

A Sermon of the Paschal Lamb

Ælfric of Eynsham

Imperial · Early Medieval · Sermon

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INTRODUCTION

Composed around the turn of the eleventh century by the most accomplished vernacular prose stylist of late Anglo-Saxon England, this Easter homily walks its hearers through the Passover of Exodus and shows them Christ in every detail, the lamb, the blood on the doorposts, the unleavened bread, the haste of the meal. Ælfric, a Benedictine monk trained at Winchester under the reforms of Æthelwold, wrote in English at a moment when most theological argument moved only in Latin, and the sermon became a flashpoint centuries later when Reformation controversialists seized on its account of the Eucharist as evidence for a figurative reading older than transubstantiation. The exposition proceeds patiently, type matched to fulfillment, with the cadence of a teacher who expects to be heard aloud.

Men beloved, it hath been often said unto you about our Saviours resurrection, how he on this present day after his suffering, mightily rose from death. Now will we open unto you through Gods grace, of the holy housell, which you should now go unto, and instruct your understanding about this mystery, both after the old covenant, and also the new, that no doubting may trouble you about this lively food.

The Almighty God bade Moses his captain in the land of Egypt, to command the people of Israel to take for every family a lamb of one year old, the night they departed out of the country to the land of promise, and to offer the lambe to God, and after to kill it, and to make the sign of the cross, with the lambs blood upon the side posts, and the upper post of their door, and afterwards to eat the lambs flesh roasted, and unleavened bread with wild lettuce.

God said unto Moses: Eat of the lamb nothing raw, nor sodden in water, but roasted with fire. Eat the head, the feet, the inwards, and let nothing of it be left until the morning: if anything thereof remain, that shall you burn with fire. Eat it in this way. Gird your loins, and don your shoes on your feet, have your staffs in your hands, and eat it in haste. This time is the Lords passover.

And there was slain on that night, in every house throughout Pharaohs reign, the first born child: and God's people of Israel were delivered from that sudden death through the lambs offering, and his bloods marking. Then said God unto Moses. Keep this day in your remembrance, and hold it as a great feast in your kindred with a perpetual observation, and eat unleavened bread always seven days at this feast.

After this deed God led the people of Israel over the red sea, with dry feet, and drowned therein Pharaoh, and all his army together, that were pursuing them, and fed afterward the Israelites forty years with heavenly food, and gave them water out of the hard rock, until they came to the promised land.

Part of this story we have treated of in another place, part we shall now declare, to wit, that which belongeth to the holy housell. Christian men may not now keep the old law bodily but it behoves them to know, what it ghostly signifies. The innocent lamb, which the hold Israelites did then kill, had signification after ghostly understanding of Christ's suffering, who understanding of Christ's suffering, who, without guilt, shed his holy blood for our redemption. Hereof sing Gods servants at every mass:

Agnus dei qui tollis peccata mundi miserere nobis.

That is in our speech: Thou Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.

The Israelites were delivered from that sudden death, and from Pharaohs bondage by the lambes offering, which signified Christ's suffering: through which we be delivered from everlasting death, and from the devils cruel reign, in we rightly believe in the true redeemer of the whole world Christ the Saviour. The lamb was offered in the evening and our Saviour suffered in the sixth age of this world. This age of this corruptible world is reckoned unto the evening.

They marked with the upper posts Tau, that is the sign of the cross, and were so defended from the angel that killed the Egyptians first born children. And we ought to mark our foreheads, and our bodies with the token of Christ's rood, that we may be also delivered from destruction, when we shall be marked both on forehead, and also in heart with the blood of our Lord's suffering.

Those Israelites eat the lamb's flesh at their Easter time, when they were delivered, and we receive ghostily, Christ's body and drink his blood, when we receive with true belief the holy housell. The time they kept with them as Easter seven days with great worship, when they were delivered from Pharaoh, and went from the land. So also we Christians keep Christ's resurrection as the time of Easter these seven days, because through his suffering and rising we be delivered, and made clean by doing to this holy housell, as Christ says in his gospel:

Verily, verily, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. He that eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, abides in me, and I in him, and has the everlasting life, and I shall raise him up in the last day. I am the lively bread, that come down from heaven, not so as your forefathers eat the heavenly bread in the wilderness, and afterwards died. He that eats this bread, he liveth forever. He blessed bread before his suffering, and divided it to his disciples, thus saying: Eat this bread, it is my body, and do this in my remembrance. Also he blessed wine in a cup, and said: Drink you all of this. This is my blood, that is shed for many, in forgiveness of sins. John 6:53-58 / Matthew 26:26-28

The Apostles did as Christ commanded, that is, they blessed bread and wine to housell again afterward in his remembrance. Even so also their successors, and all priests, by Christ's commandments, do bless bread and wine to housell in his name with the Apostolic blessing.

Now several men have often searched, and do yet often search, how bread that is gathered of corn, and through fierce heat baked, may be turned to Christ's body, or how wine that is pressed out of many grapes is turned through any blessing to the Lord's blood. Now we say to such men, that somethings be spoken of christ by signification, some by things certain. True thing is and certain, that Christ was born of a maid, and suffered death of his own accord, and was buried, and on this day rose from death. He is said bread by signification, and a lamb, and a lion, and so forth. He is called bread, because he is our life and angels life. He is said to be a lamb for his innocence. A lion for strength, wherewith he overcame the strong devil. But Christ is not so notwithstanding after true nature, neither bread, nor a lamb, nor a lion.

Why is then the holy housel called Christs body, or his blood? If it be not truly that is it called? Truly the bread and the wine which by the mass of the priest be hallowed, show one thing without to human understanding and another thing they call within to believing minds. Without they be seen bread and wine both in figure and in taste: but they be truly after the hallowing, Christ's body and his blood through ghostly mystery.

A heathen child is baptised, yet he altered not his shape without though he be changed within. He is brought to the font-vat sinful through Adams disobedience. Howbeit he is washed from all sin within, though he hath not changed his shape without. Even so the holy font-water that is call the wellspring of life is like in shape to other waters, and is subject to corruption, but the Holy Ghost might come upon the corruptible water through the priest's blessing, and it may after wash the body and soul from all sin, through ghostly might.

Behold now we see two things in this one creature. After true nature the water is corruptible water, and after ghostly mystery, hath healing might. So also if we behold the holy housell after bodily understanding, then see we that it is a creature corruptible and mutable: if we acknowledge therein ghostly might, then we understand we that life is therein, and that it gives immortality to them that eat it with belief.

Much is betwixt the invisible might of the holy housell, and the visible shape of his proper nature. It is naturally corruptible bread, and corruptible wine: and is by might of God's word truly Christ's body and his blood: notwithstanding bodily, but ghostly. Much is betwixt the body Christ suffered in, and the body that is hallowed to housell. The body truly that Christ suffered in was born of the flesh of Mary, with blood and with bones with skin and with sinew, in human limbs, with a reasonable soul living: and his ghostly body, which we call the housell, is gathered of many corns: without bloody and bone, without limb and without soul: and therefore nothing is to be understood bodily, but all is ghostly to be understood. Whatsoever is in that housell, which giveth substance of life, that is of that ghostly might, and invisible doing. Therefore is the holy housell called a mystery, because there is one thing in it seen, and another thing understood. That which is there seen, hath bodily shape: and that we do there understand, hath ghostly might.

Certainly, Christ's body which suffered death, and rose from death, never dies henceforth: but is eternal and unpassable. The housel is temporal, not eternal. Corruptible, and dealed into sundry parts. Chewed between teeth, and send into the belly: howbeit nevertheless after ghostly might, it is all in every part.

Many receive the holy body: and yet notwithstanding, it is all in every part after ghostly mystery. Though to some man fall a less deal, yet is there no more might notwithstanding in the more part, than in the less: because it is all in each man after the invisible might.

This mystery is a pledge and a figure: Christ's body is truth itself. This pledge we do keep mystically, until that we come to the truth itself: and then is this pledge ended.

Truly it is so as we before have said Christ's body, and his blood: not bodily, but ghostly. And you should not search how it is done, but hold it in your belief that it is so done.

We read in the book which is called *vitae patrum* (Lives of the Fathers), that two Monks desired of God some demonstration touching the holy housell, and after as they stood to hear mass, they saw a child lying on the altar, where the priest said mass, and God's Angel stood with a sword, and abode looking until the priest broke the housell. Then the angel divided that child upon the dish, and shed his blood into the chalice. After, when they did go to the housell, then was it turned to bread and wine, and they did eat it giving God thanks for the showing. Also Saint Gregory desired of Christ, that he would show to a certain woman doubting about his mystery some great affirmation. She went to housell with doubting mind, and Gregory forthwith obtained of God, that to them both was shown that part of the housell which the woman should receive, as if there lay in the dish a joint of a finger all be blooded: and so the womans doubting was then forthwith healed.

Let us now hear the apostles words about this mystery. Paul the apostle speaking of the old Israelites, thus writing in his epistle to faithful men. All our forefathers were baptised in the cloud, and in the sea: and all they ate the same ghostly meat, and drank the same ghostly drink. They drank truly of the stone that followed them, and that stone was Christ. Neither was the stone then from which the water ran bodily Christ, but it signified Christ, that calls thus to all believing and faithful men: Whosoever thirsts let him come to me and drink. And from his bowls flows lively water. This he said of the Holy Ghost, whom he receives which believes on him.

The apostle Paul says, that the Israelites did eat the same ghostly meat, and drink the same ghostly drink: because the heavenly meat that fed them forty years, and the water which from the stone did flow had signification of Christ's body, and his blood, that now be offered daily in God's church. It was the same which we now offer: not bodily, but ghostly.

We said unto you a little before, that Christ hallowed bread and wine to housell before his suffering, and said: This is my body, and my blood. Yet he had not then suffered; but so notwithstanding he turned through invisible might the bread to his own body, and the wine to his blood, as he did before in the wilderness, before that he was born a man, when he turned that heavenly meat to his flesh, and the flowing water from the stone to his own blood. Very many ate of the heavenly meat in the wilderness, and drank the ghostly drink and were nevertheless dead, as Christ said. And Christ meant not the death which none can escape: but the everlasting death, which some of the folk deserved for their unbelief. Moses and Aaron, and many other of the people which pleased God ate the heavenly bread, and they died not the everlasting death, though they died the common death. They saw that the heavenly meat was visible and corruptible; but they ghostly understood by the visible thing, and ghostly received it.

The Saviour said: He that eats my flesh and drinks my blood, has everlasting life. He bade them not eat the body which he was encompassed with, nor the blood to drink which he shed for us: but he meant with those words the holy housell, which ghostly is his body, and his blood, and he that tastes it with believing heart, has the eternal life.

In the old law faithful men offered to God diverse sacrifices, that had foresignification of Christ's body, which for our sins he himself to his heavenly father hath since offered as a sacrifice. Certainly this housell which we do now hallow at God's altar is a remembrance of Christ's body which he offered for us, and of his blood which he shed for us: So he himself commanded: Do this in my remembrance. Once suffered Christ by himself, but yet nevertheless his suffering is daily renewed at the mass through the mystery of the holy housell. Therefore the holy mass is profitable both to the living and to the dead: as it has been often declared.

We ought also to consider diligently how that the holy housell is both Christ's body, and the body of all faithful men, after a ghostly mystery. As the wise Augustine says of it: If ye will understand of Christ's body, hear the apostle Paul thus speaking: You truly be Christ's body and his members. Now is your mystery set on God's table; and you receive your mystery to that which you yourselves be. Be that which you see on the altar, and receive that which you yourselves be. Again, the Apostle Paul says by it: We many be one bread, and one body. Understand now, and rejoice, many be one bread, and one body in Christ. He is our head, we be his limbs. And the bread is not of one corner, but of many. Nor the wine of one grape, but of many. So also we all should have one unity in our Lord, as it is written of the faithful army, how that they were in so great a unity, as though all of them had one soul, and one heart. Christ hallowed on his table the mystery of our peace, and of our unity: he which receiveth the mystery of unity, and keeps not the bond of true peace, he receiveth not a mystery for himself, but a witness against himself.

It is very good for Christian men, that they go often to housell, if they bring with them to the altar innocence in their heart; if they are not possessed with vices. To the evil man it turneth to no good, but to destruction, if he received unworthily the holy housell.

Holy books command that water be mingled to the wine which shall be for housell: because the water signifieth the people, and the wine Christs blood. And therefore shall neither the one without the other be offered at the holy mass: that Christ may be with us, and we with Christ; the head with the limbs, and the limbs with the head.

We would before have intreated of the lamb which the old Israelites offered at their Easter time, but that we desired first to declare unto you of this mystery, and after how we should rescue it. The signifying lamb was offered at their Easter: and the Apostle Paul says in the epistle of this present day, that Christ is our Easter, who was offered for us, and on this day rose from death.

The Israelites did eat the lambs flesh, as God commanded, with unleavened bread, and wild lettuce: and we should receive the holy housell of Christ's body and blood without the leaven of sin and inquiry. As leaven turns the creatures from their nature; so doth sin also change the nature of man from innocency to foul spots of guiltiness. The Apostle hath taught how we should feast not in the level of idleness, but in the sweet dough of purity and truth. The herb which they should eat with the unleavened bread is called lettuce, and is bitter in taste. So we should with bitterness of unfeigned weeping purify our mind, if we will eat Christ's body.

The Israelites were not want to eat raw flesh, although God forbade them to eat it raw and sodden in water but roasted with fire. He will receive the body of God raw, that shall think without reason that Christ was only man like unto us, and was not God. And he that will after mans wisdom search of the mystery of Christ's incarnation, do like unto him that do sees lambs flesh in water: because that water in this place signifies man's understanding: but we should understand that all the mysteries of Christ's humanity were ordered by the power of the Holy Ghost. And then eat we his body roasted with fire: because the Holy Ghost came in fire likeness to the apostle in diverse tongues.

The Israelites should eat the lambs head, and the fete, and the purtenance, and nothing thereof must be left overnight. If anything thereof were left, they should burn that in the fire: and they should not break the bones. After ghostly understanding we do then eat the lambs head, when we take hold of Christ's divinity in our belief. Again when we take hold of his humanity with love, then we eat the lambs feet; because that Christ is the beginning and end, God before all world, and man in the end of this world. What be the lambs purtenance, but Christ's secret precepts? And these we eat when we receive with greediness the word of life.

There must nothing of the lamb be left unto the morning, because that all God's saying are to be searched with great carefulness: so that all his precepts may be known in understanding and deed in the night of this present life, before that the last day of the universal resurrection does appear. If we can not search out thoroughly all the mystery of Christ's incarnation, then ought we to betake the rest unto the might of the holy Ghost with true humility, and not search too rashly of the deep secrets about the measure of our understanding.

They did eat the lambs flesh with their loins girded. In the loines is the lust of the body, and he which will receive the housell, shall restrain concupiscence, and take with chastity the holy receipt. They were also shod. What be shoes but of the hides of dead beasts? We be truly shod, if we follow in our steps and deeds, the life of those pilgrims, which pleased God with keeping of his commandments.

They had staffs in their hands when they ate. The staff signifies a carefulness and a diligent overseeing; and all they that best know and can, should take care of other men, and stay them up with their help. It was enjoined to the eaters that they should eat the lamb in haste. For God abhors slothfulness in his servants; and those he loves that seek the joy of everlasting life with quickness of mind. It is written: Prolong not to turn unto God, lest the time pass away through thy slow tarrying.

The eaters might not break the lambs bones. No more ought the soldiers that did hang Christ break his holy legs, as they did of the two thieves that hanged on either side of him. And the Lord rose from death sound without all corruption : and at the last judgement they shall see him, whom they did most cruelly wound on the cross.

This time is called in the Hebrew tongue, Pasca, and in Latin Transitus, and in English a Passover; because that on this day the people of Israel passed from the land of Egypt over the red sea : from bondage to the land of promise.

So also did our Lord at this time depart, as says John the Evangelist, from this world to his heavenly Father. Even so we ought to follow our head, and to go from the devil to Christ, from this unstable world to his stable kingdom. Howbeit we should first, in this present life, depart from vices to holy virtue, from evil manners to good manners, if we will after this corruptible life go to the eternal life; and, after our resurrection, to Jesus Christ. He brings us to his everliving Father, who gave him to death for our sins. To him be honour, and praise of the well doing, world without end. Amen.