

International Conversation Cafe

New Testament: The Last Supper, Matthew 26

Perhaps one of the most recognizable paintings of all times is Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper. It was commissioned by Duke Ludovico Sforza for the refectory (a room where the monks ate meals together) of a monastery in Milan, Italy. Da Vinci painted it on dry plaster using oil and tempera paints. Usually, tempera (an egg based paint) is painted on wet plaster. The result is called a "fresco." But in this case, Da Vinci mixed the two paints together and painted on dry plaster. His experiment was not a success. After 18 years, the paint began to wear off because it did not adhere to the plaster well.

The topic of the painting is the last meal, or supper, Jesus shared with his disciples before he was crucified. The story begins when Jesus was shared the Passover meal with his disciples. Passover is a celebration when Jews remember how God delivered their nation of Israel out of slavery in Egypt to freedom in their own land. The Passover meal consists of food that represents different parts of their story. For example, there is a bowl of salt water which represents tears and bitter herbs that remind Jews of their hard slavery in Egypt. At Passover, they serve a cracker instead of yeast bread to remind them that their escape from Egypt happened so quickly they had to eat their bread without giving the dough time to rise. Hence, they ate a cracker. There are cups of wine to remember that their ancestors sacrificed lambs and spread the blood on their doorframes. The death angel passed over those homes and the family was protected from harm. These foods are eaten in a certain order following a scripted dialogue that retells the story of God bringing Israel out of slavery.

Discuss the words or concepts that are unfamiliar.

The New Testament gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John record the story of the last supper. Here is the account found in Matthew 26:19-25

The disciples prepared the Passover meal.

²⁰ When evening came, Jesus was at the table with his 12 disciples. ²¹ While they were eating, he said, "What I'm about to tell you is true. One of you will hand me over to my enemies."

²² The disciples became very sad. One after the other, they began to say to him, "Surely you don't mean me, Lord, do you?"

²³ Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will hand me over. ²⁴ The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But how terrible it will be for the one who hands over the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born."

²⁵ Judas was the one who was going to hand him over. He said, "Surely you don't mean me, Teacher, do you?"

Jesus answered, "You have said so."

Retell the story in your own words.

The moment reflected in the painting is just after Jesus announces that one of them will betray him, that is give him up to his enemies. Take a moment to look at the painting.

Notice that the disciples are in four groups of three. Look at the first group of three to the left of Jesus as we look at the table. Judas has his hand on a money bag he received as payment for his betrayal. John is beside Jesus and Peter is to the left of Judas.

Notice the expressions on the faces of the disciples.

What do their expressions and body postures seem to suggest?

John's gospel tells us that Jesus gives Judas bread and then Judas leaves the room and goes out into the night. Jesus continues the Passover meal. As he does so, he gives new meaning to the bread and the wine.

While they were eating, Jesus took bread. He gave thanks and broke it. He handed it to his disciples and said, "Take this and eat it. This is my body."

²⁷Then he took a cup. He gave thanks and handed it to them. He said, "All of you drink from it. ²⁸This is my blood of the covenant. It is poured out to forgive the sins of many people. ²⁹Here is what I tell you. From now on, I won't drink wine with you again until the day I drink it with you in my Father's kingdom."

³⁰Then they sang a hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives. Matthew 26: 26-30.

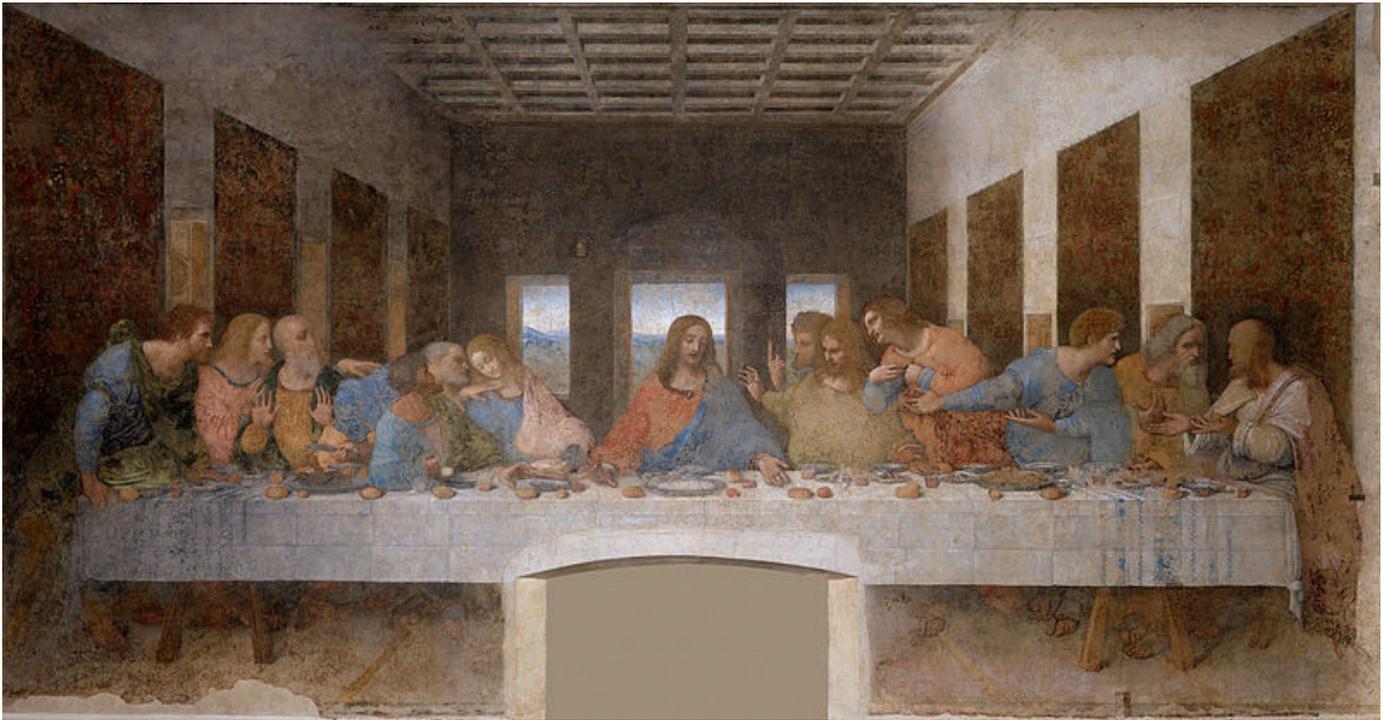
Retell this part of the story in your own words.

What does the bread represent? How does the bread relate to the death of Jesus?

The word, "covenant" means contract. The contract Jesus is talking about is God's agreement to forgive sins based on Jesus' death in our place. His death guarantees that God has the right to forgive sins.

Christians recall the sacrifice of Jesus when they gather for worship by drinking grape juice/wine from a cup and eating a small cracker. This ceremony is called the Lord's table, communion, or the Eucharist.

Have you ever seen or participated in this event? What was it like for you?



Leonardo da Vinci. The Last Supper, 1495-1498. Tempera on Gesso. Sata Maria delle Grazie, Milan, Italy