

## SEDER SERVICE

Dear Friend:

December 20th 2005

**Merry Christmas!** to you and your family. This is a small collection of Christmas Carols I put together a few years ago. I love the old reverent carols and I am sure some of them were truly **inspired**. During the Christmas season, it seems like the Christian faith is not so much celebrated as it is undermined by Santa Claus, *Jingle Bells*, drunken parties and expensive presents for everyone except Jesus, on the occasion of the commemoration of the Most Important Birthday in History. It is hard to find a way to celebrate Christmas properly in the middle of all the pagan junk that now surrounds it. But putting up a manger scene at least provides some competition for the Christmas tree. And the carols remind us of what it is really about.

The last few years I have given a lot of thought to proper Christian ceremonies. They are necessary for reminding ourselves and teaching our children about the Christian faith. I was raised in the Catholic Church where they pay a lot of attention to ceremonies--too much perhaps, and not enough attention to other matters. Salvation through proper ceremony.

But ceremonies are important. You have to have a birthday cake and sing *Happy Birthday* when your child's birthday comes around. And ceremonies remind us of the major events of our Christian faith. Unfortunately we have come to celebrate Christmas with drunken parties and waiting for Santa Claus. Easter has to do with the Easter Bunny and colored eggs. These things may be fun for children but they do not give teenagers and adults the moral and spiritual grounding they need to persevere in the Christian life. It also creates confusion. The question of whether you still believe in Jesus Christ is entangled with the question of whether you still believe in Santa Claus.

Thank you for inviting me to the *seder* last Easter. The food was wonderful and the company was charming. But it did push me to some further thinking about Christian ceremonies, past, present and future, especially as they revolve around the major Christian celebrations of Christmas and Easter. I know a lot of Christians today are looking for some sort of unity with Judaism and that *messianic Jewish* tradition seems to be the source of your *seder* service. It is an attempt to synthesize Jewish and Christian beliefs and practices. But we have to question whether Judaism and Christianity work that well together, whether they are equal faiths, whether essentials of the Christian faith are not lost sight of in this synthesis.

I am not sure I entirely agree with those who see serious spiritual danger in letting kids dress up as ghosts, goblins and witches etc. to go out *trick or treating* on Halloween. But I do see danger in letting pagan myths and practices predominate in the way in which we celebrate major Christian holidays. In respect to the *seder*, the question is how far we can mix Judaism with Christianity. That was a major problem in the early church as witness the Council described in Acts 15 and the letters of Paul. And it is still a major problem.

A century later, there were still Jewish Christians who rejected the writings of Saint Paul because of his negative attitude towards **The Law** of the old covenant: *No one is saved by The Law*. It is notable that Justin Martyr ignores the epistles of Saint Paul. Early church fathers insisted, just as Saint Paul did, that Christian belief was a substantial departure from Judaism as defined by the Jewish religious establishment. You could accurately describe Jesus as the first Reform Rabbi--and the only one with the divine right to do it. He certainly did not leave Judaism as he found it. So Ignatius of Antioch writes to the Magnesians (8,9) about the year 110 AD, just before he was martyred in Rome: *Do not be led astray by wrong views or by outmoded tales that count for nothing.* (apocryphal Jewish legends and allegorical interpretations of the Old Testament) *For if we still go on observing Judaism, we admit we never received grace. The divine prophets themselves lived Christ Jesus' way. That is why they were persecuted, for they were inspired by his grace to convince unbelievers that God is one and that he has revealed himself in his Son Jesus Christ, who is his Word issuing from the silence and who won the complete approval of him who sent him.* 9 *Those then who lived by ancient practices arrived at a new hope. They ceased to keep the Sabbath and lived by the Lord's Day, on which our life as well as theirs shone forth, thanks to Him and his death . . . 10.3 For Christianity did not believe in Judaism but Judaism in Christianity.*

In his letter to the brethren at Philadelphia (5,6) Ignatius makes a basic distinction between the prophets and the old religion of Judaism: *And the Prophets, let us love them too, because they anticipated the gospel in their preaching and hoped for and awaited Him, and were saved by believing on Him. Thus they were in Jesus Christ's unity. Saints they were, and we should love and admire them, seeing that Jesus Christ vouched for them and they form a real part of the gospel of our common hope.* 6 Now, if anyone preaches Judaism to you, pay no attention to him. For it is better to hear about Christianity from one of the circumcision than Judaism from a Gentile. If both, moreover, fail to talk about Jesus Christ, they are to me tombstones and graves of the dead, on which only human names are inscribed.

What we have today is worse than what Ignatius had to contend with. Modern TV evangelists relentlessly promote an **end times** scenario which is all mixed up with Zionism and Israeli Nationalism. People are taught to believe that the ultimate aim of the Christian life is somehow tied up with sending more jet planes and missiles to Israel. Hagee teaches his congregation to believe that they will be raptured just in time to watch *Armageddon* from some heavenly balcony. He also preaches militarism and millionaire Christianity. Jesus had a mansion, so should you. He describes his faith as *Christian Zionism* and many of the TV evangelists share it.

### When is Elijah Coming ?

Surely a *Christian* has to base a *Passover Seder* primarily upon the four gospel accounts of the *Passover* held by Jesus Christ and the 12 Apostles the night before He was crucified. If you depart very much from those accounts, you are on very doubtful ground. The service you used does bring in items from the four gospels. But it mixes them in with items that are not found in the gospels. And it leaves out much of what is actually found in the gospel accounts of the *Passover* or **The Last Supper** as it was later called.

Setting a place and leaving a chair for Elijah may be fun for the kids, but it displaces what Jesus taught in Matthew 17.10-13: *Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come ? He replied, Elijah does come, and he is to restore all things; but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not know him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of man will suffer at their hands. Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.* Does not this information from Jesus himself about the coming of Elijah have to replace the old Jewish belief about the coming of Elijah ?

The further question is about another Missing Person, Jesus himself. Since He was the most important person at the *Passover* seder described in the gospels, Christians can hardly commemorate Passover without giving Jesus the central place. Would it be appropriate to set a place and leave an empty chair for Jesus ? I don't think so, but it would Raise the Right Question as to Where He Is in relation to this gathering. Is He up in heaven now ? Is He coming next year to Jerusalem ? He was supposed to have shown up there back in 2000. A lot of evangelical Christians seem to believe that our primary relationship with Jesus Christ is the expectation that He will soon return in the flesh and restore the Kingdom of Israel. I think these beliefs are mistaken and create a serious spiritual problem in that many Christians do not know where to find Jesus Christ. They think He is Coming when, in fact, like *Elijah*, He is already here as the Holy Spirit of Jesus. They are ready to go up and meet Him when He comes in the clouds. Meanwhile, they forget to meet him down here where he told us to meet him in Matthew 25.31-46. They ignore the plain teaching of John 20.21-22 which entrusted the *Mission* of Jesus to his first followers while making them in effect clones of Jesus. Is Jesus *Coming* ? Isn't He already here as the Holy Spirit ?

## bread and wine

The Catholic commemoration of the Passover seder of the *Last Supper* on *Holy Thursday* centers around the bread and wine ceremony, as does every Catholic Mass. Of course that pushes you into 500 years of argument about the Real Presence; who can consecrate; who can receive; and what it means to call Him the Lamb of God. A basic belief of Catholics is that your primary relationship with Jesus Christ is tied to the consecrated bread. When Mel Gibson was filming *The Passion*, they had a Latin Mass every day and the movie is full of juxtapositions which tie the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ--whereby we are Saved from our Sins--to the reception of *the body and blood*. And the result is that Mel Gibson can have a relationship with Jesus just by regularly going to mass and communion even while he continues to live the life of a Hollywood millionaire in his gated mansion and continues to make movies like *Braveheart*, *The Patriot* and *We Were Soldiers*, which contain doctrines not to be found in the gospels.

But you do have to acknowledge that the *passover seder*--the Last Supper--was immediately followed by the Crucifixion and so there is an immediate connection between the pouring of the wine at the Last Supper--*this is my blood of the new covenant*--and the shedding of the blood of Jesus before sundown of the following day. Catholic churches used to have a *treori* service from noon to 3 PM on Good Friday, centering upon The Stations of the Cross. It did move people to re-live The Passion. Since non Catholic Christians flocked to see *The Passion* they might seriously consider reviving the *treori* service. In fact you can make the Stations of the Cross any time using the little booklet which shows them: *Jesus is condemned to death . . . Jesus meets the sorrowful women of Jerusalem . . . Jesus falls the first time*.

I do think there is an obsessive emphasis on *The Eucharist* in the Catholic Church which came about historically because they lost the Holy Spirit. They lost track of the primary way in which we have a relationship with Jesus Christ through *the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ*. Then this exaggerated emphasis on the bread and wine leads to a further ceremony in which the consecrated bread is displayed on the altar and people are encouraged to worship the bread itself. As a boy, I thought of my personal relationship with Jesus Christ as consisting of the minute it took for the communion wafer to dissolve in my mouth. We were taught not to chew it. And I didn't because it seemed to show an indecent haste to cut short the moment I was spending with Jesus. Another basic problem with the Roman Catholic Church is setting up The Pope as the Vicar of Christ. Aren't all real Christians supposed to be the vicars of Christ ? Even the **clones** of Jesus Christ, who have *put on Christ* as Paul says. And we **put him on** only if we do actually have *the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ*. cf. John 20.21-22.

I see a similar displacement among the evangelicals in which reciting a Salvation formula: *I accept Jesus Christ as my personal savior* replaces both the bread and wine ceremony and any question as to whether those who count themselves Saved have in fact received the Holy Spirit. Do they show that Spirit of Truth, Love and Courage which the first followers of Jesus had ? Do they have the Courage to Bear Witness to the Truth ? In fact they use their main doctrine about Jesus as the excuse to avoid bearing witness and to neglect the Works of Mercy enjoined upon us in Matthew 25.31-46. They have entirely lost track of their personal obligation to take in the homeless person.

It is important to ask and answer basic questions about The Lord's Supper--the Eucharist or Communion. I have not thoroughly researched the practices and beliefs of the early church in respect to it, but I have come across references while doing other research. It does appear that the early church had a weekly gathering (at least) in which the bread and wine ceremony was the central ritual and that this was followed by a common meal. Of course they had a real community which got together on a regular basis, even on a daily basis. They shared meals and houses etc. Modern so called Christians tend to lack anything that can properly be called a *community* and live their lives apart from one another except for the weekly service. Which makes it difficult to have common meals and a community which comes together on that basis. Which would naturally memorialize the last time Jesus sat down to eat with us. *Communion* and *community* naturally go together and the loss of one leads to the loss of the other.

In the Catholic Church, only an ordained priest has the power to consecrate the bread and wine. And that doctrine had important political repercussions. Luther challenged that with the doctrine of *the priesthood of all believers* and with another doctrine which says in effect that the body of Jesus Christ is in everything already, not just the bread and wine. The arguments about this may be vexing but it does have to be decided as to what is going on--as to how important the bread and wine--the body and blood of Jesus--is to living the Christian life. I am not convinced that an officially ordained priest has to consecrate the bread and wine but neither am I comfortable with ceremonies in which it is assumed that anyone can do it. Jesus did say *do this in memory of me*. But it is a serious question as to which of us can presume that he was speaking to us. The youngest child may be the right person to ask the *passover* questions, but not to stand in for Jesus as the one who *consecrates* the bread and the wine. The early Christian congregation seems to have had a *presider*. I don't see a moral or theological problem with having everyone recite the words of consecration together. But I am not entirely comfortable in taking on the role which was always reserved for the priest.

I don't know that you have to ask and answer the question as to whether the bread and wine actually becomes the body and blood of Christ, whether it is *real* or just *symbolical*. Since Jesus did it and told us to do it *in memory of me*, that would seem reason enough to go ahead and do it without a lot of argument about what is obviously a great mystery, however you look at it.

Then there is the practical question as to who should be allowed to receive the bread and wine and under what conditions. In the early church, new converts were apparently not allowed to participate in the sacraments until they had been fully instructed in the Christian faith. The modern church tends to welcome all and sundry to communion. Of course, if it is a just a ceremony, and there is no reality behind it, there is no reason to be uptight about letting everyone participate. But if it is at the heart of the Christian mystery it is not something to be treated casually. There is the further question as to how central and important the bread and wine ceremony is to the Christian faith. As a practical matter, should it be held once a week or once a year ? Or even daily, as with Catholic practice.

### Political Liberty or Spiritual Freedom

The theme of the Jewish Passover is the miraculous deliverance of the Hebrew people from Egyptian slavery. But this theme is missing from what Jesus talks about at the Last Supper. You might expect that He would connect the earlier liberation of the Jewish nation with the liberation from sin which He means to bring about. But He doesn't. And there are some obvious reasons for it. The Jewish nation had long since lost its liberty. For centuries it had remained the conquered province of a series of empires. Jews were conscripted into the Roman army and sold into slavery if they could not pay the tribute. And Jesus shows no interest in restoring the liberty of the Jewish nation. He actually refuses to be the Messiah they hoped for, the warrior king who would liberate the Jewish people from the Roman yoke. That is a basic reason why Jesus was **rejected** by the Jews of his own time, and why He was crucified. Thirty years later, the Jews followed false messiahs in a rebellion against the Romans. A million perished, Jerusalem was destroyed and The Temple was leveled--just as Jesus had prophesied.

In Israel today there are patriotic cults surrounding these failed rebels. But Israel is as hostile as ever to the most famous Jew of all time. And, in terms of Jewish nationalism, they have a good case against Jesus. He not only refused to lead them to Freedom, He was instrumental in the Destruction of Jerusalem, and its Temple and the dispersal of the Jewish people all over the world--as they are still. So Jesus can hardly be presented as the liberator of the Jewish people, following in the foot steps of Moses as it were. He was obviously NOT the *new Moses* in respect to leading them out of the bondage of the Roman yoke as Moses had led them out of the bondage of the Egyptian yoke. Imagine Jesus drinking to *next year in Jerusalem* at the Last Supper when he anticipated being put to death in Jerusalem the very next day, when He had refused to be their king and when he had prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple.

And Jesus says other things contra the belief in Jerusalem as the center of our faith. In John 4.21-23 he tells the Samaritan woman that *the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth*, and that this is *neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem*. Our faith is no longer tied to Israel nor centered upon Jerusalem. In fact Christianity had spread far and wide by

the time Jerusalem and its Temple were destroyed in 70 AD as Jesus had also prophesied. He defines the *Kingdom of God* in such a way that it has to be entirely independent of the *Kingdom of Israel*. In a number of passages He shows that the Kingdom he preached was not the Kingdom of Israel restored, that the gentiles would flock into it while most of the Jews themselves were cast out from it. Which explains why He himself refused to become the King of Israel.

The TV evangelists and their foolish flocks have a religious faith in American nationalism which has become tied into a religious faith in Israeli nationalism. But Jesus was the exact opposite of an Israeli nationalist. His life, his teaching and his death on a cross in Jerusalem destroyed the nation of Israel and replaced it with a new nation, as 1 Peter 2.9-10 says.

Jesus does not seem to care at all about that political *freedom* which is central to the American faith. He refused to do what he could have done on behalf of the *Independence* of Israel. So it is hazardous to try and include Him in a service which is focused on political freedom and that national independence, which requires endless wars and endless patriotic lies to justify the wars. He showed no interest in that political *freedom* which supposedly gives us our primary spiritual identity as Americans. He preached a very different definition of *freedom*: *You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.*

#### slaves and servants

The *seder* service emphasizes that no one should serve himself because we are now free and no longer slaves. That does not fit in very well with one of the most startling ceremonies of the Last Supper in which Jesus girded himself with a towel and insisted upon washing the feet of his apostles, while telling them that they must follow the example he has given and **serve one another**.

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It is difficult to find authentic Christian ceremonies. I do believe that the truth of the church is best expressed in authentic ceremonies and vice versa, that preserving or reviving authentic ceremonies is one essential way to preserve and revive an authentic Christian faith.

I seem to be living in exile from the church. Because I don't know where to find it. I don't seem to be able to find it, despite a lot of looking. I am trying to re discover it, at least in theory, through true history and true theology. Which tend to be the same subject to the degree that you can re discover the theology of the early church through serious historical research. With the assistance of the Spirit of Truth-I don't see how else you can do it.

And I am trying to re discover it as best I can here and now among those who are still serious about living a Christian life. I know that describes you. Your situation is more difficult than mine in that you are trying to raise a Christian family without the support of that Church community you had a few years ago. I have to be thankful that I do not have to meet the challenge of keeping teen age children on the right path amid all the seductions of this post Christian society.

In fact, I find it hard to see how anyone can raise a Christian family without joining the Amish or some such. Or at least moving some place where there is no TV. The VCR gives you some control over it, but the regular channels are moral poison. The best defense is a good offense but where can you find the positive pole in today's society ?

Anyway, I know you are interested in these subjects, while you struggle to raise a Christian family in a society which is often at war with that aim. I wish you and yours the best for the new year.

*Terry Sullivan*