

THE SYMBOLS OF EASTER PART 1: THE LAMB

“Then I saw standing in the midst of the throne and the four living creatures and the elders a Lamb that seemed to have been slain...Each of the elders held a harp and gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of the holy ones. They sang a new hymn, ‘Worthy are you to receive the scroll and to break open its seals, for you were slain and with your blood you purchased for God those from every tribe and tongue, people and nation. You made them a kingdom and priests for our God, and they will reign on earth’” (Revelation 5:6, 8-10).

We have used many symbols over the years as part of our Easter celebration and traditions. As time passes, though, we can sometimes forget what those symbols mean and why we use them. During the Easter season, I will reflect in this column over some of the most popular of those symbols and their meaning, beginning this week with the image of the lamb.

Christians began associating the image of the lamb with Jesus Christ very early on because of the connection between his death and the Jewish feast of Passover. This annual feast was established on the night that God worked his last and most terrible sign to convince Pharaoh to let the Hebrew people leave Egypt (Exodus 12). God commanded Moses to tell the people to sacrifice a lamb, to eat its flesh to be strengthened for the journey ahead, and to sprinkle the doorways of their houses with its blood. That night, the Lord swept through Egypt and slaughtered the firstborn male of every Egyptian family, but he passed over the houses of the Hebrews that were marked with the blood of the lamb. Thus the Passover, or Paschal, lamb became a symbol of God’s saving power, bringing freedom and life out of death.

All four gospels make clear that Jesus was crucified either on or near the feast of Passover, when, following God’s command to celebrate that saving event annually, the Jewish people sacrificed the Paschal lamb. After Jesus’ resurrection, the early Christians immediately understood his saving sacrifice on the cross in the light of the Paschal sacrifice, but in a much more profound and far-reaching way. Jesus’ death is the new Paschal sacrifice, offered for all people, and those who are washed in his blood through baptism are saved from the eternal death we deserve for our sins. His flesh and blood, made present in the Eucharist, are food for our journey as we follow Jesus, the new Moses, to the Promised Land, the kingdom of God.

So, when you see images of a lamb this Easter season, remember whom they represent, and recall the words we hear at every celebration of Christ’s saving sacrifice: Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.