

“DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME”

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Here we are once again, celebrating “communion” – it’s our monthly communion service. For most of us here it is part of our regular pattern of churchgoing, something that we take in our stride as the routine of the church’s programme brings it round again. But what’s it really all about? Why do we get together on a regular basis and go through what – when you stop and think about it – seems a rather strange ritual? In some of the liturgies used by the Christian Church it is referred to as a “*sacred mystery*” and it has always been a bit of mystery to people both inside and outside the church. We discussed it a bit, almost in passing, at our worship workshop earlier in the week and someone did comment that they didn’t really know why some people were so keen on it (in a particular form, that is). There was a Roman governor in the first century called Pliny who used to write to the Emperor Trajan about the goings-on in his little province of the Empire and in one of the letters that has survived he talks of the early Christians as cannibals, because they used to meet each week to eat the body of their leader – or so it appeared to him.

Part of the difficulty comes, as with so many things in the life of the church, from the fact that different people have different ways of interpreting what’s going on and different ways of referring to it. In our tradition we call it “*Communion*” because that word incorporates the idea of togetherness, something we do together as a group of people – like the words “*community*” or “*communism*”. Some people refer to it as the “*Eucharist*”, based on a Greek word meaning “thanksgiving”, because, for them, that is what’s at the heart of it – an opportunity to give thanks to God for what he’s done for us through the death of Jesus on the cross. Yet others call it “*The Lord’s Supper*” or “*Breaking of Bread*”, for fairly obvious reasons. And some – particularly those who have a Catholic leaning – refer to it as “*The Mass*” after the Latin words the Priest used to end the service – “*Ite: missa est*”, which basically means, “*It’s over. Off you go and live it out*”. Unfortunately, some of those words have become associated with particular groups of people, so we don’t use them all. (Some of you may recall the hot water Howard Cannan got into with some people when as editor of *Vision* he included a reference to “*Midnight Mass*”!)

But whatever name we choose to use, there is no getting away from the fact that this is something Jesus commanded his followers to do, and they have done it ever since, in all kinds of different situations: huge Papal masses with millions of communicants; two or three frightened believers in a forest in the Soviet Union; a cluster of ex-pats in a North Korean University; a couple of times a year on a remote Scottish island; month by month here in a city centre church. At root, we believe it’s an object lesson – Jesus was very fond of using visual aids to make clear his teaching, and so it remains for us today. The central bits of the Jewish Passover were re-interpreted by Jesus to make a powerful point about what he had come to do and his disciples have continued to use them down through the centuries to remind themselves of what is at the heart of their belief. It’s a symbol, something we can see which helps us understand and reminds

us of something we cannot see. It's a bit like a knot in a handkerchief that is there to be seen and remind of something we can't see.

So what does it help to remind us about? How does it help? Well, the reading we have just heard from Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians* has some useful things to say and we're just going to reflect for a few moments on vv25,26. Notice that, like so much of Paul's teaching – especially to the Christians in Corinth, who must have been a real pain for Paul – this is part of a corrective to some pretty bad behaviour in church. We'll concentrate on the positive stuff this morning, though.

1. REMEMBERING

Jesus says after they have drunk the wine – and after they've eaten the bread in v24 – “*Do this in remembrance of me.*” He wanted them particularly to remember him and his life. The bread and the wine were to remind them of the times they'd spent together, maybe the many meals they'd shared, the talks they'd had. It's what sparked off the recognition of Jesus when he shared the meal with his two followers in the house at Emmaus on the evening of Easter Sunday. In some ways it's a bit like Marcel Proust, a French writer who took a bite of a little bun and it took him back to all that he remembered of earlier events in his life (and he then knocked out twelve volumes of very boring prose about the whole thing). Or like me – whenever I taste a bit of coffee and walnut sponge it reminds me of the times I used to spend in my grandma's house when I was a child.

So, as the early followers of Jesus took the bread and the wine in this particular context, they thought back over Jesus' life and remembered certain things about it, things which we are encouraged to think about and reflect on as we participate in communion today.

a) His example Jesus did many things that were to be a model for his followers to copy and after one of them – his humbly washing his disciples' feet (again, in the context of sharing a meal with them) – he actually said to them, “*I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you*” (*John 13:15*). As we, his followers, eat the bread and drink the wine, we are to remember his example and resolve to live as he lived.

b) His teaching But Jesus wasn't just a good example. He also spoke as a great teacher. He taught many things that he put into practice in his own life and he wants us, as his followers, to put into practice in our lives. In fact, being a disciple of Jesus is only possible if we *are* reminded of his teaching. “*If you hold on to my teaching, you are truly my disciples,*” he told them in *John 8:31*. That's why communion

should really usually take place in a context in which Jesus' teaching can be read and explained, so that, as we take the bread and the wine, we are reminded of his words.

c) **His love** We also need to remember the love that Jesus had for us. That's at the heart of this sacrament of grace. His life was full of love: all that he did was motivated by love – he showed it in the ways he reacted to people whom he met while he was on earth, in the care which he demonstrated, in the miracles which he performed, in the things he said to them. Above all, he showed his love for all people when he died on the cross at Golgotha. That takes us on to our next point ...

2. **PROCLAIMING**

Whenever we take communion, Paul tells us, we "*proclaim the Lord's death*". In taking the bread and the wine we are showing to one another – and to anyone else who happens to be watching – that we believe the very pinnacle of Jesus' love for us was demonstrated in his death. Paul talks of that in *Romans 5:8* – "*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners Christ died for us.*" And John puts it like this in *1 John 4:10*, "*This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*"

But, as we proclaim that, we are accepting two very important things. The first is that Jesus' death was **the one sacrifice**. If we look at *Hebrews 10:10* (which, you may recall, we reflected on last week), we see that Jesus made the sacrifice "*once for all*". For us to have any hope of spending eternity with God in his renewed and restored Kingdom once this part of our life is finished, there had to be some kind of sacrifice for our sins. Jesus made that sacrifice, so there is no longer any need for us to keep sacrificing animals and so on, as people had been doing to try and get themselves on the right side of God. Jesus became the one supreme sacrifice. And when we are taking part in communion we are proclaiming that, proclaiming that Jesus' death was once and for all. There is no need to see the communion service as some kind of re-sacrifice each month (or whenever); there is no sense in which we are trying to make another sacrifice in order to put ourselves right with God.

We also proclaim that we believe that **Jesus is the only way to be reconciled to God**. He said himself in *John 14:6*, "*No-one comes to the Father except through me*". Accepting that the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross at Golgotha was for you personally is the only way to get back to that right relationship with God, the only way to ensure that you will not be cut off from him for eternity. Peter told the magistrates the same thing in *Acts 4:12* – "*Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*" It is an uncomfortably exclusive claim in today's thinking, but

that is part of what we remember and proclaim as we eat and drink here. As we take the bread and wine we are proclaiming Jesus' death, announcing in a symbolic way just what we believe about him.

3. ANTICIPATING

Not only do we look back to Jesus' life and death, but we also look forward, for we are to proclaim Jesus' death "*until he comes*". Jesus died, but he was also brought back to life by his Father and he is now with him in heaven. But one day he will return to earth – as we were thinking about in our journey through Matthew's Gospel back before Christmas. You may remember those parables that Jesus told which spoke of the inevitability of his return and in *1 Thessalonians 4:16,17*, Paul writes:

“For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.”

And he then goes on the following verse to say that that is to be an encouragement to us, that we really can look forward to being with Jesus one day. Communion should always remind us that we are to look forward to the return of our Saviour and Lord, but it's something that we can easily forget. We often use words at the end of our communion – and we will again this morning – to emphasise this aspect of Jesus having died and been brought back to life in preparation for his eventual return. We should always be living in the anticipation of Jesus' return, but I suspect that most of us hardly ever really think about it at all. It is truly a tremendous thought, an amazing hope!

When we share communion, then, we do so remembering what Jesus has done and taught, announcing the message of his death and all that it entails, and looking forward to the day of his return. It's a ritual that has huge significance for us – a way of encapsulating in a few fairly simple actions what it is that our faith is all about. Once again this morning, may we eat with real thanksgiving and a great sense of anticipation!

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Questions for discussion

1. What do you think you are doing when you take part in communion? Do you consciously think about it as you are taking part?
2. Which is most important for you – remembering, proclaiming or anticipating? Why?
3. If you have regularly celebrated communion in another tradition, what do you think the emphasis was on there?

4. How often would you like to celebrate communion? Why?
5. Paul tells the Corinthians to "*examine*" themselves (v28) before taking communion. What do you think he means – and why?
6. How might reflecting on this passage alter the way you view communion (if at all)?