

“UNTIL HE COMES”

Romans 8:18-27

This communion service is always full of remembering. We refer to it often as a “memorial” and the words we use in our prayers and liturgy speak of remembrance, of looking back with gratitude to what Jesus has done for us. Indeed, Jesus himself told his disciples, “*Do this in remembrance of me.*” It’s a kind of spiritual knot in your hanky, a regular jog to the memory so that we never forget what he has done for us.

But it also makes real to us in the present the benefits of Jesus’ sacrifice. When we are gathered like this, as God’s people, followers of Jesus, and we share this bread and wine in this very special – very stylised and formal way – something happens. It may not be transubstantiation – that doctrine which teaches that this bread and wine actually become in some way the body and blood of Jesus – but nonetheless, this is a special time now. With the help of the Holy Spirit we can re-experience the sense of Jesus doing something in our lives, of Jesus’ presence with us and his continuing work in our lives. If that weren’t the case, I don’t suppose most of us would make the effort to come along to these services.

But what we often forget, I believe, is that there is also a clear future aspect to all this. This says something about the past and connects with us in the present, but also looks forward to the future. In the words we usually use from Paul’s *First Letter to the Corinthians*, we repeat, “*You proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes*” (1 Corinthians 11:26). “*You proclaim*” (present) “*the Lord’s death*” (past) “*until he comes*” (future). Jesus will return. That is part of what we believe as his followers. If he wasn’t going to come back, if there wasn’t that to look forward to, then there would be a great deal missing from our hope. Jesus will return and the Kingdom which he inaugurated during his time on earth – what we’re reading about as we work through Matthew’s Gospel week by week – will be fulfilled, will finally be established.

As we have been reading through Matthew’s Gospel we have noted again and again that God’s Kingdom is not a geographical and political entity but rather a way of describing God’s righteous rule over all creation, including, of course, our lives. And that righteous rule mean that things will return to the way God originally intended this world to function before sin and evil got a grip on it. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has dealt the definitive blow to the forces of evil and we are now just waiting for Jesus to come back and put the seal on it all for eternity. And as we wait for that time, for “*the redemption of our bodies*” (Romans 8:23), so all the rest of creation is waiting as well. Paul says in these words that all creation is waiting for that time so that it can be released from the “*bondage to decay*” which has been its lot since God punished the first human beings after they had sinned. When Jesus

returns, creation will once again be made perfect – as God intended – and men and women will reign with Jesus over that creation – as God intended.

Again, as we've seen looking through Matthew's Gospel, there are glimpses of that now. Jesus showed people in first century Palestine what the Kingdom of God might be like. He healed people and restored their dignity. He exorcised those who were in thrall to the demonic and gave them back their lives, their choices, their humanity. He provided food when it was needed. He tamed the dangerous wildness of creation. He kept on talking about how wonderful this Kingdom of God would be. And what he pointed to was just what Paul is talking about here. A liberated and renewed creation carefully stewarded and benevolently ruled by redeemed human beings.

Eventually, you see, heaven – where God's rule currently runs unhindered – and earth – where his rule is currently opposed by many – will be one. As the Kingdom is fulfilled, the rule of God will run universally and we will all be able to experience that if we have made the decision to side with Jesus. Even now, I believe, there are signs of heaven bleeding into earth. Since Jesus died, returned to life and took his seat at the right hand of the Father, you can see odd hints of the Kingdom life which we can expect in all its fullness one day. The old Celtic Christians used to talk of "thin spots", places where the boundary between heaven and earth was particularly fluid. There are places, aren't there, where you can sense the presence of God perhaps more keenly than in other places. There are times when you can be especially aware of the joy and power of God's Spirit. There are those occasions when you are granted a glimpse of what Kingdom life might be like – worship, peace, joy, celebration, wholeness. I'm sure we have all sensed that at times – even if we've not quite been able to identify what's actually going on.

And communion has that aspect to it as well: it's a bit of a "thin spot". Here God's infinite love is given shape in these chunks of bread. Here the amazing sacrifice of Jesus is made real for us in the cup of wine. Here, into our messy, broken, dysfunctional world – into our confused, hurting, bewildered lives – comes a taste, a glimpse of God's amazing grace. Here we remember what God has done and we recognise what he is doing. But we also look forward to what he has promised to do: redemption, renewal, restoration.

It's all symbolic, of course, the little bits of bread, the thimbles full of wine, laced together with familiar words. But it's not only a memorial of what Jesus did do: it's also a foretaste of that great feast we shall all share when the Kingdom is fulfilled. It's a few of God's people coming together in peace in this little chapel. And it's a glimpse of what it will be like when all God's people across geography and history get together to worship the Lamb of God, the Kingly Messiah.

In a few moments we are going to sing a hymn, one of Charles Wesley's lesser known songs that was actually passed on to us at a recent lecture up at the Cathedral as a poem. Let me read it to you before we sing it, as it might help us to appreciate it more than we do when we're trying to fit it to a tune.

HOW GLORIOUS IS THE LIFE ABOVE

*Which in this ordinance we taste,
That fullness of celestial love,
That joy which shall for ever last!*

*That heavenly life in Christ concealed
These earthen vessels could not bear;
The part which now we find revealed
No tongue of angels can declare.*

*The light of life eternal darts
Into our souls a dazzling ray;
A drop of heaven o'erflows our hearts,
And floods with joy the house of clay.*

*Sure pledge of ecstasies unknown
Shall this divine Communion be:
The ray shall rise into a sun,
The drop shall swell into a sea.*

Doesn't that sum up wonderfully what we've been saying this morning? Apart from the idea that heaven is "up there", it reminds us of the life that is to come, of which we taste just a fraction in "*this ordinance*". As we take this bread and wine this morning, it's like a "*dazzling ray*" shining into our situation – however dark and gloomy that situation has been during the week, however much we are anticipating the difficulties of the week ahead, God's light shines into that experience. It's like a little "*drop of heaven*" dribbling into our dryness and our disquiet.

But those things are what help us to "*proclaim the Lord's death until he comes*". They are, as Wesley says, a "*sure pledge of ecstasies unknown*" – unknown as yet because these "*earthen vessels*", this "*house of clay*" could not cope with it – they are the guarantee, as Paul says elsewhere, of our future life with God. And what we taste and experience here this morning will be infinitely multiplied when Jesus does come and the Kingdom of God is finally established. "*The ray shall rise into a sun, the drop shall swell into a sea.*" Now that is something to look forward and something to proclaim as we eat and drink this mornng. Reflect on that as we sing and then share.