus, the religious leaders send another group (Pharisees and Herod's followers) to question Jesus. They flatter him lavishly before delivering the killer question: should Jews pay taxes to Caesar – the Emperor? The tactic is the same as with the previous question: either yes or no, and Jesus is finished. A 'yes' answer would completely discredit him with the people. A 'no' answer is treason to the Empire.

Jesus' masterly answer above avoids both pitfalls. What does it mean? The coin (a denarius) had Caesar's image on it – so give it him back. The person, in God's image, should be devoted to God.

This passage would have been of great interest to the Christians of Rome.

### The question about resurrection 12:18.27

**'For when the dead rise to life, they will be like the angels in heaven and will not marry.'** (12:24)

Having dealt superbly with all the dangerous questions thrown at him, Jesus is faced with yet another twisted question. This time it's the turn of the Sadducees – a group with very clear beliefs (see beside).

They ask him a question -a long, convoluted question -about marriage. Jewish law said a man must marry his dead brother's widow - if she had no children. The Sadducees spin this out to make a 'widow-bride for seven brothers'. In this so-called resurrection of the dead, whose wife would she be?

Jesus deals with them in masterly fashion. Marriage is meant for this earth; the resurrected ones are like angels in heaven. Sadducees didn't believe angels existed. Jesus then quotes from the Torah - the only accepted source of authority for the Sadducees - to show how the resurrection of the dead is already implied.

God does not say, 'I was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ..' rather, 'I *am* the God of Abraham ...' implying that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are 'alive in God'. His answer impresses the watching scribe who goes on to ask him about the greatest of all the commandments.

#### What did the Sadducees believe?

It might be easier to answer the question: 'What didn't they believe?' Unlike the Pharisees, they didn't accept the 'oral tradition of the elders' and later Jewish teachings about angels, demons, resurrection from the dead, the Messiah, and so on.

So what did they believe? Their only rule of religious, moral and social life was the Law of Moses as found in the first five books of the Old Testament (called the Torah or the Pentateuch). They took the Commandments of Moses literally.

## LAST SUPPER 14:12-25

Sharing a meal has great power in traditional cultures. It signifies close bonds of kinship and friendship – the word ‘companion’ stems from ‘one I share bread with’. The Passover meal that the Jews celebrate to this day brings to life the great way God liberated the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

The first Passover was eaten in haste as the Israelites prepared for their journey to the Promised Land. The blood of the slaughtered lamb protected them from the Angel of the Passover who was sent to destroy the first-born in the land. So the Passover meal contains the idea of a *saving sacrifice* as well as the cementing of relationships.



**Jesus took a piece of bread, gave a prayer of thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. ‘Take it ... this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, gave thanks to God, and handed it to them ... Jesus said, ‘This is my blood which is poured out for many ...’ (14:22-5)**

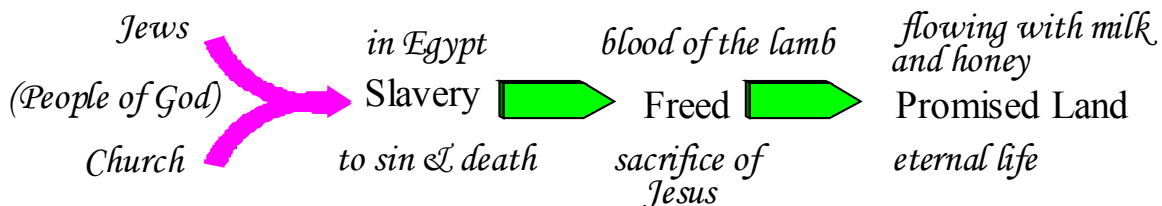


All the Passover food had symbolic meanings to remember the events that secured the liberation from slavery in Egypt. Jesus changed the meaning of the bread and wine. Mysteriously, he presented his self-offering, the broken body, the blood pouring out, through the bread and wine. This was to mark new relations with God, a new covenant.

### For Christians today: Eucharist/Mass/Holy Communion/Lord’s Supper

Like the ways the Jews recall the events that secured their freedom from slavery in Egypt, the Last Supper demonstrated in symbolic action the sacrifice that Jesus made for people. He gave up his body to death in order to obtain freedom from sin. Christians enact the events of the Last Supper as a way of making present the risen Lord.

**A full understanding of the Eucharist is impossible without referring to the Passover story.**



The worship of most Christians includes a sacred meal that recalls the events of the Last Supper. There are several different names used for this meal. ‘Eucharist’ comes from the Greek for ‘give thanks’. ‘Mass’ is the term used most often to refer to the Catholic service. The Church of England often uses ‘Holy Communion’. This term focuses on the community nature of the service.

Catholics believe that as the priest repeats the words of the Last Supper the risen Lord is made really present through the power of the Holy Spirit. Mysteriously, what was bread becomes Christ’s Body; what was wine becomes his blood. This is the Doctrine of **Transubstantiation**.



In the Eucharistic celebrations of many other Christians the bread and wine are viewed as symbols of the Jesus’ self-offering.

## Activities

1 Write four sentences about the Temple based on the next four questions.

Where in the Temple did traders set their stalls?

- A Court of Israel
- B Court of the Priests
- C Court of the Gentiles

Ordinary Jewish men were allowed to enter

- A the Holy of Holies.
- B the Court of Israel.
- C the Court of Priests.

When was entry to the Holy of Holies allowed?

- A on the last day of the Jewish year
- B on the Day of Atonement
- C on the Sabbath

Jesus told the traders that they had turned the Temple into

- A a den of thieves.
- B a house of prayer.
- C a place for Gentiles.

2 Simply read the following true story and reflect on it.

***The Roman Catholic Philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe explained Transubstantiation like this ...***

“When one says ‘transubstantiation’, one is saying exactly what one teaches the child in teaching it that Christ’s words, by the divine power given to the priest who uses them in his place, have changed the bread so that it isn’t there any more (nor the stuff of which it is made), but instead there is the body of Christ.

“I knew a child,” she continues, “close upon three years old and only then beginning to talk, but taught as I have described, who was in the free space at the back of the church when the mother went to communion. ‘Is He in you?’ the child asked when the mother came back. ‘Yes,’ she said, and to her amazement the child prostrated itself before her. I can testify to this, for I saw it happen.”

3 **Celebrations of the Eucharist are outdated and irrelevant for Christians today.**

Do you agree? Show that you have thought about more than one point of view.

***for the statement***

- There are so many different Christian groups that it is impossible truly to show unity
- Prayer on its own should be sufficient for Christians
- It is difficult to understand how Jesus could truly be present in the form of bread and wine.
- Faith in Jesus is what is essential
- Many people ‘switch off’ during the Eucharistic celebration
- ...

***against the statement***

- Christ changed the meaning of the bread and wine in order that his followers would remember what he did for them
- Sacred meals are used in many religions because they help the believers to understand their faith
- It demonstrates how the community works together to tell the world about Jesus
- The Church could do nothing greater than make Jesus present in this world
- ...