As ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human experience, for every conceivable human need from and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacles of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. Humans have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and groom in a little country church; for the proclamation of a dogma or for a good crop of wheat; for the wisdom of the parliament of a mighty nation or for a sick old woman afraid to die; for a schoolboy sitting an examination or for Columbus setting out to discover America; for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover; in thankfulness because my father did not die of pneumonia; for a village headman much tempted to return to fetish because the yams had failed; because the Turk was at the gates of Vienna; for the repentance of Margaret; for the settlement of a strike; for a son for a barren woman; for Captain so-and-so, wounded and prisoner of war; while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheater; on the beach at Dunkirk; while the hiss of scythes in the thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church; tremulously, by an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his vows; furtively, by an exiled bishop who had hewn timber all day in a prison camp near Murmansk; gorgeously, for the canonization of St. Joan of Arc – one could fill many pages with reasons why we have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them. And best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of christendom, the pastors have done this just to make the plebs sancta Dei – the holy...
common people of God." The Shape of the Liturgy, Dom Gregory Dix. Page 744, fourth impression 1949

As one looks backward through the 2000 year history of Christianity, there are two things which strike the mind.

First, that there in fact should be a Christianity at all. That a young Jewish man could teach of the kingdom of God, be found guilty on a political charge, be publicly executed, have his small band of associates scattered, and still leave behind him a faith structure that endures to this present moment is indeed a miracle. Yet, unlike the others who thought they had a messianic calling to redeem Israel from the hated enemy, at his death those who surrounded Jesus did not disband. Disheartened, disoriented and discouraged, they saw their dead leader alive. The fact of the Resurrection transformed this motley group into leaders who began a process that has profoundly affected the course of human history. That process has enriched the lived of countless multitudes. That we have just concluded – hopefully – a joint effort of a number of nations in which another nation was not permitted to persecute and destroy another group, is a reflection of the impact of the Resurrection. From the Resurrection flows, ultimately, the love of God, who has created all persons equal. It is not just a "religious" truth that one talks about but does not expect to see in fact: it has become of the warp and woof of our civilization. (Even those who find it amazing that one could conceive of using bombs to create peace have to admit that at least the ultimate goal flows from the love of God.) From the cross flows the beginnings of the real New Age. All humans can be freed from those demons that plague their lives. Those societal mores, those judgmental hypocrites, those breakers of spirit, those destroyers of creativity, those forces of conformity, and the rest of them: have been defeated by the power of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus. Humans are entitled to freedom and love and respect.

The Resurrection ensures the victory of God, the love of humanity.

Equally amazing is the nature of those who brought this victory to our world. Starting with fisher-folk and some unattached women, no one of any 'correct' background – indeed, even Jesus himself comes from the wrong side of the tracks, so to speak. No great victor such as Alexander the Great or William the Conqueror made others conform to the message of the Loving Creator-God. All were asked to use their own skills and abilities to look at the history of God and see for themselves: they were to be partners with God. Raised up by God, they are invited – indeed, welcomed – into a fellowship of love and family where "force is not of God." At the very heart of the Resurrection experience (as Luke shows it on the road to Emmaus) is the eucharistic action. So simple, utterly simple. Take, bless, break and give bread; take, bless and give a cup of wine: thus did this young Jewish man with his friends on the night before his death. He told them that this was to be done for the anamnesis of him – for his recalling. And so it has been from the very beginning: the Eucharist.

Dom Gregory writes another paragraph that fits in here:

"To those who know a little of Christian history probably the most moving of all the reflections it brings is not the thought of the great events and the well-remembered saints, but of those innumerable millions of entirely obscure faithful men and women, every one with his or her own individual hopes and fears and joys and sorrows and loves – and sins and temptations and prayers – once every whit as vivid and alive as mine are now. They have left no slightest trace in this world, not even a name, but have passed to God utterly forgotten by humans. Yet each of them once believed and prayed as I believe and pray, and found it hard and grew slack and sinned and repented and fell again. Each of them worshipped at the eucharist, and found their thoughts wandering and tried again, and felt heavy and unresponsive and yet knew – just as really and pathetically as I do
these things. There is a little ill-spelled rustic epitaph of the fourth century from Asia Minor: – “Here sleeps the blessed Chione, who has found Jerusalem for she prayed much.” Not another word is known of Chione, some peasant woman who lived in that vanished world of Christian Anatolia. But how lovely if all that should survive after sixteen centuries were that one had prayed much, so that the neighbors who saw all one’s life were sure one must have found Jerusalem! What did the Sunday Eucharist in her village church every week for a life-time mean to the blessed Chione – and to the millions like her then, and every year since? The sheer stupendous quantity of the love of God which this ever repeated action [eucharist] has drawn from the obscure Christian multitudes through the centuries is in itself an overwhelming thought. (All that going with one to the altar each morning!) The Shape of the Liturgy, Dom Gregory Dix. Page 745, fourth impression 1949

It is this mystery that has brought us here to our parish church. It is this mystery which we shall leave as our heritage to those who follow us. It is this mystery that is the subject of this Eastertide series of The Skeptic for this spring. I originally prepared this for another congregation. It became popular enough that it has gone around the world.

I hope you will enjoy it and find that it feeds your faith.
E. Perren Hayes

MAKING THE PEOPLE OF GOD
THE HOLY EUCHARIST

2. Why “Do this?”

We modern Americans are so used to a scientific approach in all things that we are unable to appreciate the place in life that must be accorded to myth and story telling. Nothing can be left to the imagination. Everything must be presented as “fact.” There can be no shades of gray. All things must be seen as “correct” or “incorrect,” “right” or “wrong,” “good” or “bad,” “win” or “lose,” “either – or,” etc.

In fact, in the matters that deal with “facts” this is the only reasonable way to see things, so long as one remembers that sometimes additional information will make changes in so called “facts.” For example, recent information indicates that there is water in the form of ice on the moon.

But where matters of the Spirit and of God are concerned, a different way of thinking is needed. Word-pictures, or metaphors, make it possible to talk about things that cannot be perceived directly through the five senses. This is especially true in religion, for here the subject is, by definition, beyond human comprehension. Yet it is here that metaphors or images are most helpful.

It is very important not to confuse the metaphor or image with reality, however. Spirituality is vast, and far beyond our comprehension. Images and metaphors give direction to thinking; but they only point in the direction of – they are not the reality itself. That is beyond our abilities. As St. Paul puts it, “Now we see only a bit, like an image in a mirror. . .” Even the sum total of images and metaphors is incomplete. God and spirituality expand infinitely as our comprehension grows.
All of this applies to the Eucharist.

When Jesus said “Do this” the command brought with it a whole load of images and metaphors. Part of the reason is, of course, the setting of the command in the first place. The first three Gospels make it clear that the command came as part of the Passover celebration that Jesus had with his disciples – the twelve and the others – on the night of the Passover meal. The first day of Passover, it is called today. (Because he uses a different set of images and metaphors, the author of the Fourth Gospel sets the meal on the day before the day of the Preparation for the Passover. This way Jesus dies on the Day of Preparation, at about the time the Passover Lambs were being slaughtered/sacrificed in the Temple. This brings with it an entirely – but equally important – set of images and metaphors.)

The Old Testament contains within it three major metaphors having to do with the relationship between God and his Chosen People. It is important to understand these three images, because they relate directly to the Eucharist as it is presented in the Gospels and in Saint Paul; and, of course, in the Church today and throughout the ages.

All three of the images or metaphors derive from the concept of the Creator God in the first chapter of Genesis. If this chapter is not understood in most of its implications, it is difficult to understand the rest of the Old Testament. At this point the most important things about the chapter is that God created everything that is – without any exception – out of nothing at all. There is no ‘raw material’ to be used for the creation. All comes about simply and solely because God “thought” about it. (An image relating God to ourselves. A thought becomes a ‘real’ thought when spoken: so God said “Let there be . . ., and there was . . .” It was brought into existence because the Spirit – power, or soul – of God acted.)

The clear implication of this kind of creation is that if God thought it up, if God made it ‘real’, if God brought it into existence, then it belongs to God; God owns it; it is God’s possession; its continued existence depends on God; its meaning and purpose come from God; its relationship to the rest of creation is fixed by God.

The one exception to this is that humans are – in addition to the things that are common to all of creation – created in the image or metaphor of God. To a certain extent humans share in God’s very life and creativity, because humans can also bring a thought to life – even though humans must use a ‘raw material’ from what God has provided. In Hebrew, this creativity is called “knowledge” as best we can translate it. As we ‘know’ what the mind can conceive, so from the ‘raw materials’ provided in creation, that which is “known” is given “reality.” We “procreate.” To limit “procreation” to the conceiving of children (as some would do) does great harm to the concept of God’s creation. (Depending on the context, the Hebrew word “know” or “knowledge” can also mean “sexual intercourse.”)

Humans share in the creativity of God. If this is to be a “real” sharing, then humans must also share in another ‘aspect’ of God: humans must have a large element of “freedom.” Without freedom, the “procreativity” of humans becomes a sham, a deception, a lie, a fraud – a denial of the gracious goodness of the God who created it all.

However, this freedom does not exempt humans from their own “createdness.” Humans still belong to God; they are owned by God; they are God’s possession; they depend upon God; their meaning and purpose comes from God; their relationship with the rest of creation is established by God. Only in the freedom that comes from the image of God are humans any different from the rest of creation.

That this freedom is real – to the Hebrew mind – is proved because humans can deny any or all of their “createdness.” If they cannot,
then they are not really free. But the fact that humans can – and indeed do – deny their createdness is in itself proof that they are free. The Hebrews tell this in the story of the Man and the Woman in the Garden: humans deny their createdness by defying their relationship with God; they then seize God’s place in their own lives. When that happens all of creation is disrupted. (St. Paul says the whole creation groans like a woman in labor pains.) This disruption is a rebellion against God; it is a denial of reality; it is, in fact, a denial of one’s own being and nature. It in fact, from the human side, separates humans from God.

Over the centuries this separation has been called sin.

Human sin, however, cannot change God; it can only change humans and their perceptions of God and God’s creation. The gracious goodness of God is unchanged by human sin. The Hebrews note this by having God protect the humans from exploitation and from each other by giving them clothing.

But far more important, God's gracious goodness immediately begins a new creative burst. By making use of human freedom and procreativity, God's gracious goodness begins the process of redemption. Not the restoration of the status quo ante, but a new creation, a creation that expands on the gracious goodness of God. Thus God reaches out to humans in love; and chooses a People who will understand – to a degree – God and their relationship to God; and, using their freedom, God will redeem humanity with his own love. This is the starting point of the Eucharist.

MAKING THE PEOPLE OF GOD

The Holy Eucharist3. Why “Do this?” (Part 2)

Last week, the necessity of using metaphor was discussed. Metaphor was applied to the Creation story in Genesis. When this is done, then one sees the Christian concept of God – as distinct from the prevailing American idea of God – in a totally different manner. Many who loudly call themselves Christian have an inadequate, if not downright wrong, idea of God.

The Christian God of the Bible – including both Old and New Testaments – is not part of Creation. This God created everything that exists, including all the laws of physics and mathematics, from nothing other than what we call – using metaphor – thought or imagination. Continuing the metaphor, the mere thinking made it real, and it came into actual existence through the – metaphor – power, or Spirit, or soul, of God. (Stephen Hawking indicates that we lack the knowledge of math to fully be able to comprehend much more than we now know of the moment of the “big bang.”)

The Christian God of the Bible is, however, not just the Creator who did it and then (metaphor) stands back and watches it go. The Christian God of the Bible is intimately and actively involved in the process of Creation – for creation is an on-going process. Again, this is something we can only learn by observation, by reflection, and by faith. Then the observations, reflections and faith express themselves in story. “Story” is a combination of observation and reflection, told in a manner that includes the observation and the reflection in support of the faith of the community. That is what the Bible does for us. It tells us how the observation of events – history – illustrate the action of God in creation. (The clearest illustration of this is: The 6 PM Evening News TV on the day the Israelites went through the Red Sea, both in Egypt and in Israel, had the same lead story, a reporting of the same event: but the story in Egypt was quite different from the one in Israel.)

When one begins to understand the Bible in this manner, then real faith
can commence, and the direct relationship of God to the ordinary events of daily living can be seen. When that happens, then it becomes possible to perceive the action of God in the redemption of humans — the restoration of relationships with God, with Creation and with Each Other. When that happens, then the Bible becomes a paradigm of restored relationships, rather than a book of laws to be obeyed. It comes quite clear that it is impossible for humans ever to earn God’s love. There is absolutely nothing at all that humans can do that will ever destroy God’s love — not even the murder of God’s only Son. (metaphor) God’s love is consistent and constant. When humans believe (have faith) this, then they can take their full part in the procreation and completion of Creation: in faith enhancing all relationships between people, God and all aspects of creation with the dynamic of love.

That is what the Eucharist is all about.

When Jesus said “Do this for my anamnesis – in remembrance of me,” he brought all of this into the minds of the disciples. (Apparently more than just the Twelve.) “Do this” includes the entire history of Israel, the whole paradigm of God’s relationship to Israel. This is best understood in the three major themes presented in the Old Testament. These themes are: 1. Freedom from Slavery (Exodus); 2. Homecoming/Restoration/Heavenly Banquet (End of Exile, Isaiah chapters 40 - 55; 3. Mediation of Grace through Institution (rebuilding of Temple, Sacrifice, Ministry, Torah).

To this very day, the first of these (Freedom from Slavery) continues as a major part of the continuing Jewish/Hebrew religion. To participate in Passover is to be involved in a great and wondrous celebration of the power of God, the graciousness of God and the exaltation of humanity. And perhaps most important, the celebration of Passover is not the looking back with affection on some past event. Passover is not a commemoration of something that happened 3500 years ago. Passover is not the desire to return to some previous period in the past as a “better” time than now. No, Passover is the making present of the act of God that demonstrated the love of God for those whom God has chosen as the recipients of God’s love.

The love/action of God gives a freedom God’s people did not know or understand. Look at the recipients: slaves in a nation ruled by a despotic ruler/god; desperate to demonstrate his ability to overcome the laws of nature and live forever. These sophisticated Egyptians even — perhaps — had the beginnings of a belief in the One God. They took these foreigners, enslaved them, forcing them even to forget their own heritage. The condition of the Hebrew slaves was dreadful: insufficient food; incorrect tools for the task; impersonal interrelationships; poverty; harassment; in short, every discrimination-evil known to humanity. Not only were they required to destroy their children, but they did it without complaint.

With one exception.

Moses was one of these horrid Hebrew slaves. But his mother had faith. After assuring his ability to survive, she sent him floating down the river for a future she could not imagine. The baby is discovered by a princess of the royal family and raised as her own child. (Serendipity? Luck? Fate? Coincidence? Fluke? Act of God? — it depends on your own faith.) And look what happened!

Through the actions of Moses, this unfortunate gaggle of slaves, these unsophisticated, uneducated, unknown people with no homeland, no history (in the sense of war and conquest), no claim to significance by any set of standards suddenly found themselves set free.

This freedom came to them, in effect, as a bolt out of the blue. A flash of lightning gave their lives a new meaning and purpose. They had done nothing at all. But it happened. It happened when the wind — the sign of their Storm-god — came up and blew back the water so they could escape the pursuing Egyptians. (Wind was observed blowing back the water in the shallow lakes that covered the isthmus of Suez during the construction of the Suez Canal.)
For no observable reason this tattered people was set free. They were delivered from their misery. They experienced the action of God. They gave thanks to God for their deliverance. How could they show their gratitude? First, by making present the loving action of God throughout all ages; second, as a paradigm, or model, for all humanity.

( Metaphor )

“Do this.” The “This” is the action of God, setting free not only the Hebrews, the first followers of “The Way”, the Christians. It was the person of Jesus who “did this.” Jesus did this, not by his teaching, not by his miracles, but by the total offering of his own life. This self offering – this obedience – this utter faith in God – is the making holy (sacrifice), the “showing” of the complete love of God for his people, the bringing of his people into full life in God. This, in the first three Gospels and Paul, is the setting free for no reason that God did at Passover with Moses. For no (humanly discernable) reason, God acted. The unfailing love of God came because God chose to bring it. But God brought it to the People of God, those who were looking forward to God’s loving action – Messiah??

Making the People of God
The Holy Eucharist

4. Why “Do this?” (Part 3)

The first great theme of the Old Testament is “freedom from bondage.” Moses, a leader inspired by God, took the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, where they were building monuments for the pharaohs. Their lives were wretched; without hope; with no future; no power; no expectation of relief; no organization; working at a task that provided them with no benefit; no entertainment; they had even forgotten their God; nothing at all – except the impossible task of work with insufficient, incorrect tools. Even the most needy persons in our nation have nothing to compare with the hopelessness, loveless life of these Hebrew slaves.

Suddenly a speech-impaired man from the ruling class comes to them, organizes them around their God – whom they had all but forgotten – and tells them that they are to be set free to go worship their God. While the miracles done by Moses are told in a manner to convince Pharaoh the free the slaves, they certainly had the additional affect of convincing the Hebrews of Moses’s authenticity. After a time – ending with the Passover Angel – they were set free; they went on their way.

As they were reveling in their new freedom., suddenly they saw the army of Pharaoh following them. The old bondage was reaching out to snatch back its escaped slaves. In terror, they moved faster – perhaps to out-run the army chariots? Suddenly, in front of them, a body of water appears. The army chariots behind; the water in front - what were they to do? The brief fire of freedom was to be extinguished: either by the violence of the army, or the water before them. Maybe it would have been better to have remained slaves! Bad as it was, it was predictable.
A strong east wind blew all night long. (Exodus 14:21)

The Hebrews went through the place where the water had been—
with dry feet. Then the wind ceased; Pharaoh’s army was destroyed.
Now they indeed were free! Now indeed they were free! Free at last!
Free at last! Finally—free! No more bondage; no more bricks; no
more work; no more external authority; no more rules made by other
people: they were free. In the exuberance of their freedom, they
continued with Moses to the place where they worshipped their God.
They thanked him for deliverance.

After a while—like children on school vacation—the question arose:
Now what?

They complained about their freedom. How were they to eat and
drink? Looking into that horrid past, it suddenly seemed rosy: there
was plenty of food in Egypt; perhaps they should go back. The Nile
river ran through Egypt; plenty of water. Suddenly they toyed with
going back to the past. Power requires responsibility; is it worthy it?

Give back that freedom—which required them to use the minds that
the Lord God had given them. They wandered around in a
wilderness for a long time—forty years. They experimented with
many things; strange gods; strange practices; peculiar interpersonal
relationships. They complained about the responsibility of their
freedom. They could not get along with each other even when Moses
supplied them with leadership and rules from God. They did not
understand the rules and chose not to follow them. Even the new
leadership became weighed down with the failure of free people to be
responsible for their interrelated lives. More than once they
complained that slavery (no power) in Egypt was preferable to
freedom (power). They were free, but they did not know how to live
with their freedom.

In spite of their many failures to accept the freedom they had been
given, they did not turn back. They moved on to the Promised Land
—that place of hope—where all their expectations of the meaning of
freedom would come true. The Promised Land was not like Egypt: it
was a land where they would be in charge. No one would tell them
what to do; they would have food in abundance; each person would
have his or her own home; all children would be above average; life
would be, in a word, a bowl of cherries. Hope in the future helped
them overcome their displeasure with the present; and they rejected
the concept of turning back to the past.

But it was not exactly what they had expected.

All this is included in Jesus’s specific direction:
Do this for my anamnesis/remembrance/recalling. Why?
First of all, the Eucharist is associated with the Passover festival.
Whether it was the night before the Preparation of the Passover as in
the Fourth Gospel, or whether it was the First night of Passover is not
really as important as the direct association with Passover. Passover
is the celebration of freedom. More than that: Passover is the
celebration of the unmerited love of God—love freely given for no
reason imaginable by the human mind.

The only reason that the first Passover took place is that God loved
those whom God chose to set free. Abject slaves; living with all
decisions made by others; poverty; negative worth; powerless people;
people with absolutely nothing in their favor, not a single positive
item—in the way that humans (separated from God by sin) look at
things. Yet God brought the freedom and gave them power over
their lives.

This was done in accordance with their own recollection of someone
named Abraham. This Abraham, their legends had it, was a very old,
childless man who was very wealthy and powerful in his time. He had
a vision of the **LORD GOD**. God promised him that Abraham would have children more than the stars of the heavens, than the sands of the sea. This happened at the end of Abraham’s life. Yet it was the beginning of Abraham’s life that started it all. Without question, Abraham left his homeland at God’s direction, went west, and, by being faithful, he became successful as the world sees success.

But in the one thing which everyone thought to be of great importance, Abraham’s life was incomplete. He had no child to inherit his estates. When he had the vision as a very old man, when God announced that he would become a father at the age of 100 – married to Sarah, who was in her 90’s – Abraham believed: – that is, Abraham had faith. That faith set him free from fear for his estates. For no valid **human** reason Abraham was the object of the love of God. God’s loved showered on him and Sarah, and Isaac was born.

To test Abraham’s faith, Abraham was asked to sacrifice (kill) his son Isaac as an act of worship to God. When Abraham raised the knife to kill his son, God recognized Abraham’s faith: and “it was counted to him as righteousness.” A ram was caught in the thicket, and the sacrifice was completed. (John the Baptist called Jesus “the Lamb of God.”) Faith, such as Abraham’s; or faith, such as the slaves had: faith resulted in the love of God being released on them.

The Love of God is the essence of the Creation. It is the primary force of union and of creation. The only thing that prevents humans from receiving this bountiful, gracious love of God is the selfishness that places something other than God at the center of life.

**MAKING THE PEOPLE OF GOD**

**THE HOLY EUCHARIST**

5. **Why “Do this?” (Part 4)**

Freedom from slavery was the original note of the Passover. But in the ‘concreteness’ of the Hebrew language, it was easily moved from the real slavery of the body to real slavery to sin – of any sort. Just as the slavery of the body cannot be removed by self, so also slavery to sin cannot be removed by self. Before we continue on this first theme and its relation to the Eucharist, we must first complete the presentation of the other two themes previously mentioned.

The second **Great Theme** of the Old Testament is the one announced in Isaiah 40. (In fact, it might do well if the reader would read at least the first 11 verses of this chapter.) Again, what it was the led to this announcement is seen by the Hebrews – and us, their successors – is the **unexpected** graciousness of God. Very little was said about this in the Church when most of us were brought up; indeed, not much is said even today.

After the Passover event the Hebrews spent forty years (a long time) wandering in the wilderness. They were experiencing their new found freedom – like adolescents, they tried out all kinds of new things and ideas: worship of other gods; flouting proper authority; complaining about food and drink; experimenting sexually; banding together against elders; replacing old traditions with their own new ideas and so on. Eventually they entered a **territory** that they called the **Promised Land**. This territory, they believed, was Abraham’s heritage – at least tradition said some of it was. So the Nomads who had settled in comfort in Egypt under Joseph, and then become slaves after Joseph’s death, now had a **territory** of their own. (Of course, to get it involved much horrible military action, retold in the books of
Joshua and Judges.)

Set free from slavery, now they had this territory that they called their own. Once they had settled there, and formed a kind of union of the clans for mutual protection, they began to act like other nations. Their own traditions really didn’t allow this copying, yet they set out to do it. Their freedom was a physical freedom; it was their territory, and they set out to make it their land. Although they knew that their God was also their king, they wanted to have a “real” king to rule over them. In that way they could have their own kingdom. Perhaps they did not recognize that their real goal was to have the “Kingdom of God.” (Our Father who art in heaven... thy kingdom come...) Whatever they may have thought, they set out to have a king over them; Saul was chosen/anointed (messiach).

Saul didn’t work out.

David was chosen/anointed (messiach) to succeed him, and the Promise (Covenant) made to Abraham and his descendant children (the twelve tribes) was reformulated to apply to David and his descendant family. David’s successor son Solomon was able to use brute force and politics very well: the boundary of the country reached its greatest extent – but at a terrible human cost.

When the genealogy in the first 17 verses of Matthew’s Gospel is examined it will be noted that it falls into three sections: The first section begins with Abraham and leads to a high point with David. (The Covenant was initiated with Abraham and his descendants; that Covenant was restated to be with David and his descendants. [The Eucharist celebrates the New Covenant])

The second section of Matthew’s genealogy indicates what happened after David. It was all down hill. The list of kings after David shows how they continued to fail in their task of being the kingdom of God; instead they followed their own policies, and so lost the entire territory.

The northern Ten “Tribes” had vanished from the pages of history in the eighth century BC. In 586 BC the southern “tribe of Judah” – David’s tribe – (all that was left of the original Twelve) was sent to exile in Babylon. It was a similar exile in the eighth century that had destroyed the Northern Kingdom.

But the North had not had the advantages of the work of the Deuteronomist in the seventh century BC; nor had they had Jeremiah and Ezekiel. It was the Deuteronomist (kings Hezekiah and Josiah) who saw that the past history showed the hand of God at work to bring God’s will into fulfillment. The Deuteronomist saw that God was at work in the events that happen on the grand scale and on the individual scale. Our God – yours and mine – is a God who not only created everything there is, but our God is intimately concerned that the will of God be fulfilled in the way in which humans relate to each other and the rest of Creation and the God who made it all.

(This God is not the god most of us learned about in Sunday School or in comparative religion classes. The god we learned about is a god who made everything; created laws of nature; and set it all running. Even what we call “freedom of will” (many classical Protestants and fundamentalists in fact deny any kind of “free will”) is, under this god, a pre determined matter. (Behaviorist psychology is far from dead, even though it is in disrepute today.) It is because of this god that we have such things as “Acts of God” as clauses in Insurance Policies; that we believe in a kind of fatalism; that we believe people cannot be healed, they must be imprisoned or executed; that we try to earn salvation by “obeying rules”, by “not sinning”, by being racist or in other ways denying our direct human-family-connection with all other humans. The god most Americans believe in is far, far from the
biblical concept – this is especially true of most fundamentalists. This god is the god of the “enlightenment”: cleaned up somewhat from the deist concepts many of us also learned. This god is only concerned that his will be obeyed.)

The end of the second section of Matthew’s genealogy is the Great Exile in Babylon. As described in the Bible – and according to usual practice in non-biblical records – the leadership in religion/politics, business and education were exiled from their homeland – the territory of Abraham – and brought to Babylon to live. This was not the worst thing – objectively – that could have happened.

Babylon was one of the great centers of life and culture in the ancient world. It “Hanging Gardens” are still remembered as one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. It was exciting; it was wealthy; it was very large; it was filled with many people; many foreign cultures (multicultural in today’s parlance). The Hebrews were – except for the fact that they were not at home – well treated. They were not only not imprisoned, they were encouraged to take full part in the life and culture of their new community. In this way their captors expected to integrate them into their new life in a new country.

But the Babylonians did not expect Jeremiah or Ezekiel.

Read the first 6 verses of the 137th psalm to understand their homesickness and sadness; then read the last three verses to partake of their bitterness.
(This second Biblical Theme will be continued next week.)

**MAKING THE PEOPLE OF GOD**

**THE HOLY EUCHARIST**

6. Why “Do this?” (Part 5)

Separated in Babylon from all they had known, the Hebrews might well be expected to wither and die out as an independent people. To begin with, they had not been great in number at home: in Babylon with all its excitement and sophistication they might well disappear. Certainly that was a large part of the hopes of the Babylonians.

But Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Priests prevented this.

As an answer to the question, “What makes us Jews?” the people in exile came up with these answers: 1. Sabbath; 2. Circumcision; 3. Torah/Teaching; 4. Worship/Synagogues. If the Hebrews would continue to observe the Sabbath Rest; practice Circumcision (not a procedure of the Babylonians); study and live by the Torah/Teaching; and worship their God together at the Synagogues. They would maintain their identity as Hebrews/Jews. Then they could continue loyal to their God, even in the foreign land.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel lamented the displacement; emphasized the importance of maintaining identity; and, when all was said and done, they made it possible for the Hebrews to survive. Ezekiel’s famous Valley of Dry Bones stirs their faith that God will maintain God’s people: God can accomplish this even if it means taking their faithless dry bones and filling them again with the spirit of God.

The priests at this time also began to organize the Bible in the way in which we know it. They took a Babylonian dualistic creation myth and re-wrote it to conform to the Hebrew concept of the one Creator God. They saw that God’s creative energy was well expressed in
humans, who were created in God’s image. They saw God’s Sabbath rest as a preparation for the fulfilment of God’s will. Other parts of the Bible were collected and rewritten to make clear the concept of God’s concerned action in the events that affected the Hebrew people. The Bible texts as we know them are traced to this period.

Perhaps the most important thing that the priests – and others – in exile learned was that it was still possible to worship God in a foreign land. That is, God could be worshiped without the Temple; without animal sacrifices; God could be worshiped through observance of Torah/Teaching. Thus the matter of territory underwent a transformation. Above all – through the teaching of Jeremiah and especially Ezekiel – the concept of hope was born.

Hope – looking to the future for the fulfilment of present needs and desires – took hold of the Hebrews. It was to dominate their lives both in Babylon and later. At first, hope was more a matter of confidence that God would somehow restore them to their homeland. It was because of their faithlessness and false worship that they had lost their homeland. But their faith was certain that their God would never fail to keep his promises; God would be faithful to the Covenant, even if the Hebrews had not been equally faithful.

So their hope was nurtured in their faith that their God still loved them, despite their faithlessness and false worship.

Both Jeremiah – before the actual exile – and Ezekiel – during the exile – placed a great emphasis on the understanding of sin. Sin – in a language that has no capacity for abstractions – was expressed in terms of acts, things done. Both – and especially Jeremiah – Jeremiah and Ezekiel were writing in a manner to internalize the concept of sin. It is not so much the action done as it is the state of mind of the actor – the one who does the act: that is, the sinner, that separates one from God.

Thus Jeremiah writes that “God will write his laws in the hearts of humans”; Ezekiel speaks of giving [the people] a “heart of flesh.” The new concept that the individual is responsible for his/her own actions – sins – finds its origin here. One does not suffer for the sins of parents or tribe: only for one’s own sin. “The parents eat sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge” is one of the ways the old teaching was discussed: no longer will this be said.

At the same time, the concept of the Hebrew God underwent a change. This was associated with the new beginning of the Book we now call Genesis. If God indeed was the great creator who made everything that is from nothing at all, then there could be no other god whatever. No longer was their YHWH “God of gods;” he was the only God there was – anywhere. He was not just superior to the other gods: only YHWH existed at all – indeed, YHWH was existence itself!

This led to the mockery of pagan gods by 2nd Isaiah: They cut down a tree; the smooth it off; they make furniture from it; they burn it in the fire to keep warm; they use it for cooking; then they use what is left over to make a god (statue); they then bow down and say “You made me.”

But, if the pagan gods didn’t exist, who made the pagans? Was it not YHWH? Is not YHWH the only God there is? Therefore, did he not have to have made everything and everybody? Does not, therefore, YHWH also love them, since he made them? Should not they then be brought into the worship of the Hebrew God? If they worship the Hebrew God, should they not also learn the Torah/Teaching?

The YHWH is not only the only God of the Hebrews; he is not the only God there is; he is also the creator of all that is; therefore the
concern of YHWH is the same for all creation – all parts, people things and all.

Thus the idea that the Hebrews had something that was not just for themselves was reborn in the results of the exile in Babylon. They were chosen not just to be the people of YHWH; they were chosen to be a *priesthood* for all the world. In their relationship to their God was to be found the ultimate meaning of human life for all people; and this meaning was a way in which all humans could learn to live together in peace.

It was, however, the seeds for this that were sown in Babylon. The full bloom was not to come until a later time.

Meanwhile, the Hebrews continued to live and grow and develop in Babylon. Life there was apparently fairly pleasant. The Hebrews flourished; started businesses; married and had children; taught their children their faith; and – even as they got themselves comfortably settled – they continued to express their *hope* that their God would act and bring them once more to the *territory* of Abraham.

At the same time, life in this busy, exciting and sophisticated city got to them. Perhaps some of their prayer become more formal than fervid; perhaps they wanted to “Go home, but not just yet...”

(It is best to stop at this point this week. The next thing that happens absolutely blows their minds. It will be better to start with this event next week rather than end with it this week. eph.)

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**MAKING THE PEOPLE OF GOD**

**THE HOLY EUCHARIST**

7. Why “Do this?” (Part 6)

Out of the clear blue sky, like a thunderbolt, came the sudden announcement from the conqueror of Babylon, Cyrus: The Hebrews may return home to Jerusalem!!! Not only could they return, but Cyrus apparently permitted them to take back the booty the Babylonians had taken from the Temple: gold and silver sacrificial plates and other implements.

Oh! the excitement. The wonder. God had acted on their behalf. Finally. The exile was ended; bondage was ended; the penalty for past sin was completed; they would go back home!

In the bible, this is the content of Isaiah chapters 40 - 55 – called by most people, Second Isaiah. These chapters are well worth reading.

Everything was going to be OK. Back to their own territory. Like it used to be. It was so exciting: the trip would be so easy to return home: valleys would be filled in; hills would be made smooth. Most important of all, **Everyone** would see the glory of God. He had acted in a foreign land, by means of a ruler who had never heard of the God of the Hebrews. Not only that, but the people in Jerusalem who waited in desolation for the return would be filled with joy.

Their hope had never dwindled; their trust in their God was unwavering. They knew beyond all doubt, that their God would act to redeem them. After all, that is what the Covenant was all about; God, in his holiness, in his glory, in his *shekinah* presence, God would never fail to keep his promises. The descendants of Abraham would return to their homeland; the (revised) Covenant with the family of David (Tribe of Judah) brought them all home.

The more they thought and prayed about this, the more wondrous the
Homecoming became. The Temple was in Jerusalem. The Temple. Again, they could worship correctly at the Temple. Animal sacrifice would be restored; proper worship again. Synagogues were OK – but now, the Temple would be back.

God was bringing them back to the place where God dwelt – the Temple. It would be like a gigantic family reunion! A fantastic party! A joyous feast! A great feast where the Host was their very own God – the only God there is, the God who made everything – God himself would preside at the heavenly banquet! Oh! the joy, the happiness that would attend their return! It was beyond imagination!

And the whole world would see that it had happened! And as a result Jerusalem would become the center of the world. Every nation would want to have a God like their God. It even appeared in the 87th psalm: “Of Zion it shall be said, ‘Everyone was born in her.’”

Now the rest of the world would pay attention to Jerusalem, the Hebrew people and their God. Now they would be seen by everyone to be a formidable nation; a nation to be reckoned with; a nation the equal of any other. Their dreams when they first sought a king would finally be fulfilled. Their God had acted to redeem; their God now showed his power.

The smallest tribe of the twelve tribes of former nomads was to inherit the fulness of the Covenant Promises to Abraham; the successors to the slaves delivered by Moses were now seen to be free persons equal to any in the world; their God was showing their importance to everyone. No nation could ignore or fight them now! Their warfare was ended.

How proud they were!

As things turned out, the actual Return was somewhat less than the anticipation.

After all, Babylon was a great city, if not the greatest city in the world. (Rome was just beginning to become a small settled village.) Many of the Hebrews had thriving businesses; the culture and sophistication of Babylon was very attractive. It wasn’t really necessary to have the Temple, so long as they continued to observe the Sabbath, practice Circumcision, read (and practice) the Torah/Teaching, and worship in the synagogues. And the trip would not be easy, no matter what the poet said. Indeed, some of the Hebrews in fact were assimilated into the new nation. The actual number who went back was apparently quite small – disappointingly small.

And when they got back, they faced a ruined city. The Babylonians had destroyed it. What little that was left standing was not fit for anything. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe how they first built the foundations of the Temple, but then built their own homes and not much more. The prophet Haggai reproves them for building their own homes, but not the Temple.

Time went on and the joyous return they had anticipated did not in fact happen. All that could be said was that some of the Hebrews had returned home. Under great pressure, they were unable to cope with all that needed to be done. And – once again – they began to marry outside their own traditions. That, as in the past, brought foreign gods and foul worship. Instantly a crack-down came. No foreign wives. The most important thing was to get the worship back in order, and to observe all the Laws of Ritual Purity. With much effort, they got the Temple built, and began the regular worship. They began to become more and more interested in the Ritual Purity rules and regulations.

Most of us were taught that this system of rules and regulations was a kind of meaningless formalism; it allowed anything, as long as the ritual cleansings were observed. It was, we were taught, meaningless ‘ritual for its own sake,’ a formalism that is certainly not found in our kind of religion!

Whatever we were taught, the Purification Laws were not a mere
formalism. They were extremely important, and they were very carefully observed, and they served to bring peace to Hebrews as they observed these rules and shared in the Temple worship.

But all this put a great damper on the concept of the Great Return; the wondrous Homecoming; the Heavenly Banquet. Their relationship to their God was, in their minds, somewhat diminished.

Yet their faith in their God (also our God) was absolute. God would keep his covenant promises. God was faithful. What was needed was for them to be patient, and wait until they were fully purified. God had acted partway; for they were now back in Jerusalem. But the time for the final act of God was in the future. Later on a new ruler would come, and a new anointed one – messiach (Messiah) – would bring the final fulfilment of the action of God. They needed to be both patient and faithful in their practice of their religion.

At first they had full control of their government as well as their religion. But near the end of the 4th century BC Alexander the Great arrived from Greece. He conquered every nation in sight, and, using the teachings of his tutor, Aristotle, placed persons in power who would allow the keeping of local customs. But Greek was to become the regular language.

Then Alexander died.

Making the People of God

THE HOLY EUCHARIST

8. Why “Do this?” (Part 7)

With the death of Alexander the Great – in his early thirty’s – the vast territory he had conquered was fought over by his generals. Each wanted his own share of power, and Alexander’s empire was divided into three parts. Palestine/Israel was in the middle part.

This land – Palestine/Israel – was of great importance. Then, even more than now, it was very fertile, and produced much food. (That is probably the main reason Rome wanted this land – to provide food for the mainland of Italy and the scattered Roman army.) It was also a highly traveled territory between Egypt and many points to the East: Babylon (Iran/Iraq, India, perhaps even China). There was much wealth to be had in its control. That is why it was so important then – as now.

At first the Ptolemies (320-200 BC) – the Greek successors to Alexander – continued his ways. But as time advanced, so did their greed both for wealth and power. They allowed the local government to continue under the leadership of the High Priest.

The Syrian Antiochus III defeated the Ptolemies, and took over the land from them. His successor (a name to be remembered), Antiochus Epiphanes, made cozy with Menelaus the High Priest. On December 25, 167 BC, they placed a statue of Zeus in the Temple at Jerusalem. This precipitated the Maccabaean revolt (the subject of Handel’s oratorio, Judas Maccabaeus). On December 25, 164 BC Judas Maccabaeus cleansed the Temple from its desecration, and restored the Temple worship. Today this event is still commemorated as Hanukkah, the Feast of Light, by modern Jews.
By 140 BC the office of High Priest and King had been combined, outraging many. This arrangement continued until Pompey, the Roman General conquered the territory in 63 BC, in order to provide food for Rome and its armies. Jesus was born somewhere about 6 BC.

There were many strains throughout this tumultuous time, as can well be imagined. The Pharisees first appear on the scene around 150 BC, as a group dedicated to restoring the religious practice of the Hebrews. They worked from within the system as best they could. It became more and more difficult, as the quest for power by the High Priest increased. Some, as the Dead Sea Scrolls indicate, in fact left the main body of the Hebrews, claiming that they alone were the inheritors of the Covenant promises.

The above just barely indicates the confusion caused by the uncertainty of rule. When the disappointment of the failure of the Return from Exile to materialize as it had been anticipated is added in, one can almost experience the distress. And that distress destroyed whatever unity the Hebrew religion might have had. There were many forms of this religion, and within the past 50 - 75 years we have learned much about the popular religion of the Hebrew people.

But before we continue on this aspect of things, we must first present the third of the Great Themes of the Bible: Temple/Priesthood.

Central to the renewal of the Covenant with the family of David was the exaltation of the Temple at Jerusalem. Thus – apparently – during the time in Exile, the priestly writers edited the inherited scriptures to make this clear. Although much of the text of the Old Testament makes it clear that each of the “high places” was a place of sacrificial worship, complete with its own priest(hood), to make a good case for the unity of the people of God in exile, the priests used Aaron, the brother of Moses, as the beginning of a hereditary priesthood, replacing the ancient(?) Levitical priesthood (the tribe of Levi, who had no land in the territory of Palestine). (The priesthood was needed, among other things, when the diet required meat, and the word for “priest” is cohen which also means in modern Hebrew, “butcher.”)

When Jerusalem became the capital of the united Kingdom under David, its unity was signified and sealed in its relationship to God. It became very important to make this clear to the exiles in Babylon, so as to firm up their faith and hope and trust that God would act to restore them to Jerusalem, that city of their unity. (This is still the issue in the current negotiations between modern Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Israel still does not wish to relinquish or divide Jerusalem.) Much attention is paid in the texts of the bible to the events that made Jerusalem and its Temple the center of Hebrew life.

Again and again the successor kings to David married foreign wives, who brought their foreign religions with them. Apparently the kings often established “other temples” for their wives; sometimes even placing something in the Temple for their wives to venerate. This practice is highly and widely criticized in the bible literature.

At the same time, anything that pointed to the importance of the Temple and its priesthood was magnified by these priestly editors. While they could not make David the builder of the Temple, they did attribute its architectural design to David; the Solomon became the actual builder of the Temple. (The fact that Solomon’s construction of the Temple as a “chapel of ease” for the greater royal palace is not immediately clear in the present text of the bible. Nor is the more important fact that these construction projects nearly bankrupted the new nation; not to mention the enslavement of a substantial segment of Hebrews!)
The priestly emphasis moved the Feast of Passover from the home where it had originally been celebrated to Jerusalem. A pilgrimage was expected to Jerusalem at least annually for Passover, Booths (Pentecost), Unleavened Bread (later combined with Passover), and others. However, none ever lost the ultimate reason for all this importance: the matter of redemption from sin, i.e., separation from God. This was the reason for everything.

While the understanding of God as the great creator, the only God there is, is developed in the first chapter of Genesis, it is the second chapter that begins both the evil of sin and the good of God's act of redemption. Adam and Eve (actually, in those days, only Adam) were a major part of all this. God had created them as the “governors” (rulers) of Creation.

It was to their failure that God responded in his Covenant for redemption. Abraham was, in effect, a new Adam, and so the covenant was made with him. The faith of Abraham replaced the presumptuous pride of Adam. And just as the original Adam was to be the father of a multitude, so Abraham was to be that father. The Covenant was sealed with sacrifice.

Thus the importance of Sacrifice; thus the importance of any altar; but when the Covenant was renewed with David, and directly placed on the descendants of David, then the relationship with God needed to be that established by David = the Temple at Jerusalem. And the Temple could not function without a priesthood to manage its affairs, and preside at its worship. (More on this next week.)

**MAKING THE PEOPLE OF GOD**

**THE HOLY EUCHARIST**

9. Why “Do this?” (Part 8)

The importance of this third (and last) of the major themes of the Bible cannot be overestimated. Because of the placement of the priesthood in the scheme of things; because of the centrality of the Temple and its significance as the locus of the presence of God; because of the union of the office of High Priest and King; this third theme not only dominated, but almost obliterated the other two themes. The theme of Freedom from Slavery and the theme of Homecoming/Family Celebration almost vanished. (This is especially important when the medieval church is considered. The same thing happened: the priesthood and the institution of the church were so much exalted that the themes of Freedom and Rejoicing were all but lost.)

To comprehend what in fact happened, we need to go back again and look at the history as it is told. Again, it must be pointed out that there is no such thing as objective history. All history (description of an event = news) is told from the point of view of the bias of the observer (bias is a neutral word, not a negative one.) As has been said before, the TV news broadcast on the evening of the escape from Egypt, the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, is going to be told in a very different manner in Egypt than it is in Israel! The Bible is written by several groups of people, each group having its own bias. But all the biases in the Bible are reflections of the religion of the Hebrew people, and are recognized as such. Newer interpretations (biases) are often written along side of the old. This makes it difficult for those who may not share the biases (e.g., us). But it is important for us – if we are to understand what is happening – to make the effort to enter into the bias, if not fully adopt it ourselves.
Two things happened in Babylon. First, the Hebrews learned to take actions that would identify them as a people for all time. This identity did not include territory (land, nation); it did include religious custom: Circumcision, Sabbath, Torah/synagogue. Second, their concept of God was radically altered. Their Creator God had to be the only God there is; and he had to be the God for everyone there is. There is a third thing that we today must note, even though it was assumed in Bible times: God is active in his universe, and his activity is discovered by looking backward in history. When we look backward, we can see a plan, a design in what happens.

The Hebrews had to ask themselves these questions. Why is it, that this group of nomads with no homeland both get and lose a homeland? How can these people, illiterate as they were, become a people of the highest literary quality in a major flowering of human genius in the eighth century B.C.E.? Why, when all hope seems to have been extinguished, are they suddenly returned to their homeland? And, most important of all, What is the meaning of, and how are they to deal with, the failure (presumed) of the great promise of the Return from Babylon?

Part of the answer is the same answer that has appealed to all nations throughout recorded history: how to dominate both one’s own people and other nations. This often is “excused” by saying that it is to “protect a food or water chain” or some other external excuse. By keeping ordinary people always involved in production for war, rulers were able to keep them subjugated and generally happy at the same time. This exaltation of war and the domination of others has continued even into our time, even permeating the education of young people. (We continue this in computer games and some of the strange movies seen in theaters and on TV.)

Some of the Hebrew people did exactly the same thing. Eventually the High Priest actually became the ruler of the people, and thus in charge of war! This was (and is) the strain that has understood part of God’s plan: that there is a unification of the people under the aegis of their relationship to God. The High Priest identified himself with this, and so tried to set up a God-centered nation, with his office at the top. (This continues down to our own time: e.g., the Queen of England is the Head of the National Church of England; it is also true in some of the Islamic nations and in parts of Africa.)

But violence and domination of others is always wrong; and solves nothing. (Look at Iraq, Afghanistan, e.g.)

Many others looked in different ways for the action of their God. Some saw that in fact, the Return had not yet happened. It was still an event that was coming in the future. These people, many of whom lived in Galilee, kept looking into the future. “The Kingdom of God will come,” they said; “the rule of God is on its way;” and, “God will act in history to save and finally redeem his people.”

This will happen as the real Return from Exile.

As did their forebears, so also these people wrote down their hopes and aspirations and expectations. Because they already understood the truth unknown to the ancient prophets and writers – that God acted in the events of history – they wrote about that history-to-come. They wrote about it in fantastic language. They had a powerful hope: they had zero knowledge as to what might happen. But they knew beyond all doubt that God would act; and that he would act in the events of history.

We call their writings Apocalyptic.

Some of it appears in the Book of Daniel. (Daniel almost didn’t make it into the Old Testament as we know it; most of it is not written in Hebrew, but in Aramaic – the common language of the inter-
testamental people.) More of it appears in the *Apocrypha* – without which an Episcopalian/Anglican Bible is incomplete.

There are two kinds of apocalyptic literature; but they are closely related. One reaffirms (faltering?) faith. Daniel in the Lion’s Den/the Flaming Fiery Furnace. Daniel’s faith affirms that he will remain faithful to God no matter what happens – whether he is saved or perishes. God will act how God pleases and when God pleases and human ideas of what God’s action should be are of no significance whatever. After all, human ideas of what God’s action/laws should be are the cause of sin/separation-from-God in the first place. Nothing can occupy the place in human life that belongs to God. Apocalyptic writing, when it is understood correctly, can bring about great hope and trust in God. That is why it appears in the New Testament both in the Gospels and in the Revelation of St. John the Divine – also called the *Apocalypse of John*.

The second kind of apocalyptic literature includes stories of the judgement and ultimate victory of God (see Susanna in the Apocrypha, as well as *Revelation* or *The Apocalypse of John*.) Some of this kind of apocalyptic appears in the Gospels in the New Testament. By telling a story placed in the future, the writer gives strength and direction to those reading it in the present. That is the purpose of the Matthew 25:31 ff story about the sheep and goats: In as much as you have done it one of the least of these my brothers, you have done it to me. . . Even though the Kingdom of God has come and has come not exactly the way you expected it to come, it has come, and this is how you are to treat others: as if they were the Lord Jesus. The judgement has come: God-lovers behave this way.

“Do this to make me present.”

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**MAKING THE PEOPLE OF GOD**

**THE HOLY EUCHARIST**

11. “For my recalling:- in remembrance of me.”

The three threads of the Bible history are essential for the understanding of the meaning of the Bible for today. But it is important – before proceeding – to see what happened to these historical threads.

In order for us to understand what has happened, it is important that we put aside one of those fundamental “truths” which we have all been brought up to believe is “self-evident.” (As is true with most such “self-evident” truths, they are self-evident only to those who find them true. Humans are quite capable of seeing “self-evident truth” through dirty or distorting glass: theologically that is called “sin.”) The fundamental “truth” to be set aside is the one that says there is such a thing as “objective truth, or fact.” This objectivity – so called – underlies much of modern society, not only events. It is the basis of much science. In order to determine what happened, one must be careful to report only what happened. There is then no distortion of the event, and we can “know” the “truth” about the event.

When Pilate asked “What is truth?,” Jesus said nothing.

Quantum physics – somewhere – discovered the problem that when certain events are observed, the event of observation alters the event itself. One wonders if – as is the case with such minute events – this is in fact a “fundamental truth.” We become aware of this in minute events. But as the events become larger, is the effect of the observer either lost in the “objectivity”, or is it subsumed into the event itself? In either case, what we call “objectivity” has vanished.

However, by using this “myth” of “objectivity” many modern persons
have stated that there is no causal connection – or relationship – between events. When this is accepted – or believed – then any concept of “purpose” must also vanish. Where there is no purpose, there can be no plan: and if no plan, there is no need for any kind of a god, Christian or otherwise. This concept of “objectivity” can, when carried to an extreme, result in a loss of faith. Yet we seem to miss that the “scientists” themselves see ultimate objectivity as not part of the scheme of things.

The ancient Hebrews understood this exactly. They knew that total objectivity can belong only to God. Only God can know the whole truth. For that reason, part of the definition of God is: God is truth. St. Ignatius of Loyola said something like this in a totally different context, but it seems to fit here: All of us stand in a circle around God; we each look at God; we each see God; none of us sees all of God; none of us can know the whole of God; we need to share with each other what we do see to deepen the understandings of each other.

This is in fact what science does: they keep looking at an event or its repetition, and when they keep seeing pretty much the same thing, it becomes “objectified.” Thus, when the same events are repeated, the same results follow. Thus it is predictable. There must be a plan, or predictability will not follow.

The Hebrews went one step farther. If it is predictable and if there is a plan, then there must be a purpose. That requires intellect – and the Hebrews recognized that if they could think about this, even in their imperfect way, then there must be a greater intellect that put it all together. The word they use for the name of God is a form of the verb “to be.” So in describing God through a name, they chose a concept that is the essence of reality – being itself.

They also had no difficulty in the concept that God’s creative activity involved a plan. However, it took them a while to find the meaning of the plan that God had.

The three Biblical threads that have been the subject of the past several weeks of *The Faithful Skeptic*, plus the concept of the Creator God made it possible to take the “objective facts” of their own history, and discover (have revealed to them) a large portion of the Plan that God had for his creation.

For that to be useful and meaningful, the Hebrews realized that humans had to have been created with a share of the intellect that God is. Only then could they be able and capable of discerning the plan of God. In their own way, they followed the modern scientific method: again and again, they observed what happened in God’s creation. They saw how in so far as they could tell, humans were the part of creation that was most like God.

Experience (observation) again and again told them that humans would rather be God, than use their humans gifts – God given as they are – to serve God’s plan. Experience (observation) again and again showed them that when something other than God was the motivating force in life, only pain and misery of one sort or another could result. Experience (observation) told them that when this was corrected, a wholeness (salvation) reasserted itself, a wholeness that was lost when God was not the motivating force in life.

The separation from God, the failure to use God as the motivating force in life was called “sin.” When one lived in “sin” – separation from God as the motivating force in life – one’s experience of God and often of life in general was painful. But the same observation and experience showed them that God was creative, and therefore God’s plan had to be creative, and creativity underlay creation. Sin, then – again, observation and experience showed this – was highly unnatural, un-Godlike. God – the creator God – had to be involved in Creation, which is an ongoing process. (Self evident fact: if it were not an ongoing process, nothing would ever change.)

God’s involvement in Creation then did several observable things. First, in effect, there was constant supervision. Thus things evolved, or
developed into more useful things – useful, that is, to creation, not necessarily to humans. Second, there appeared to be a means for correcting the problem of sin. It was called redemption. It too was part of the fundamental process of constant creation.

But observation also showed that the majority of creation did not notice this process. (Just as most of us do not notice that there can be no objective reporting of “facts:” the reporter always sees from a particular point.)

Observation also showed the ancient Hebrews that their history did not fit the usual pattern of other peoples. Was this really so? And if it were really so, Why was it so?

Using their intellect, using the process that we do not understand and which we call “prayer” they saw in the life of their nation a meaning and a purpose that was not for them alone. They were chosen by God – so to speak – (theologically called “election”) to serve as a pattern, an example, a paradigm of purpose, meaning and plan for all humanity.

This plan, paradigm, this “election” was not a position of privilege in the sense that it gave a kind of honor and glory usually found among nations. What it did was redeem humanity by making a new creative act of energy that would bring a whole new world into being. A world that brought peace and brotherhood for all.

MAKING THE PEOPLE OF GOD
THE HOLY EUCHARIST

12. “For my recalling:- in remembrance of me.” (2)

As we look back from our vantage point, with the tools for study that have developed over the centuries, we have begun to see how this all worked itself out. But even today, while there is an overall general agreement on many of the broad themes, there are those who cannot understand the concept of development. These persons, therefore, are unable to appreciate the great and splendid beauty and glory of the Bible. They seem to see only a book of rules put out by a god whose main motive is anger: humans better do as this god orders, or . . .

At the time that Jesus was born there was a rich tapestry of ideas and concepts relating to the religion of the Jewish people. Still primary was the freedom that brought the Hebrew People into existence as the Paradigm (Chosen) People of God. Along with that was the overwhelming concept of monotheism, thought out as it had never been thought out before. The Hebrew One God had to be the God of every human being. Because of the oppression of the Roman Empire – which needed this fertile area to help feed its army and citizens in Italy – and the religious conviction that Yahweh would act, there was an air of expectancy. This conviction was fed by the continuing apocalyptic writings (some included in the Apocrypha, some in the Book of Daniel).

The records from the time show that there were a number of uprisings led by a great variety of people. They ranged from scoundrels to very pious religious persons. A number proclaimed themselves to be the messiah. In fact, after the Resurrection, there were still persons claiming that status. It lasted not only through the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, but through the final revolt in 130 AD.
Running through all this ferment and fervor was the conviction that the Return from Exile (Isaiah 40 – 55, e.g.) had been postponed until the Messiah came. So they were looking for the sign of the Return, the Celestial Banquet. (Is this what Jesus meant when he said at the wedding at Cana “My time has not yet come”? He did not drink the water made wine; indeed, not until he was on the Cross did he drink wine. Was this to signify the beginning of the heavenly Banquet, sponsored by the Messiah, who, by his death on the Cross was about to accomplish the redemption (salvation) of humanity?)

There is one other matter – which was referred to earlier in this series – and that is the matter of the sin of pride.

The Temptations of Jesus are the basis for the Baptismal renunciations: the world, the flesh and the devil.

The world, of course, has to do with possessions; when this renunciation is carried to its fullest meaning, a vow of poverty is taken. But all Christians are expected to change in a fundamental manner their relationship to possessions, to external richness.

The flesh has to do with feelings or emotions, internal matters; taken to its fullest meaning, a vow of chastity is taken. One must remember, however, that sex has to do with knowledge, in the language(s) Jesus used. Thus it is not limited just to sexual expressions, but to all “feelings” and internal emotions. All Christians are expected to change their lives in a fundamental manner in regard to these matters.

The devil is the greatest of the problems. It is here that we humans most often fail. The devil has to do with the presumption that our reason, logic and intellectual skills are perfect and need guidance from no one, neither God nor fellow humans. This is the flaw in much prayer – prayer time is often used to explain to God what he ought to do. Our minds are used to detail not only the thoughts, but how they shall be brought into being. And it works in lots of ways: an architect, for example, uses the intellect to produce the details of a building, and it is constructed and looks like the intellectual idea. But when the devil gets involved in the relationship with God, many things go wrong.

From our vantage point, we can look back, with those intellectual tools which we have perfected, and see what was happening. Often our pride keeps us from seeing that the Hebrews had a serious problem. They – the Hebrews – had pretty well doped out the development process the Bible shows us. They knew that Yahweh would act; they knew that when Yahweh acted, he would restore the Kingdom to Israel through the action of the Messiah. They knew that the Messiah would bring all nations under the Aegis of Israel.

Their pride was such that they knew how Yahweh would act. The messiah would be a great conqueror, leading a great army, and he would defeat all the other nations of the world. Then they, the Chosen (Paradigm)People, would be seen as the true leaders of all humanity. Jerusalem would become the center of the universe. All people would worship Yahweh at the Temple in Jerusalem. Then the Return would come and be complete; then there would be the Heavenly Banquet. And at the heavenly banquet the Hebrews would sit nearest the heavenly throne, for they were the honored People of God; others would wait on them.

Oh! The sin of pride!

How it places us right square in the center of things! How it exalts us at the expense of others! How it misses the mark!

Yet – again from our special vantage point – they were absolutely correct in the basic premise; yet totally wrong in the details. (Is this where the popular phrase, “The devil is in the details” comes from?)

The loving God who developed later in the life of the Hebrews – he is hard to find in the Torah (first five Books of the Bible), but he is very much there – could not force humanity to do anything, without discrediting the love with which Yahweh endowed humans in their
creation. Further, Yahweh had to do this in a way that both exalts and restores humanity; this means using the normal events of human life. Finally, Yahweh had to do this as the final revelation of himself. “No human has seen God at any time” had to become a thing of the past.

And so it was that Jesus was born.

And with his birth, everything that the Hebrews had looked for, had believed would happen, had expected in the action of Yahweh: – in fact happened. *But not exactly the way they had expected.*

We are still in the process of learning what in fact happened. But the beauty of God’s creation is that it is in progress. That means that each generation can build on the learnings of the previous generation. Without denying the past, we can build on their understandings and develop them.

This is why we Episcopalians need the ministry of Bishops, Priests, Deacons and Laity: in the total ministry of the Church we test out the developments of the present over the past. We need the Bible to give us the basic events. We need the Creeds to proclaim the basic truths from the past; and we need the sacraments to bring us into the spiritual reality where God is all and in all.

“All this for my recalling.”

**MAKING THE PEOPLE OF GOD**

**THE HOLY EUCHARIST**

13. The Messiah – God’s Anointed

Once we place Jesus and the New Testament in its proper perspective, then two things come very clear. First, unlike its Roman and other pagan counterparts, the religion – faith – of the Hebrews was a *total reorientation* of human life. Second, the expectations of the Hebrew people had to be clarified.

All too often our modern concepts of religion ignore the first of these. Religion is something one does on Sunday morning – even on Wednesday evening – because it is “what one does.” Our current official religion – a fundamentalist parody on Gnostic forms of some Protestant theology – is just that.

Because of a “conversion” experience and the relief that God’s forgiveness brings – and it really does come – many will give up *one particular sin* that has bothered them. The person is very grateful to God (and often to the cleric who mediated God’s grace); the person “feels” better.

Since that has been the problem – feeling good – that is the primary result. The alcoholic will no longer drink; the addict will no longer take drugs; the smoker will give up smoking; the marriage cheater will remain faithful; the mean supervisor will become friendly; the spouse abuser will respect the spouse; the three dessert eater will stick to one; and so forth. One part of life is altered – and that part is often very depressing to the person who has the problem. All too often in our American Religion, this is all – or almost all – that happens. The person is restored to better relationships with self and associates – and everyone “feels better.”

All too often the process of Redemption ceases at this point. That
is because our Official American Religion – and many of the fundamentalist (a term with no denominational limit) Christians – is essentially filled with the Gnostic heresy, condemned in Acts, James and Paul. This heresy says that the reality of this world is essentially evil; and that the purpose of religion is to remove the “elect” – “chosen”, “saved”, “redeemed”, “reformed” – from the pain of this world for the joys of the next. There is no Christian fulfillment in this world, (it is said) only a way to hope that by careful living according to the “rules and laws of God” one might possibly “go to heaven” when one dies.

But that, it continues, depends on your behavior here and now.

Whatever this is, it is not the Good News of the Gospel – that God loves you no matter who or what you are or do – simply because God made you, and therefore God loves you. The Good News delivers you from the presumption that you can earn God’s favor, a task that defeats most people who try. Then they give up – return to their former ways, or seek some other outlet for their feelings.

The Hebrews and the Christian Church that is based on the Apostolic Ministry, the Scriptures, the Creeds and the Sacraments, know beyond all doubt that God’s love enfolds you into God’s very life. Thus your life becomes a part of God’s life; your purpose, God’s purpose; your will, God’s will. Redemption then means the reordering, the restructuring, the fundamental changing of all human life. (Called, often, “metanoia.”)

The Hebrews of Jesus’s time saw themselves as the Elect of God, the Chosen of God: they were, in their own minds what Abraham was in the mind of God: a new Adam; a new burst of God’s Creative energy; the vehicle through which God would now pour his love into the world: as God had intended from the first moment of the act of creation.

The Hebrews were the priests that God had promised in Deuteronomy; that was the only reason why this people had been preserved: they had no other reason for existing. They were an enslaved people; effectively they had no territory; they couldn’t even govern themselves; and their worship was corrupted.

But they were absolutely convinced that God would act now to bring all people the benefits of the loving and living God they worshiped. The vast tapestry of opinion as to what God would do was based, however, more on the observation of other nations, than on their religion.

As is often true, this observation of others is really an observation of self. What is found, then, is one’s own desire. This may or may not be what is best for the circumstance: – and even if it is best, it is an accident, not freely chosen. Thus it may or may not survive any problems that may arise.

So the Hebrews looked around and saw the glamor of the other nations. There had been – and to a degree, still was – Egypt. The evidences both present and past – especially in Hebrew archives and memory – of splendor, grandeur, of wealth, of learning, and, of course, in war. There were the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks and now the Romans.

Each of these peoples seemed to thrive because of great military power and might. The size of the empires depended only on the will of the military. And respect: oh!, how these nations were respected! Look at the power, the majesty, the wealth that they had. Somehow, even these people who served the Lord God never noticed that all the wealth and power was concentrated in the hands of a few. They never noticed how these few fought among themselves for more wealth, more power, more evidence that they were indeed powerful.
But the poor: they were – so to speak in this period before gunpowder – cannon fodder. They were the highly taxed ones; they provided the food. Although it may seem that today’s ratio of Chief Executive compensation to middle management compensation of 419:1 is excessive, yet in those Biblical times the gap between the wealthy and the poor was off the charts.

In spite of it all, the Hebrews expected their God to act by making Israel the ruling nation in all the world. A far greater empire than ever seen before. A nation of great wealth. A nation of enormous military might – military might presided over by the anointed of the Lord, the Messiah. The Messiah would come; the Messiah would lead a great army of triumphant Israelites; the vanquished would become the servants – slaves – of the Israelites.

Then the real Return from exile would happen. All that was read in Isaiah 40-55 about the Restoration, about the heavenly banquet, about the worship of the God of Israel by all people would now happen.

And, in fact, it all did happen. But not the way it was expected!

Into this, Jesus was born. It is through his death and Resurrection that all that was anticipated to happen did happen. But for it all to happen, Jesus had to clarify the issues and the expectations.

That is where next week will commence.

MAKING THE PEOPLE OF GOD

THE HOLY EUCHARIST

13. The New Messiah

Last week it was noted that the Hebrews were looking for a Messiah. They knew what the Messiah was to do, because their aspirations over the past several hundred years had developed in a manner that, among other things, defined the rôle of the Messiah.

The Hebrew understanding of reality, the Creation which the Lord God had made, did not fully comprehend the relation of spiritual and material. (This is still a problem for current Christians, although its form is different.) Their expectation was that the spiritual is contained in the external, and that the external defines the spiritual. Thus the sign of God’s rule was contained in external conformity to the worship of God, at the Temple at Jerusalem. Exactly what was in the mind of the worshiper was not as important as the fact that the worshiper was obedient to the law of Worship: that is, did the required things in the required way at the required time.

With this as the frame of reference, the Hebrews then expected that the Messiah would come at the head of a mighty army. Leading that army – with the help of their God – the Messiah would vanquish all other nations. The other nations would then become subject to the restored, reconstituted Israel. The nations – or their leaders – would come to the throne of the Messiah, proclaim their acknowledgment of God, and then go to the Temple and worship God using the prescribed rites.

This would be the Kingdom of God on Earth.

In this Kingdom of God, the will of God would be normative, because the vanquished would acknowledge the supremacy of God, and accept the will of God as defined by scripture, the Messiah and the High Priest – who may or may not be the High Priest. It is easy to read the Lord’s
Prayer in a manner that supports this view of things.

Even the disciples seem to have understood things from this view. James and John wanted to sit on either side of the Messiah’s Throne to share in his exalted position of complete power over all others.

When one begins to examine the Hebrew words that are used to describe the relationships between those governed and the governor; between the ruled and the ruler; between the people and the king; between the sheep and the shepherd; the words “subdue” and “dominion” and “kingdom”; and how all these words and concepts are used in the Bible, it begins to come clear that these words point in a specific direction, but they never fully define what they mean. Left alone, it is likely that they will be seen as supporting that above concept of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Jesus had to begin with where he found people, and then redefine the terms and concepts everyone thought they knew.

That is why Jesus is often portrayed as saying something like, “You have heard in the past . . . , but I say to you . . .” He was taking a familiar concept or word, and redefining it to fit his own idea of who the Messiah was, and what the Messiah was going to do. Indeed, his whole life and ministry did exactly that: redefined and restructured the religion of the Hebrews.

Jesus, in fact, showed how his actions, his teachings and, indeed, his whole life fulfilled the Law and the Prophets – but not exactly as the Hebrews had expected it.

That he was not entirely successful is evidenced in the disputes the disciples had about who was greatest. (Luke 22:24) This comes after the Last Supper in Luke, just before the arrest of Jesus. If his own close friends, those who are called the Twelve, the Disciples, and, especially in Luke, the Apostles didn’t understand Jesus until after the Resurrection, it is not terribly surprising if others failed to comprehend as well.

It is interesting to note that the late Father Raymond Brown, world renowned Roman Catholic New Testament Scholar, put forth a thought provoking idea that fits into these discussions. Father Brown is the world’s expert on the Fourth Gospel, St. John. In his two volume commentary in the Anchor Bible series (and in other places) he concludes that the long chapter four in St. John’s Gospel is of crucial importance. This is the story of the woman at the well in Samaria. You might want to read that story.

Father Brown concludes that the Fourth Gospel was written for a group of people who believed that Jesus was the Messiah, and believed this before his death and Resurrection! He further concludes that this story – which is only in the Fourth Gospel – tells of the beginnings of the Community. (His further conclusion is that the “Beloved Disciple” or “the disciple whom Jesus loved” – who is not the apostle John – is the founder of this pre-Resurrection community of believers and worshipers. While this is very important and very interesting, it is not germane to this discussion.)

You will remember in the Fourth Gospel that when Peter and “the disciple whom Jesus loved” ran to the tomb to see what the women were reporting, Peter looked in and went back to the others, wondering what had happened. But not so the “disciple whom Jesus loved:” he looked in, saw, and instantly believed.

He did not need to see Jesus to believe the Resurrection – he already knew and believed that Jesus was the Messiah, who would restore Israel and, to use the terms we have been using, initiate the Return from Captivity and the Heavenly Banquet for the Community created from the Cross. Again, the Community created from the Cross received its own new life through the Offered-Blood-life of Jesus. Baptism in the Water that flowed from the Offered-Blood-Life of Jesus continued the Community of the Cross.
Baptism and the Eucharist, then, flow from the Cross, and provide life for the Christian Community: New-birth and Nurture. To the Community of the Beloved Disciple, this was easy because everything they knew about Jesus had pointed to this fulfillment of the Scriptures, and to their eschatological hopes and apocalyptic aspirations.

Thus, the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John, presents Jesus in a manner different from the other three Gospels. The others go into more detail about the ministry of Jesus, and how, through the understanding of this, Jesus took the Scriptures and *reinterpret* them to meet the expectations of the Hebrews. Matthew, for example, goes to great effort to show how Jesus fulfilled all the Law and the Prophets. At the same time Matthew shows that Jesus is a new Law-giver, who can both *reinterpret* the Law and also *change* the Law.

The great difficulty we have today is that the New Testament – and other contemporary writings – all reflect the post Resurrection time frame. Often the historic event is presented through the eyes of post Resurrection faith. Peeling this away to find the original event is both very much needed and very dangerous. It is rather like a Grand Jury investigation whose results need to be affirmed or denied with a trial. (More next week.)

**MAKING THE PEOPLE OF GOD**

**THE HOLY EUCHARIST**

14. The New Creation

When one looks back to the time of Jesus, the magnitude of what Jesus did often escapes us. But think for a moment: Jesus was crucified around the year 30 in our time. Crucifixion was the most horrible death, not only for the person crucified, but for everything associated with that person. Jesus’s own followers did not understand what he had done, and without doubt did not expect the Resurrection. Yet within 70 years – the end of the century – the number and influence of the Christians had gone from zero to become such a major threat to the Roman Empire, that there was an *official policy* against the Christians. And the Roman Empire as such collapsed in about 250 years.

It is utterly amazing!

What had happened is that the followers of Jesus finally – following the event of the Resurrection – understood the reinterpretations that Jesus placed before them. They were, after all, ordinary people like you and me. And, like you and me, when something is believed to be in a certain way, we have difficulty in seeing and hearing the new interpretation of the old. We are, as Jesus kept pointing out to his followers, deaf and blind. They believed and followed *their own* interpretations so fiercely that they were unable to hear what Jesus said, to see what Jesus did: indeed, to understand what Jesus was all about. They saw only the ridding of their land of the hated Roman armies, and the restoration of their ancient, traditional religion.

And that is exactly what Jesus did – only not exactly the way they were expecting it to happen. Thus, they missed it.

As the concept of the one God – monotheism – grew, it became
increasingly clear that the great Creator God of the Hebrews was (and could be) the only god there was. Not only was YAHWEH the God of the Hebrews, but YHWH was everyone's god. There was no other god: especially, the Roman Emperor was not a god.

But the God of the Hebrews was not the vindictive god that so many had (and have) assumed. The God of the Hebrews was a God who could only be understood in terms of love. From the very instant of human sin, the God of the Hebrews showed concern by initiating the Covenant. The Covenant promised that God would be with those who had faith in God; that God's love would never waver; that God's love came because God is love, not because it was earned: God's love comes because God chooses to love: indeed, because God is love. God's love comes to those who believe this fundamental fact of the whole created universe.

The fact of the matter is that the God of the Hebrews could be known by looking at, and listening to, Jesus. Jesus was in this world because of the action of the Spirit of God. Matthew and Luke declare this in the narratives of the nativity with which their Gospels begin; John declares that Jesus is the Son of God, God in flesh in a different manner – the Word was made flesh. All four gospels record the coming of the Holy Spirit on Jesus at the time of his baptism by his cousin John. God is no longer invisible; to see and understand God, all one needs to do is look at Jesus.

The Commandment about making representations of God is now overthrown. It is Jesus who sits on the “mercy seat” between the cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. God is totally accessible at any time to all people of faith.

Jesus had reinterpreted the Hebrew idea of God.

Then there was the Covenant/Torah. Faith was utterly at the basis of the Covenant/Torah. Abraham twice showed his commitment: without question, he left his homeland, his family and friends and went to a new, unknown country. Near the end of his life, as he was putting his estate in order, he had faith in God's promise that he would have a son and heir. This was the beginning of the Covenant/Torah – as it is recorded. Moses led the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt to a place they didn't know about, to worship a God they had forgotten about. This was the beginning of the concept of Freedom as part of God's promise to his people in the Covenant/Torah. It renewed and reformulated the Covenant/Torah. God's people are free, and their freedom is found in God. “You shall know the truth (God),” said Jesus, “and the Truth shall set you free.” Instead of a set of rules for earning freedom from sin, the Covenant/Torah is in fact the loving response of the People of God to the fact of God's love.

Jesus had reinterpreted the Covenant/Torah.

Then there was Sin. Sin is the disobedient act formulated in the mind (that is, the image of God in us) that separates us from God. Told originally in Genesis, Israel – the Covenant/Torah People of God – found themselves constantly separated from God because of their actions in sin. The Old Testament details this over and over again, as they placed some other god in the place that belongs only to their own God. The sin of the Northern Ten Tribes was so great that they were exiled by the Assyrians – and vanished from the world stage. Later Judah, the tribe of David's family, sinned so badly that they too were exiled – to Babylon. But in spite of their sin, they were to be redeemed. Cyrus sent them home in the glorious Return, about in which Isaiah glories in chapters 40 - 55. But the Return in fact was not so glorious. Indeed so bad were things that the Hebrews assumed that although they were back in their homeland, yet the Return had not yet really happened. Jesus reinterpreted the Return to mean that the Land to which they were returning was not their place of residence, but the land was the Church, and it had no bounds, since it was for all people. Thus the Return, with all its anticipated joy, was found in the Church. The Church – the land of Israel – encompassed the whole world, in the new family of God.
Jesus had reinterpreted Sin, Separation and Return.

Finally, there was the Temple. The Temple was the presence of God in the City of God. It was there that God had told David he was to plan to build the Temple, and there that Solomon in fact built it. It was there that the Temple had been rebuilt after the failed return from Babylon. It was there that the elaborate ceremonial involving incense and animal sacrifice had been centralized. In the Temple was the shekinah, the glory of God; into the Holy of Holies the High Priest went only once a year, to beg the forgiveness of God on the sins of his people on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. Everyone had to come to Jerusalem in order to participate in the liturgies that took place in the Temple. Here one was made close to God; here the restoration of the People of God with the God was effected and made perfect. Here was the absolute center of the Hebrew religion. When God acted to restore his People, he would do it through the Temple. The Temple was the location of God’s presence. In the Temple, one not only found God, one was made one with God through prayer and sacrifice.

In the Passion Story as told by the first three gospels, as Jesus dies, the Veil of the Temple—the veil that kept the Holy of Holies separate from the rest of the Temple, the place of residence of God’s presence—that veil was torn in two. (Destroyed.) No longer is that the place of the residence of God’s presence. As John’s Gospel puts it, the presence of God among humans is now on the Cross.

Jesus had reinterpreted the Temple.

**MAKING THE PEOPLE OF GOD**

**THE HOLY EUCHARIST**

15. Do this for my recalling - to make me present

What Jesus has done is to reinterpret every part of the heritage of the Hebrew People – the People of God. In the process of doing this, everything that they hoped for, and longed for, and greatly anticipated, happened—but not exactly as they had expected it to be. For the disciples, it was simply the event of the Resurrection. For Thomas, he had to see Jesus in person and have the opportunity to touch him and his wounds. For many it was the testimony of these witnesses, received in the form of preaching and teaching. Some had a sudden insight, an inspiration, such as Paul had. As time went on, much of it came to be written down by a variety of people, some of whom we know as Matthew, Mark Luke and John.

For all their variety, the Gospels tell the same story.

Yet, even though we are quite familiar with the story, we too need to reinterpret it. There are two reasons why this is so.

First of all, whether we are speaking of religion or some other discipline, it is important that every generation, restate (= reinterpret) itself anew. This is because the mind-set, the outlook, we each have is set anew in each generation. We know things that were not known in earlier generations. We see things differently from our parents, from our grandparents—even from our teachers. It is of the very nature of human existence that each generation must reinterpret the past to fit the understanding of the present.

Second, this matter of reinterpretation is especially important when
it comes to religion and the Bible. This is because there are certain matters in religion which are fundamental to all human life. (When these are reinterpreted it often brings about great consternation. It is unfortunate that some of the clergy – who are charged to make this reinterpretation to the people in their care – choose either to avoid the issue by repeating the past, or they reinterpret according to their own personal tastes. This is part of the reason that the Episcopal Church uses the Chicago/Lambeth Quadrilateral: Scriptures, Apostolic Ministry, Catholic Creeds, Sacraments as essential. It protects the People of God from wanton, individualistic, teachings.) It is especially in matters of religion, which are so fundamental to life, that reinterpretation needs to be made each generation. That is why we can preach new sermons, and teach new courses and all the rest of the things that are done. Yet it is true with religion almost more than in other disciplines that much care has to be paid to the past. It is the past that tells the story of what we believe to be the fundamental principles on which human life is lived.

The past century and three quarters has seen the rise of what has been called scientific Biblical criticism. It was a French Roman Catholic priest, Herman Reimarus, who pointed out in the seventeenth century (1600's) that there are great numbers of inaccuracies, inconsistencies and anachronisms in the Bible. (For example, in the familiar story of Noah and the Flood, we all recall how Noah was told in chapter 6 of Genesis to bring into the Ark pairs (2's) of the animals of the earth. In chapter 7 he is directed to take seven pairs of the clean animals and one pair of the unclean animals.) Textual criticism of the Bible was well under way when Darwin wrote “Origin of the Species.” This seminal work is the origin of the idea of “Evolution.” As has been noted recently, this issue is still a matter of conflict for some.

From the very beginning of Christianity in Jerusalem on the third day following the crucifixion, there have been those who want to deny the Hebrew God as the great Creator of all that is, the god who looked out on the “Seventh Day” on all the Creation he had created, and said, “It is good; it is very good.” These people – lumped together with the term 'gnostic' – deny the reality of the created world. This allows them to deny the fundamental truth of monotheism: there is only one God. If there is only one God, then there is only one truth – or else there is no truth!

We learn from the Bible that God created humans in his own image, that is, with a share in the wisdom that is the essence of the God who conceived and created everything that is. We not only can, but we must, make full use of our wisdom – the image of God in us – as we examine and explore the world into which God has placed us. The Bible tells us that humans are to rule, govern, shepherd, guide, lead the rest of the world – in the same manner and fashion as God rules, governs, shepherds, guides and leads us. As we learn more and more about our world and universe, we can see more and more deeply into the very being of the God who made us and it.

Because we are humans – and therefore less than God – we are incomplete in our ability to fully comprehend all there is to know about the reality of the world and universe that God has created and in which we live. So it is, from time to time, as we learn more things about the world and universe, we must modify – sometimes even radically change – what we knew and understood in past generations. We no longer believe, for example, that the earth is flat, nor that the sun revolves around the flat earth. Telescopes in outer space are even now further modifying things that we thought were the ‘last word’ just a few years ago.

When we remember the Biblical teaching that there is only one God, and only one truth, we know beyond all shadow of doubt that there is – and can be – no conflict between science and religion. Because we are humans and not God, and therefore do not understand
everything fully and completely, we may individually be confused or think there is a conflict. **But that is not possible.** We individually may think there is a conflict, but that is just part of our human fallibility.

A wise priest once told me “If you think there is a conflict between what you hear from the Church and what your teachers in college teach you: be assured there is no conflict. It is more than likely that you misunderstood the Church’s teaching, or you didn’t fully understand your teachers. Most likely, you didn’t understand either very well!”

Among the things that all this means is that our idea of God has developed and changed since the Bible was written. God has not changed, just our idea of God has changed. Our task is to understand the essence behind the image of God presented in the Bible and see how it fits into our current understandings of Reality. After all, Reality – Yahweh – is God’s Old Testament name! The Bible itself reinterprets the idea of God several times. The final reinterpretation is that **God is love.** This is not stated by Jesus, but by the author of the First Epistle of John. That author reinterprets God by the Crucifixion on the Cross of Jesus, the Son of God. A God who would allow such must be pure, unadulterated and perfect love. Reinterpretation is required.

Next week: Conclusion.

**MAKING THE PEOPLE OF GOD**

**THE HOLY EUCHARIST**

15. Making the People of God.

When all is said and done, our Western, Latin based minds often have much difficulty in understanding Hebrew and Eastern thought patterns. The Latin part of our heritage makes us literalists and direct; it makes us see and interpret everything in terms of what has come to be called “black and white” – absolutes, positive and direct. We want a precise answer that is “error-free” to every question. We also want a quick and uncomplicated answer.

It is possible to provide such answers. Indeed, our society seems to thrive on such answers. Thus we have political answers; we have artistic answers; we have health-care answers; we have education answers; we have religious answers.

Although in many ways things in contemporary society are better than previously, the groups who demand simple (simplistic?) answers seem to prevent the real kingdom of God from entering this earth.

Changing religion to an ethics system that determines future state (i.e., after death) is perhaps most destructive of the message of the Bible and the message of Jesus. The Creator God of the Bible is both actively and intimately involved in this life, in this world, in the here and now. Remember, the Hebrew language has no **past** tense in the verb: the past is indicated as “completed action.” But the language is very rich in present and future. And the God of the Hebrews – who is the God of the New Testament as well, and therefore **our God** – is very concerned that **this world**, the here and now, be improved, be made more and more like God’s original intention.

**That is what the Bible story is all about.**
God, the Creator of all that exists, included a share of God’s creative energy in creation. That is what makes creation live. As the development of Creation continued, humans evolved with enough of a share of God’s creative energy to participate in the ordering of creation. All it required was for humans to live in accord with the reality of creation, the way God made it to work. Humans would care for it, develop it, seek to understand it – thus seeing more clearly into the very nature of God.

Pride got in the way. Humans separated themselves from God and God’s creation. This affected human relationships with each other and with the rest of creation in a negative manner. This, in turn, brought pain, anger, hatred, violence and the rest of the ills to God’s creation. War, poverty, suffering, anger and hatred are a result. But there is more: exploitation of the very creation itself. It is not that the various parts of creation are not to be used in a manner consistent with the needs of humanity; but often they are misused, wasted, ravaged and depleted. Care and concern are often non-existent; future – the essence of Hebrew thinking – is ignored in selfishness and selfish hedonism.

The Bible story is the record of the self-revelation of God to humans. This self-revelation took centuries. Often we do not realize that God is constantly revealing self to humanity. God’s self-revelation has been partly caught up in many areas, in many civilizations. There is a clearly remarkable foundation of unity of understanding of the nature of human life in many religions. These fundamental concepts are stated in different life- and thought-patterns; and they are very consistent.

For reasons that we do not – indeed, cannot – fully comprehend, the Hebrew people responded to God’s self-revelation very fully. Their perception that the fundamental vehicle for God’s self-revelation is in history, helped the Hebrews clearly see that this world needs to be changed. They learned by looking back over their history that they had received a call, clear vocation to be the primary agent of change for humanity on this earth.

Their perception of their vocation was clouded by their experience of what they saw as a vocation of other nations. This gave them a warped view of their vocation that made them see themselves in an exclusive fashion. They saw this as “their turn” to dominate the world as they knew it. As God’s exclusive agents, their vocation was to rule others as they had been ruled.

But God cannot be captured by human limitations. God is the creator of all, and God will see that creation will work out in the manner for which it was created.

Thus we have the ultimate revelation of God in the person of Jesus. The Bible does not give us a complete picture of God until we see that Jesus is the final revelation of God. The Bible before Jesus must be interpreted by Jesus – or as has been said here, “re-interpreted.” Anything in the Bible that seems inconsistent with the message of Jesus, must be reinterpreted. The ultimate revelation is that “God is love.” Anything in the Old Testament or the New Testament or in history up to this moment in time that is inconsistent with this fact – God is love – must be ignored or reinterpreted.

Thus it is that Jesus in fact reinterpreted everything meant by humanity. Humans had always dominated other humans, indeed, as much of creation as possible. Humans had to see that they must choose – the nature of love demands choice – a different life style, a different pattern, a different set of relationships.

God’s creation would always support human attempts to love. Nothing can ultimately prevent God’s love from flooding God’s universe.

So Jesus showed the new relationships that must come into being. First and foremost, we must understand God as creator of this world. We must perceive our vocation for caring and loving: we must be prepared to do anything required to fulfill our vocation. Anything!!

Jesus illustrated it by his death on the Cross. But, as the Fourth Gospel
tells it, in that very death is found the new life for all humanity: the life of the Community called “God’s Family, the Church.” That family is open to any and all who choose to share in the promised vocation.

That family is not haphazard, seeking to further its own ends, or elevate itself to exclusivity. It is a welcoming family to any and all who choose it. The power of the family is felt, perceived, strengthened, nourished in and with the life of Jesus, who showed us who God is.

Thus we “Do this” to make him present with us. Our vocation is strengthened, our love enriched, our care enhanced. But it works only when we live as did Jesus: – a life in communion with God. Daily worship, daily praise, daily self-giving.

God “Makes the Holy People of God” in the Eucharist, the great “Thank you, God” for all that you have given me, and for my vocation to serve you with all my life and work and mind.

It is the Eucharist that Makes the Holy People of God.

NOTE

This publication originated as “Bulletin Inserts” that I prepared for St. Thomas Parish, Croom, Upper Marlboro in the Diocese of Washington DC. I rewrote them somewhat for St. Stephen’s Parish in Harrington, in the Diocese of Delaware. They are presented in this format because many people have asked for copies, and I have bowed to this desire. I hope that reading them will increase the desire to read the Bible and Church History more often, but most especially, to help change the reason why we come to Church on Sunday morning.

Until we reassert the life of the earliest church, it is my firm belief that the church will not grow in numbers (not, I add, an important matter in itself), but that the Gospel will not be spread efficiently and effectively.

Most people go to church to “bring something home with them” that will “make them better christians.” And, although this is an important matter, it is not the primary reason we come together. As this booklet tries to point out, we come to church both to become “something/one” and to inspire our active life to be a model of the Gospel in our relationships with others people – ALL other people.

As Christians, we do not come to get something, we come to learn how to give something. It is only in giving that we have life in us – just as in giving it is God’s activity to create and to love. And who are we?—who, but the Image of God.