

THE LAST SUPPER:
WHAT HAPPENED AND WHAT DID IT MEAN?

by Dr Kieran J. O'Mahony OSA

www.tarsus.ie

*Unless noted, all translations are taken from the
NET Bible (<http://net.bible.org>)*

Introduction

The International Eucharistic Congress, Dublin 2012, provides an occasion to reflect once again on the biblical roots of the Lord's Supper. The Congress itself has a significant ecumenical dimension, a signal of the real progress made in relationships between the various Churches in the last few decades. Although it may appear sometimes that such progress has slowed down of late, nevertheless at ground level, where it really matters, the cooperation and mutual reconciliation of the Churches is quite remarkable in many parishes. To put it discreetly, many people have "moved on" when it comes to the regulations of the various Churches in regard to intercommunion. Nevertheless, both in practice and in teaching, there are challenges and it may be helpful to journey back to the biblical roots of our common celebration of the Lord's Supper. In the academy too, the origins of the Lord's Supper are discussed, yielding not only a variety of questions but also a large and interesting, sometimes unsettling, variety in understanding.

For this reflection, the following steps will be taken:

1. What happened?
2. What did it mean?
3. Multiple contexts
4. Jesus faced death
5. The Lord's Supper
6. And today?

1. What Happened?

Date

The Lord's Supper is reported in Matthew, Mark, Luke and 1 Corinthians. (There is a *Last Supper*, that is to say a final meal with the disciples, in the Fourth Gospel but no *Lord's Supper*, that is, the special words over the bread and the wine. Why the Fourth Gospel makes this radical excision is for another day's discussion: it suffices for our purposes here to note the *Lord's Supper* is absent in John.) An intriguing dimension of "what happened" concerns the dating of the Last Supper. The Synoptic Gospels time it on Thursday of Jesus' final week, and the Gospel of John agrees. However, there is a significant difference: in the Synoptic Gospels it is clearly labelled the Passover meal, that is to say, Passover began on Thursday evening and continued into Friday. In John, however, Friday night was Passover, which continued into Saturday. Although attempts have been made to reconcile these divergent traditions on the basis of different festal calendars, in general scholars think the dates are irreconcilable. The question remains which of the traditions is the more historically accurate? Is the Synoptic tradition influenced by a Passover theology? Perhaps, but so also is the Fourth Gospel. However, broadly speaking scholars think that John's Gospel—for all its limited use as a basis for reconstructing the historical Jesus—is more accurate when it portrays a three-year ministry, with three Passovers. Furthermore, the actions of the high priest and his dealings with the Roman gentile authorities on the holiest night of the year seem historically unlikely. As a result, many scholars think the calendar in John is the more accurate.

Meal practices

The handing on of the Last Supper tradition has been influenced to some degree by the meal practices of the time. A Greco-Roman dinner unfolded in two moments. The first was the dinner proper, the *deipnon*. The ideal number of guests was described as “no fewer than the graces”, that is three, and “no more than the muses”, that is nine. When dinner was over, time was spent drinking together, the *symposium*. That was the moment not only for conversation, but also for news, argument and entertainment. Traces of this are in the earliest surviving account, from 1 Corinthians 11. The relationship between this type of meal and a Passover proper, with its various cups, is a matter of discussion.

Words

The Lord’s Supper (as distinguished from the Last Supper) is reported, as we just noted, four times, in Matthew and Mark and in Luke and Paul. The difference in the wording is striking (the translation used is the NRSV, which is more accurate here).

Matthew	Mark	Luke	Paul
<p>Matt. 26:26 While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” 27 Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you: 28 for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.</p>	<p>Mark 14:22 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.” 23 Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. 24 He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.</p>	<p>Luke 22:19 Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” 20 And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.</p>	<p>1Cor. 11:23 The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” 25 In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”</p>

As the Lord’s Supper took place only once, the differences are accounted for by the evolution of worship practices and the theologies of the different traditions and writers. Broadly speaking, Mark and Matthew resemble each other, while Luke and Paul are similar. Matthew expanded Mark by the addition of instructions (underlined above) and the addition of *for the forgiveness of sins*, a large theme in his Gospel. The versions in Luke and Paul do resemble each other, but there is the significant difference of the repeated instruction to do this in remembrance of me.

Is it possible to go behind the developed traditions to an early form? Using the tools of the historical-critical method, many have thought so. Some years ago, John P. Meier proposed this reconstruction as an earlier base for all four traditions.

He took bread, and giving thanks [or: pronouncing a blessing], broke [it] and said: “this is my body”.

Likewise also the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the covenant in my blood”.

2. What did it mean?

Such a historical reconstruction gives rise to the question, what could it have meant? Before going into the detail, it should be said that this calls for careful, even delicate, reconstruction. When we stand back from the Gospel theologies of the cross, it can be surprisingly difficult to establish how Jesus himself understood his death and, it must be frankly admitted, there are gaps in our understanding. As a *caveat*, it should also be added that John's Gospel, with its super clear portrait of Jesus' intentions, cannot be used to reconstruct the historical Jesus. Because of the delicacy of the task, I'm going to proceed by describing the multiple contexts that make sense of the Supper. In this way, I hope gradually to build up a picture of what might have been intended.

3. Multiple contexts

Multiple contexts (i) The Kingdom of God

Starting points matter a great deal and, in my opinion, the best starting point for grasping the meaning of the Last Supper is Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Jesus' proclamation of God's indiscriminate love and his gift of forgiveness was an implicit and sometimes explicit challenge to the religious traditions of the time. His words and his actions shocked people and indeed he seems to have in part set out to shock. Why heal on the Sabbath when another day would be just as good? Why touch the likes of lepers, who were barred from society by detailed regulation? Why break the dietary laws, established to protect believers from contamination with non-believers?

Furthermore, the proclamation of the Kingdom meant more than the religious cliché that God was somehow in charge. On the contrary, it was part of an apocalyptic worldview, which responded to the common religious question "where is God in all the mess?" by announcing a future kingdom when God *would* indeed show himself to be king.

Jesus moved gradually from this *future* kingdom to a conviction that it was happening in his ministry. Like the prophets of old, he used "prophetic gestures" to put across his teaching and these gestures included healing people needlessly on the Sabbath, letting himself be touched by excluded sinners and breaking the dietary laws. Tackling the dietary laws was not like tinkering with a fiddly religious regulation: on the contrary, it meant challenging the foundational identity of the religion which the dietary laws were meant to safeguard.

Multiple contexts (ii) Prophetic Gestures

These prophetic gestures or acted parables of Jesus can be best understood in the light of the Old Testament. Across the Hebrew Bible but especially in the prophetic books, we find "prophetic gestures". These are mini dramas, which vividly illustrated the message of a particular prophet.

There are many examples:

Hosea marries a prostitute – Hosea 1-3

Isaiah gives symbolic names to his children – Is 7:3; 8:14

Jeremiah: the almond tree and the pot – Jer :1:11-14

Jeremiah: the waistcloth hidden by the Euphrates Jer 13:1-11

Jeremiah: the potter – Jer 18:1-12

Jeremiah: the jug – Jer 19

Jeremiah: the figs – Jer 24
Jeremiah: the yoke – Jer 27-28
Jeremiah: buying the field – Jer 32
Ezekiel makes a model of Jerusalem – Ezek 4:1-3
Ezekiel: the rationed food – Ezek 4:9-19
Ezekiel: the hair – Ezek 5
Ezekiel with the exile's baggage – Ezek 12:1-16
Ezekiel's "non-bereavement" – Ezek 24:15-27

These acted parables amount to a teaching technique, a kind of early use of PowerPoint, if you like. Jesus himself used prophetic gestures in a notable way. Outstanding examples would be the call of the twelve, the entry into Jerusalem, Jesus' prophetic action in the Temple and the cursing of the fig tree. More frequent prophetic gestures are the healings, the exorcisms and what is called "open table fellowship". All of these were intended to make tangible the proclamation of the Kingdom of God and God's indiscriminate love. In particular, the open table-fellowship forms an essential background for the core message of Jesus' ministry and was itself a prophetic gesture with special layers of meaning.

While tracking this prophetic dimension of Jesus' ministry, I might draw attention to a related topic vis-a-vis the Lord's Supper. In the course of his ministry, Jesus said, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many". The very last phrase may not be quite as historical as the start. Nevertheless, the verse evokes in people familiar with the Bible the great Servant Songs in Second Isaiah. These striking poems or prayers are found in the middle of Isaiah 40-55: 40:1-4, 49:1-6; 50:4-8; 52:13-53:12.

A glance at the citations and allusion in Mark is instructive:

Mark 1 (Ex 23:20 + Mai 3:1; Is 40:3; Is 40:1-11)

Mark 9:12 (= Is 53:3) Despised

Mark 14:24 (= Is 53:1 Iff.) For many

Mark 10:34 (= Is 50:6) Spit

Mark 10:45 (Is 53:1 Off) Ransom

Mark 14:49, 61 (= Is 53:7) Silent

Mark 15:27 (= Is 53:12) With outlaws

Clearly, we have here extended reference as part of Mark's theology of the cross. It is possible that the use of these prophetic models goes back to Jesus himself, perhaps in Mark 10:45, and this would allow us to see something of Jesus' own "spirituality" as he accepted his calling as messiah. His evolving understanding led him to see the prophets as providing a pattern and a path as he entered more deeply into his calling.

Multiple Context (Hi) Passover

The context of Passover is clearly important from the earliest to the latest texts of the New Testament. It already comes up in Paul and is a key both for the Fourth Gospel and the Apocalypse (not by the same author, but within the same broad tradition).

For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. (1 Corinthians 5:7)

On the next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of

God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

Gazing at Jesus as he walked by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" (John 1:36)

The Synoptic Gospels—for all the problem of dating—clearly have in mind at least a Passover context or setting. What did Passover mean? We are reminded by the ironic offer to release Barabbas that Passover meant liberation. Thus the death (or "exodus" in Luke's vocabulary) of Jesus constituted a new exodus, a new liberation, this time from sin and death. The Passover lamb in its earliest form was not a propitiatory sacrifice but a communion sacrifice. Originally, the killing of the lamb was a domestic task, leading to a shared meal. Later on, the task fell to the priests in Jerusalem. The original Passover context therefore bears the meaning that the cross and its anticipation in the Lord's Supper are best approached as fulfillments of the Passover *communion* sacrifice.

Multiple Contexts (iv) Opposition

In our attempt to trace the meaning of the Supper, we find ourselves inevitably putting together something of Jesus' own understanding of his impending death. The real religious and political opposition of the time needs to be taken account of briefly.

The group that Jesus most frequently encountered was the Pharisees. In some way, he would have had much in common with them: a certain resistance to the Temple and the desire to make God "real" in everyday life. At the same time, they had enormous problems with his ready acceptance of sinners and his authority to forgive sin and to heal on the Sabbath. The Temple authorities were alerted to the danger of Jesus by his messianic entry into Jerusalem and by his prophetic action in the Temple.

In any case, the Sadducees would have had issues with his offer of forgiveness independently of the sacrificial system. Finally, the Romans, if they heard it, would have been disturbed by his proclamation of an alternative kingdom and in particular by the solidarity with the poor. Like all dictatorships, the Romans were sensitive to rebels and especially to those who might challenge their right to collect taxes. All in all, Jesus faced as a direct result of his teaching a considerable and powerful set of people with whom he fundamentally disagreed. Naturally, to get the attention of the Romans, it was necessary for the Temple authorities to convert their core religious case against Jesus into a political case in order to engage the ruling elite. This takes us to our next series of considerations: How did Jesus face his own death?

4. Jesus faced death (i) Before and during the Supper

We can see something of how Jesus' understanding of his death evolved by looking at certain events, words, parables and actions. The death of John the Baptist, his mentor, will have left its mark. This is what happens to prophets. Then, in his words, we can see an anticipation of his fate: he came to serve; Jerusalem is the place which kills prophets; the Suffering Servant allusions; the three passion predictions and the words about drinking new wine in the Kingdom. The last is very important because it connects his understanding of his death with the proclamation of the Kingdom. Here are the relevant texts:

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45)

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would have none of it! Look, your house is left to you desolate! For I tell you, you will not see me from now until you say, '**Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!**'" (Matthew 23:37-39)

That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and cured all who were sick. This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases." (Matthew 8:16-17)

Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and experts in the law, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He spoke openly about this. So Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But after turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan. You are not setting your mind on God's interests, but on man's." (Mark 8:31-33)

I tell you the truth, I will no longer drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." (Mark 14:25)

Then he began to speak to them in parables: "A man planted a vineyard. He put a fence around it, dug a pit for its winepress, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenant farmers and went on a journey. At harvest time he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his portion of the crop. But those tenants seized his slave, beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. So he sent another slave to them again. This one they struck on the head and treated outrageously. He sent another, and that one they killed. This happened to many others, some of whom were beaten, others killed. He had one left, his one dear son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and the inheritance will be ours!' So they seized him, killed him, and threw his body out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this scripture: **"The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is from the Lord, and it is marvellous in our eyes?"** Now they wanted to arrest him (but they feared the crowd), because they realized that he told this parable against them. So they left him and went away. (Mark 12:1-12)

The parable of the vineyard is an interesting case. It is possible to identify layers of later theology in the parable as we have it now. Even so, it indicates a level of awareness, both prophetic and personal. Naturally, the parable in the setting of Jerusalem is not unconnected to the messianic entry and the Temple Action.

4. Jesus faced death (ii) After the Supper

As we shall see the Last Supper represents a significant crystallization of awareness in relation to the death of Jesus. After the supper, the prayer in the garden and the last words from the cross are the final steps in Jesus' acceptance of his role. The garden prayer is an especially useful example because of it is found across a variety of texts, that is, in the Synoptic Gospels and the Letter to the Hebrews. It combines a final discernment of God's will with a prayer to be able to commit to it.

During his earthly life Christ offered both requests and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death and he was heard because of his devotion. (Hebrews 5:7)

Then they went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James, and John with him, and became very troubled and distressed. He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, even to the point of death. Remain here and stay alert." Going a little farther, he threw himself to the ground and prayed that if it were possible the hour would pass from him. He said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Take this cup away from me.

Yet not what I will, but what you will." Then he came and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "Simon, are you sleeping? Couldn't you stay awake for one hour? Stay awake and pray that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." He went away again and prayed the same thing. When he came again he found them sleeping; they could not keep their eyes open. And they did not know what to tell him. He came a third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough of that! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us go. Look! My betrayer is approaching!" (Mark 14:32-42)

Jesus' last words on the cross must be included. As has often been observed, these have come down to us in four versions. Matthew follows Mark, with slight variation. Luke and John go their own way.

Now when it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. Around three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah!" Then someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Leave him alone! Let's see if Elijah will come to take him down!" But Jesus cried out with a loud voice and breathed his last. (Mark 15:33-37)

At about three o'clock Jesus shouted with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46)

Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And after he said this he breathed his last. (Luke 23:46)

When he had received the sour wine, Jesus said, "It is completed!" Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:30)

Are all the sentences theologically driven and is none truly historical? Working backwards, it would seem that the Fourth Gospel is pursuing a theology of new creation. That Gospel begins with an echo of Gen 1:1. In the last words of Jesus, there is an allusion to Gen 2:2, when God had finished his work, that is just before the seventh day, Friday that is. Finally, the words of the risen Jesus in John's Gospel echo Gen 2:7

The LORD God formed the man from the soil of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)

So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. Just as the Father has sent me, I also send you." And after he said this, he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. (John 20:21-23)

Likewise, it seems that Luke is pursuing his theology of Jesus as prophet who underwent a martyr's death. The prophet Christology is present from Luke 4 onwards. The martyr dimension becomes clear when we compare the death of Jesus with the death of Stephen in the Acts.

When they heard these things, they became furious and ground their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked intently toward heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look!" he said. "I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" But they covered their ears, shouting out with a loud voice, and rushed at him with one intent. When they had driven him out of the city, they began to stone him, and the witnesses laid their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul. They continued to stone Stephen while he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" Then he fell to his knees and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" When he had said this, he died. (Acts 7:54-60)

Three dimensions stand out: the heavenly vision, the prayer and the gesture of forgiveness.

Then they led Jesus away to their council and said, "If you are the Christ, tell us." But he said to them, "If I tell you, you will not believe, and if I ask you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God." (Luke 22:66-69)

But Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34)

Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" (Luke 23:46)

So the last words on the lips of Jesus in Luke, taken from Psalm 31:5, express his particular theology. Could it be that the last words in Mark are also selected to express his theology of Jesus' death, that of the abandoned Messiah? If that were the case, then the question would arise, what were Jesus' last words?

One line of interpretation is based on the Elijah sentence in Mark and Matthew.

First of all, it has been observed that, in the psalms of lament, the turning point in such psalms is often "my God, you", in Hebrew "Eli atta". The psalms in question are: Pss. 22:10; 63:2; 118:28; 140:7. Scholars have speculated that Jesus actually said these words in the form "eli atta" (using simplified transliteration), my God, (it is) you. Those around Jesus misheard him to say, "elia tha", which would mean "Elijah come!". There are advantages in this reading. Firstly, it accounts for the otherwise unexplained "he is calling on Elijah". Secondly, it means that the range of meanings in Jesus' last words as represented in all four Gospels is to some degree faithful. Mark and Matthew have gone to the start of the Psalm 22, to elicit a tragic interpretation. Luke (also using a psalm) and John underline the dimension of trust. We may put it in a provocative way: none is historically accurate and all are true to the meaning. If this is a reasonable hypothesis, then we may say Jesus died as a man of faith, putting his trust in God, echoing a psalm of lament at the moment when the psalmist turns to express trust.

In summary we may say this much:

*Jesus died in **faithfulness***

*His proclamation of the **Kingdom** included **faith** in resurrection*

*He understood his death to be part of the coming of that **Kingdom***

4. Jesus faced death (v) The earliest interpreter

The earliest interpreter of the death of Jesus is St Paul. In the letter to the Romans, chapter 3, we find this understanding:

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For *no one is declared righteous before him* by the works of the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. But now apart from the law the **righteousness** of God (which is attested by the law and the prophets) has been disclosed- namely, the **righteousness** of God through the **faithfulness of Jesus Christ** for all who believe. For there is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God publicly displayed him at his death as the **mercy seat** accessible through faith. This was to demonstrate his righteousness, because God in his forbearance had passed over the sins previously committed.

This was also to demonstrate his righteousness in the present time, so that he would be just and the justifier of the one **who lives because of Jesus' faithfulness.** (Romans 3:19-26)

It has been said that these few verses are the key to grasping Paul theology of the cross. In a word, for Paul Jesus' faithfulness through death disclosed the faithfulness, the righteousness, the covenant steadfast love of God himself.

All of this is naturally significant for how we understand the words at the supper. We may summarise it like this: Jesus' understanding of his death grew out of his ministry, came to special awareness in Jerusalem and during the supper and it continued to evolve with greater intensity in the garden and on the cross.

5. The Lord's Supper

As we noted above, following J. P. Meier, the earliest form of the words at the supper may have been:

He took bread, and giving thanks [or: pronouncing a blessing], broke [it] and said: "this is my body".

Likewise also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the covenant in my blood".

What would this have meant at the time? At an immediate level, the actions and words over the bread and wine may be described as a "prophetic gesture", that is to say a teaching, specifically an interpretation of Jesus' death for those nearest to him. Looking back historically, the doctrinal tradition would say he was instituting the Eucharist. Looking forward biographically, we may say he was giving meaning to his death, as an act of self-giving service and love, to be understood in the light of the Passover.

The contexts (plural!) for such an interpretation are clear. The foundational level is the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, that is, in the *future*, God would show himself just and therefore faithful. The various prophetic actions of Jesus proclaimed this fidelity of God, but especially the practice of open table fellowship. As we saw, the dietary laws were much more than a regulation and disturbing them meant proposing something altogether new. It is not accidental that Jesus' major interpretation of his death should also be in the context of a meal, a meal which takes some of its meaning from all the previous meals, both in practice and in his teaching (the parables particularly). Once again, the Passover setting if not date tells us that his gift will be a new exodus or liberation leading to a new communion.

The need to act against Jesus was triggered historically by events and actions, by words and parables. The entry into Jerusalem, Jesus' prophetic gesture in the Temple, the disputes in the Temple precincts, the parable of the vineyard—all of these are essential historical information for the cause of Jesus' death. It was, from a Roman point of view, a miscarriage of justice. It was not, however, a mistake: Jesus was existentially, absolutely and authentically true to his calling as prophet and messiah. Tragically, this was correctly identified by the religious leadership and they acted accordingly. As a result, the meaning of Jesus' death, then and now, cannot be separated from his ministry. In a word, Jesus gave himself in faithful surrender to his Abba and to his calling.

The earliest interpreters were exactly accurate in this. I refer again to Romans 3:19-26, but I could also mention John 13:1-17, the washing of the feet and Hebrews 2:11-18 and 4:14-16. It is not possible to quote all these texts but I cannot avoid an excerpt from Eph 2:11-22, which seems to bring the various dimensions together:

Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh— who are called "uncircumcision" by the so-called "circumcision" that is performed on the body by

human hands- that you were at that time without the Messiah, alienated from the citizenship of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who used to be far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, the one who made both groups into one and who destroyed the middle wall of partition, the hostility, when he nullified in his flesh the law of commandments in decrees. He did this to create in himself one new man out of two, thus making peace, and to reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by which the hostility has been killed. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, so that through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer foreigners and noncitizens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household, because you have been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:11-22)

6. And today?

As you can see from the proportion of time devoted to it, it is relatively easy to say what happened, when and how. More difficult is the recreation of the meaning *at the time of Jesus*. This is also a work of interpretation. Nevertheless, if the arguments so far presented are reasonably accurate, then there are also consequences for today.

The Eucharist is central to the proclamation of the Kingdom of God and the proclamation of the Kingdom of God is essential to the meaning of the Eucharist. One of the tasks facing those who celebrate the Eucharist is to let this Kingdom dimension become evident again.

Two other dimensions also stand out. Because of Jesus' open table fellowship, an outstanding dimension of the proclamation of the Kingdom, the followers of Jesus are committed to showing the very same love and hospitality to others. To put it another way, the burden of proof lies with those who would exclude from the Eucharistic table. Jesus preached the indiscriminate love of God, offered by his offensively indiscriminate inclusion of all within the Kingdom. Secondly, the Lord's Supper was part of Jesus' own journey into loving faithfulness and the giving of himself. As we see across the New Testament writings—sometimes in different formulations—Jesus' own faith lies at the heart of it all. In the Eucharist we come in contact again with this faithfulness of Jesus and we build our own relationship with the Father on Jesus' love for his Abba. Finally, communion in him commits those who take part to the vision of the Kingdom and its values. There can be no separation of sacrament and "real" life. We commit ourselves to the personal pilgrimage of conversion and service as well as to the transformation of our world. It has been said that the Eucharist makes the Church and this is true. However, it makes the church by proclaiming again and again *both* the Kingdom of God *and* God's realization of that Kingdom through Jesus' vulnerable love.

By becoming our companion in alienation, injustice and mortality he disclosed the heart, the inner reality of the very mystery of God himself. This is what we mark most deeply at the Lord's Supper. Let Paul have the last word:

For Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks ask for wisdom, but we preach about a crucified Christ, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. (1 Corinthians 1:22-25)

Biographical Note

Kieran J. O'Mahony OSA, HDipEd, STL, LSS, PhD, is an Augustinian friar and a scripture scholar. He is employed by the diocese of Dublin, providing scripture resources for those in ministry and for parishes (www.tarsus.ie). At the same time, he works in the Orlagh centre (www.orlagh.ie) and is Associate Professor at the Milltown Institute. He is president of the National Bible Society ~~and of~~ Ireland and also of the Irish Biblical Association. His chief area of research and publication is St Paul (including *Do we still need St Paul?* 2009/2011). When not involved in biblical studies and ministry, friends, music, the Camino de Santiago and cycling keep him reasonably sane.

The Bedell/Boyle Lecture Series

The National Bible Society of Ireland has inaugurated an annual lecture series known as the Bedell/Boyle Lecture. It is intended that the series will provide an opportunity to promote the Bible and the effective use of the Holy Scriptures to current developments. It is hoped to publish each Lecture.

The Bedell Boyle Lecture Series is named in honour of the Hon Robert Boyle (1626-1691), who made a large contribution to the printing and publishing of the Bible for Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and also to propagating Christianity in America and Malaya. He was President of the Royal Society as well as being the distinguished scientist of Boyle's Law.

It is also intended to honour William Bedell (1571-1642), Bishop of Kilmore and Ardagh, who is famous for an Irish translation of the First (Old) Testament and for Bedell's Bible, which was published in 1685 and with which Boyle was concerned. Each year, a speaker of world stature, or who has demonstrated national leadership in a particular field, is asked to speak on a topic relating to some aspect of the Holy Scriptures to current developments.

The 2011 Lecture was given by Dr Kieran J O'Mahony OSA, in Purcell House, All Hallows College, Dublin on 2 December 2011.

First published (2012) by the National Bible Society of Ireland,
41 Dawson Street, Dublin 2

Copyright © 2012 National Bible Society of Ireland
ISBN 978 0 9548672 6 3

Also in this series:

Dr David Hutchinson (2010) *The King James Bible – Four Hundred Years On*
ISBN 978 0 9548 6725 6

Pastor Anthony Joseph (2009) *The Bible in Africa/The Bible in Ireland* (not published)

Most Rev Diarmuid Martin (2008) *The Word of God...in Ireland Today* (not published)

John Dexter (2007) *Bach, Beethoven, Bono and their Bibles* (not published)

Rev Patrick Comerford (2006) *Reflections of the Bible in the Qur'an*
ISBN 978-0-9548-6723-2

Rev Dudley Levistone Cooney (2005) *200 years of the Bible in Ireland*
Published as *Sharing the Word, A History of the Bible Society in Ireland* (2006)
ISBN 978-1-8560752-3-7

Rev Brendan Duddy, SJ (2004) *The portrayal of Christ through film* (not published)

Rev Fearghus Ó Fearghail (2003) *The Irish Testament of 1602*
ISBN 978-0-9548672-0-1

Trevor Sargent (2002) *The Bible and Politics*
ISBN 978-0-9533082-8-6

Dr Joseph Liechty (2001) *The Work of Reconciliation in Word and World* (not published)

Dr Peter Harbison (2000) *From Genesis to Judgement – Biblical Iconography on Irish High Crosses*
(Response: Rev Alan Martin) ISBN 978-0-9533082-4-8

Rev Lucien Accad (1999) *The Good News in Our Times*
(Response: Mrs Clare O'Mahony) ISBN 978-0-9533082-3-1

Rt Rev Harold Miller (1998) *Word and Spirit-The Bible and Liturgy*
(Response: Rev Pádraig McCarthy) ISBN 978-0-9518735-9-5

Dr Margaret Daly Denton (1997) *Psalmody: A Living Tradition of Worship*
(Response: Dr Fergus O'Ferrall) ISBN 978-0-9518735-7-1

Rev Selwyn Hughes (1996) *The Bible – God's Word for Today*
(Response: Rev Maurice Fearon OP) ISBN 978-0-9518735-5-7

Rt Rev Christopher Dillon OSB (1995) *Lectio Divina in the Monastic Tradition*
(Response: Rev Katherine Meyer) ISBN 978-0-9518735-3-3

Rev Terence McCaughey (1994) *Why the Old Testament – then or now?*
(Response: Rev William Riley) ISBN 078-0-9518735-2-6

Sheila Cassidy (1993) Not published

Rev Tom Houston (1992) *The Bible in World Evangelization*
(Response: Clare O'Mahony) ISBN 978-0-9518735-1-9

Most Rev Donal Murray (1991) *Alive and Active – Dei Verbum and Ireland Today*
(Response: Rt Rev George Otto Simms) ISBN 978-0-9518735-0-2