

Holy Communion: so much more than a meal

St Matthias 3rd June 2018 1 Cor 11:17-29; Mark 14:12-26

We just heard from St Paul and St Mark in what are probably the earliest accounts from about 55 A.D.- but what does Communion mean to you today?

Here are some of the ways the bible teaches us about this meal to encourage - and to challenges us.

1 The simplest way of seeing this is as a **fellowship meal**. Sharing a meal in the Jewish culture has always been highly symbolic of a close relationship of those gathered. But at Holy Communion we are breaking bread together very intentionally:

- reminding ourselves of Jesus and all he means to us;
- reminding ourselves of Jesus words at the Last Supper and of how he continues to be our host
- of how we are bound together as his church with the love for one another that he showed us, as his body on Earth,
- and the one bread that we share is symbolic of that unity and solidarity.

As St Paul writes in one Corinthians 10:

¹⁶ The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?

¹⁷ Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

But this is more than a fellowship meal with just us here, we unite with the church of God across the world and even more wonderfully, This is a meal where we look ahead to sharing this meal together with all the saints past present and future, in heaven, just as Jesus says at the end of the last supper in Mark

Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.'

But there is so much more to it than that:

2 we are sharing a meal **to remember Jesus at his Last Supper**. Matthew Mark and Luke describe this as Jesus' Passover meal with his friends.

At it, Jesus identifies himself with the Passover lamb who was killed and whose blood was daubed on Israelite doorways to protect them from the Angel of Death on the eve of their escape from slavery in Egypt.

So just as the Passover meal is an activity to help remember the Israelites rescue from death and freedom from slavery, we continue to share bread and wine as an activity to help remember Jesus and the freedom from sin and death he has brought us!

And just as the key part of the Passover meal is to use symbols...

So it was that at the beginning of the meal Jesus

took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.

And with the cup of blessing at the end of the meal *"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,"*

In fact the New Testament writers see Jesus death on the cross as both a symbol of the Passover lamb – as here, and also as the lamb killed on the Day of Atonement for the sins of God's people...

Such that we are assured the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world means we are

- justified, made right by his blood (Romans 5:9)
- redeemed, set free by his blood (1 Peter 1:18,19)
- purified by his blood (1 John 1:7)

Every time we share bread and wine in remembrance of Jesus we are retelling and reclaiming the gospel truth with heartfelt thanksgiving which is why it often called the Eucharist, the Greek word for Thanksgiving. But there's more:

3 We are re-sealing the New Covenant.

God makes a number of covenant promises to his people through the Old Testament, most notably to Abraham, in which God promises to bless him and his descendants – the covenant which is marked with the outward sign of circumcision

God also made a Covenant with Moses and the people at Mount Sinai in Exodus- that he would be their God and they would be his people and live according to his commandments. On that occasion, to seal that covenant deal, as was the standard practice at the time, animals sacrifices were made and the blood was sprinkled half on the altar and half on the people:

Exodus 24:8 ⁸ *Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, 'This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.'*

Later, Jeremiah prophesied that there another new covenant would come (Jer 31:31):

Wonderfully, Jesus is the one who brings in this new covenant – and he seals the deal in this last supper: God's promise of forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit and our adoption as God's children!

²⁵ *In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.'*

You may not have ever thought about it in this way, and it is a bit odd, but drinking of the wine is equivalent to bring sprinkled with the blood in Exodus!

So already we have three particular ways in which we value Holy Communion:

1 **as a fellowship meal** demonstrating our unity together as Christ's church, his body

2 we are **eating in remembrance of Jesus and what he did for us**, forgiveness, and freedom - and proclaiming that good news as we do so...

3 we are drinking the wine as a way of **sealing the new covenant**

This is amazing - and reason for us to celebrate isn't it? But there's more still:

4 This is Food & Drink for our souls, this is spiritual nourishment.

Jesus says in John 6 ⁵¹ *I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.'*

⁵⁴ *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. ⁵⁶ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them.*

That's pretty gross, that's cannibalism!?, and to those first Jewish hearers it would have been abhorrent since drinking blood was completely forbidden in Old Testament law since it represented the life force of any person or animal.

But that's the point. Jesus promises us that his life will be one with ours – that mutual abiding that he speaks of in John 15 – and even though Jesus is speaking before his Last Supper, the church through history has linked this passage with our re-enactment of it.

So when we break bread and drink wine together as the church in remembrance of Jesus, in thanksgiving for all he has done, and

acknowledging the benefits of the new covenant, we also mysteriously, somehow receive Jesus himself.

Whether or not the bread and wine change in substance in some way as the standard Roman Catholic doctrine continues to hold to or whether as Protestants we believe this is an outward sign of an invisible grace – a sacrament – as we eat and drink the bread and wine representing his body and blood - by faith -, we receive Jesus himself.

Wow! And if we gain so much from sharing in this simple meal, as a church council we've come to the decision that we want our children to share it too – as they always used to from as early as 250 A.D, through to the 1500s - all baptised children received the life-giving sacrament of bread and wine

Their baptism meant they belonged to the new covenant people of God. They were welcomed to the Lord's Table just as Jesus welcomed children, and the church was able to say without the embarrassment that many of us feel today "*we are one body because we do all share in one bread*".

It was only at the Reformation that we began to prevent children and people with learning difficulties from receiving communion because we felt they needed to understand what was going on, to acknowledge their need for repentance.

Maybe they wanted to protect children from the judgement that Paul describes in our first reading – not appreciating as we now believe, that Paul wasn't talking about children at all, but was just horrified by the lack of love and care and unity that the Corinthians were showing when they came together for their fellowship meal.

In fact it was only in the 1850s that confirmation was used as a pastoral tool in Protestant churches as the gateway into receiving Holy Communion.

But in the last 40 years, churches across the world have begun to reconsider the importance of baptism, and the blessings of receiving Holy Communion that we have been denying children.

We've learned more about the way children learn and develop their spiritual life. We've learned how they are more likely to grow as mature disciples of Christ by doing, by joining in with Communion with the rest of the community and with their parent's guidance, rather than just being told about it.

We've also discovered how precious a faith in God and Jesus young children often have even though they may not express it in adult ways.

So, with our Bishop's blessing, we're about to join large swathes of the worldwide church including all the Orthodox churches, the Roman Catholic Church, the Church in Wales, the Episcopal Church of Scotland, Brazil, the United States, large parts of New Zealand, Canada, Sweden, and many parishes in UK dioceses including here in Devon and return to the practices of the early church.

We hope it will also enable us to retain confirmation as a great way of affirming our faith as teenagers or adults – more on that next Sunday - while allowing all the baptised to be welcome at the Lord's table as we believe he wants them to be.

And as today he invites us to be welcomed as we come together to share, to celebrate, to give thanks and to be fed by our Lord Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit....

John Beckett