

“Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” (Lk 24:26)

The word “paschal” pertains to the Jewish feast of Passover, when the Exodus as the path from slavery to freedom is celebrated and the Passover lamb is slain and eaten. Christians use the term “paschal mystery” to refer to Jesus’ death and resurrection at Passover time and its saving significance for us. At every Eucharist we renew our participation in this mystery through the reading of sacred Scripture and our sharing in the body and blood of Christ.

The Emmaus story in Luke 24 is the longest and most elegant appearance story in the Gospels. In the afternoon of the first Easter Sunday two discouraged disciples, ready to give up on Jesus and his movement and on their way out of Jerusalem, encounter a mysterious stranger who turns out to be the risen Jesus. When the stranger interprets the Scriptures for them and shares a meal with them, they move from a plaintive “We were hoping” to burning hearts and shouts of joy.

The passage takes up three major themes in Luke’s Gospel: Jesus as a prophet, his fulfillment of Israel’s Scriptures and his shared meals. Jesus exhibited the characteristics of a biblical prophet: he taught the people in words and deeds (miracles, symbolic actions), offered predictions about the future, called his people to repent and suffered hostility and opposition. In his conversation with the two disciples, the risen Jesus explains (probably in terms of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53) that the Messiah had to suffer. The encounter reaches its climax in a meal, at which they come to recognize that the mysterious stranger is the risen Jesus. In celebrating the Eucharist today, Christians repeat the experience of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. We come to know the risen Jesus in Scripture and “the breaking of the bread.”

Today’s excerpt from Peter’s speech in Acts 2 gives a sample of early Christian preaching, in which the interpretation of the Old Testament in light of the paschal mystery was an essential feature. As in the Emmaus story, the paschal mystery functions as the key that opens up all the mysteries hidden in Israel’s Scriptures.

The principal images in today’s selection from 1 Peter develop further the significance of the paschal mystery for us. As with the Emmaus pilgrims, our life in Christ has become a sojourn or journey in search of our heavenly home—that is, in search of right relationship with God, the fullness of God’s kingdom and eternal life with God. The image of ransom or redemption refers to the paschal mystery as that which has enabled us to be freed from the slavery of sin and death and freed for life in the Spirit. The reference to “the precious blood of Christ as of a spotless unblemished lamb” connects Jesus’ death with the sacrificial system of ancient Israel and its belief that life is in the blood. Thus it suggests that his death was the perfect and all-sufficient sacrifice for sins, and that the blood that Jesus shed has given us new life.