

## HOLY COMMUNION – A MEAL WITH A MEANING – SYMBOL AND SACRAMENT

Exodus 12:1-11; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Luke 22:7-20

13<sup>th</sup> March 2011, 8 a.m. and 10 a.m.

1. Today we begin a Lent sermon series on Holy Communion. It is fitting that we do this in Lent, since the observance of Lent originally began as a period of preparation for those who were to be baptised and admitted into the fellowship of the Church at Easter.
2. Holy Communion is at heart of Christian worship. We can see this from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Here he is writing to the first generation of Christians, in about 55 AD, and already he is giving instructions about how Holy Communion should be properly celebrated. So it is clear that Holy Communion has been part of the life of the Church from the very beginning.
3. This is because it goes back to Jesus himself. Jesus didn't give many instructions about worship. He didn't say what sort of musical accompaniment we should have for our singing. But he did tell us how to celebrate Holy Communion. So Holy Communion links us directly to Jesus, our Lord and the founder of our faith. It is known as a dominical sacrament, that is, we have been commanded by our Lord to worship in this way. The words that I will be shortly using at the communion table are taken directly from the words of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels: "And he took bread gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.' (Luke 22:19-20)
4. It is an act of worship which is deeply symbolic, and what I want to do this morning is to explore some of the symbolism embedded within this sacrament. Here's a little story which illustrates the importance of understanding symbolism.
5. One weekend a young boy was visiting his grandparents. On the Sunday morning they went to church. After the service the boy asked his grandfather what communion was all about – the little communion wafer and the sip of wine. His granddad replied, "That was Jesus' Last Supper." To which the little boy replied, "Boy, they didn't give him much, did they?"
6. Clearly the little boy hadn't quite grasped the symbolic meaning of Holy Communion! As we explore this theme, I want to emphasize at the outset that Christians do not have a monopoly on the use of symbols. As humans we use symbols and symbolic gestures all the time in communicating with one another. Symbols are part and parcel of everyday life. For example, why do supermarkets stock their shelves with red roses in time for Valentine's Day? A red rose doesn't have an obvious or logical connection with love, and yet it has come to symbolise this. Or if I were to give the thumbs up sign, this would immediately be interpreted in our culture as conveying the message, "That's great! Looks good! Fine!"
7. Some symbols and symbolic gestures have real power to change situations. For example, a handshake can be used to clinch a multi-million pound business deal or seal a political agreement. We can think of the great agonising the political leaders of Northern Ireland

went through before agreeing to shake hands and so seal the Good Friday agreement that has laid the foundations for a peaceful political process.

A wedding ring is a good example of a symbol that conveys the message that the status of those wearing such rings has changed. During the marriage service the wedding ring is put on the finger of the bride and then the groom, and this seals their vows and has huge significance for their life together, their shared resources and their children.

8. Even bread and wine can carry symbolic meanings. We speak of a bread and butter issue, meaning it is both basic and essential. Wine can symbolise celebration. No New Year's celebration would be complete without the toast at midnight.

In the context of the communion service, bread and wine are even more significant for their symbolic value. They are symbols which actually carry powerful effect and have the ability to bring change to a situation. Communion is, in effect, a meal with a meaning, full of symbolism. To explore this further, let's go back to its original meaning.

9. When Jesus gathered his disciples together to celebrate what was to become the Last Supper it was originally a Passover meal. This is a meal which is central to Israelite identity. It commemorates the occasion when God rescued the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt and formed them into a people dedicated to his glory and brought them into the Promised Land. This mighty act of rescue and salvation is recalled by the use of symbolism throughout the meal. For example, in Exodus 12:8 we read the Israelites are to eat bitter herbs, bread made without yeast, and lamb. The bitter herbs symbolise the bitterness of the slavery that the Israelites had to endure. Unleavened bread is eaten to symbolise the hurry in which the Israelites had to leave, not allowing enough time to wait for bread made with yeast to rise. The lamb is eaten to recall the Passover lambs that were slaughtered so that their blood might be daubed on the lintels and doorposts of the homes where the Israelites were staying to distinguish them from the Egyptian residences. At other points in the meal salt water is used to symbolise the tears shed by the Israelites on account of their hardships in Egypt and also to symbolise the saltiness of the Red Sea. Later, sweetmeat is eaten to symbolise the sweet taste of freedom. Also, at four points in the meal, red wine is drunk with particular words accompanying each occasion. For example, the fourth cup is the cup of salvation, which serves the purpose of a toast to God's successful act of rescue. Throughout the meal these symbols and symbolic gestures are accompanied by the recital of an interpretive script, retelling the story of the Exodus, and in effect bringing it into the living experience of all those who are participating in the Passover meal.
10. This was the meal that Jesus' disciples thought they were celebrating with Jesus. They would have been familiar with it from childhood. However, at crucial points, Jesus changed the script. We can read about this in Luke 22. In verse 19, when Jesus took the bread, instead of saying, "This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate in Egypt", Jesus said, "This is my body which is given for you." And for the fourth cup, after the main meal, instead of saying "This is the cup of salvation", he said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is poured out for you."

The disciples would have been most surprised at this. What was Jesus doing? Why was he changing the age-old words that had been carefully passed down from generation to generation?

By his words and actions, Jesus was giving a whole new interpretation to the meal. It was still celebrating a mighty act of rescue and salvation by God, but this time the rescue was not from slavery in Egypt, rather it was from slavery to the power of sin; those taking part were being formed into a people dedicated to God's glory, but this time they were the Church rather than the Israelite nation; and they were embarking on a journey of deliverance that would lead to the Promised Land, but in this case the destination was heaven itself. This change of interpretation is hugely significant, and I'm going to dwell on it more shortly, but before I go any further its worth acknowledging the difficulties that have arisen from the words that Jesus used.

11. Even from the earliest days, Jesus' words, "This is my body which is given for you," and "This is my blood" have caused problems of interpretation. We know from the writings of Tertullian (AD 160-220) that the early Christians were accused by their pagan opponents of practising cannibalism when they gathered to celebrate the Lord's Supper. And yet Christians persisted in using these words, and they are also preserved in the Gospel accounts of the Last Supper.

At the outset it is worth noting that when Jesus initially used these words, he was physically present with the disciples at the time. So when he held up the bread and said, "This is my body", they could clearly distinguish between the bread and his hand which held it. The bread was not physically his body. He was using language in a symbolic fashion. Similarly, when he commanded his disciples to drink the wine that he had just described as his blood, no self-respecting Jew would drink blood. There were extensive regulations in the Hebrew Scriptures about how to prepare food that was going to be eaten, including the draining away of the blood. (Leviticus 17:13-14) But, on the other hand, blood was used on a regular basis in sacrificial rites, for example being sprinkled on the altar in the ceremonies associated with the Day of Atonement. (Leviticus 16:10-19)

12. The debate about the nature of bread and the wine used in communion and their relation to Jesus' body and blood re-emerged in the course of the Reformation. There was a famous discussion in 1529 in Marburg between Luther and Zwingli. Luther, drawing on his training and formation as an Augustinian monk, wanted to uphold the approach of medieval physics, which allowed for a distinction between outer appearance and inner substance. So although the outer appearance of the bread remained the same, as a result of the prayer of consecration, the inner substance had changed to become the body of Christ. Zwingli, on the other hand, argued that the bread remains unchanged, and this understanding has been incorporated into the Reformed tradition.

The Anglican tradition draws together both of these perspectives. This can be seen in the words which the priest uses to invite the people to come and receive communion. The first sentence backs up Luther's approach: "Draw near with faith, receive the body of our Lord Jesus Christ which he gave for you and his blood which he shed for you." However, in the very next breath, the priest uses words which would support the Zwinglian position: "Eat

and drink in remembrance that he died for you, and feed on him in your hearts by faith with thanksgiving.” This bringing together of these two perspectives goes back to the 1662 Book of Common Prayer and the words used at the administration of communion: “The body of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life...” (drawing on the medieval Catholic approach) “...Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith with thanksgiving.” (drawing on the Reformation approach).

13. At its heart, this debate is all about how we discern and receive the life of Christ through Holy Communion. How is his presence communicated? In order to answer this, we need to understand the nature of sacraments. A sacrament may be defined as an outer visible sign communicating an inner spiritual reality. So how do the outer visible signs of bread and wine communicate the inner spiritual reality of the life of Christ to all who receive Holy Communion?

14. There are two key concepts which help us with this question: transignification and receptionism.

**Transignification** is the process whereby the meaning and significance of an object are changed with practical effect. A good example of this is a postage stamp. A stamp is made of paper, but when this paper is put through the Royal Mail printing press, its significance changes, giving it power to make a difference. If I stick an ordinary piece of paper onto an envelope, nothing will happen. But if I stick a piece of paper which has now become a stamp onto an envelope, then this stamp has the power to allow the letter to travel from here to Australia or anywhere around the world. The substance of the paper of the stamp hasn't changed, but its significance has, and this makes a big difference in terms of practical outcome. In a similar fashion, the substance of the communion bread hasn't changed. But through the words of the Eucharistic prayer, its significance has, and this gives it powerful effect. To understand how this effect comes about, we turn to the second concept: receptionism.

Through **receptionism**, Anglicans hold that those who receive the bread and wine receive more of the life of Christ at work within them. This is not because the physical nature of the bread has changed, but rather, we feed on Christ in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving. It is the moment of faithful reception, rather than consecration, which is the high point of the communion service. An analogy that illustrates the way what we eat becomes part of us with practical effect can be seen in the diet for sportsmen and women. In April there is the London marathon, and at the moment all who are taking part will be reaching the culmination of their training, and making sure that they eat carbohydrate-rich meals such as pasta. This is because carbohydrates can be stored in muscles as an energy source which will be used over the long course. Or, to use another example, wrestlers and weight lifters will make sure that their diet is protein-rich.

15. So, in following the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, whenever we celebrate Holy Communion, we receive more of his life at work within us. Now we can return to considering the change of meaning that Jesus introduced by using different words at crucial points. There are three key aspects.

- i) Both the Passover and Holy Communion are meals celebrating rescue and salvation. For the Jewish people, the story they tell over the meal recalls how they were rescued from their bitter slavery in Egypt as the nation was thrown into confusion and distress by the events of the Passover. For Christians, the story told through the Eucharistic Prayer, recalls how Christ has rescued us from slavery to sin by his death on the cross.
  - ii) Both the Passover and Holy Communion are meals of corporate identity. For the Israelites, they were transformed from a bunch of slaves into a new nation dedicated to the glory of God. Having been rescued from Egypt and having safely crossed the Red Sea, they were given the Ten Commandments by Moses to form the basis for their national life. For Christians, we are transformed from a loose group of individuals into the Church with the purpose of proclaiming the word and works of God, to his glory. The words of the Communion Service recall our foundation charter, giving us identity and purpose.
  - iii) Both the Passover and Holy Communion are meals of hope. In the Passover, the Israelites look forward to being brought into the Promised Land and the establishment of Jerusalem. In Holy Communion, Christians look forward to reaching heaven after the travelling through “the wilderness of this world”.
  - iv) In both the Passover and Holy Communion, past and future converge on the present, filling it with meaning and significance. The past shapes our identity. We look back 2,000 years to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, all of which shape us as Christians. We look forward to the end of our life’s journey and hope the heavenly banquet awaiting us. This hope transforms the present, giving us the energy and motivation to make the most of each day given to us.
16. In these ways, Holy Communion is a meal with a meaning, and its true significance can begin to be unpacked as we come to a deeper understanding of the role of symbol and sacrament. It is a meal which Jesus himself commanded us to continue celebrating. Through it we are nourished by Christ’s presence, and we affirm the connectedness of our daily reality to God and his purposes.