

What is the point of Holy Communion? Part 1:- Nourishing the Church

Sermon for Sunday Evening 6th August 2006 – Robert Innes

It has been celebrated in cathedrals and prison cells, amongst gatherings of millions and with individuals in private homes, in situations of celebration and with those who are dying in hospital, with informal gatherings of young people around campfires and at the coronation of kings and queens: over two thousand years and in every continent and island across the world, Christians have celebrated the Lord's Supper. Whether they have called it Holy Communion, or Eucharist or Mass, the church has shared bread and wine in remembrance of Jesus, and read the words of the institution of the Lord's Supper recorded for us by St. Paul in our reading tonight. So continuing our series on "real church", we are thinking this evening and next Sunday evening about "the Lord's Supper" – and next Sunday we will actually be sharing in Communion. We'll be asking, how did this ceremony come to be such an important part of their worship for many or most Christians. Was it a tradition that just sort of came about, grew popular and then stuck – like the tradition of eating turkeys at Christmas or putting candles on birthday cakes? Comforting and familiar but not essential to the realities of faith and life and work. Or is there more to it than that? What really, is the point of the Lord's Supper?

Well let's begin by remembering that the Lord's Supper is a meal, if a symbolic one, and that meals were very important to Jesus. If Jesus had been born today, I think he might well have been born Belgian, because he liked to do his most important work over a meal. Some people found this rather shocking. People expected prophets to be abstemious in their attitude to food, but of Jesus they said, "He's a glutton and a drunkard". Jesus first miracle in St. John's gospel was the turning of water into large quantities of wine at a wedding – not a good role model for moderate drinking I'm afraid. It wasn't just that he enjoyed his meals, it was a matter of the wide range of those with whom he chose to dine. He accepted invitations from tax collectors. He welcomed beggars and outcasts. Even at the home of a respectable Pharisee we find him accepting the attention of a woman who had wandered in off the street. And when Jesus talked about what the kingdom would be like, well his favourite image was of a wedding feast, a great banquet in heaven hosted by God the Father. Meals were very important to Jesus.

Of all his meals, no meal was more important to Jesus than the one he shared with his disciples in the Upper Room. It was his last meal; it took place as Paul says, “on the night he was betrayed”. So we rightly call it “the *last* supper”. It took place in a significant place: Jerusalem, the capital city of the chosen people. And at a significant time: Passover, the most important festival in the Jewish calendar. Here, in Jerusalem the Jews gathered at the beginning of each new year to remember their origins as a people. Each year they would listen to these desperately moving words: “My father was a wandering Aramean, and went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation. But the Egyptians ill-treated us and made us suffer. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our Fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and brought us into this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” (Deut. 26). At Passover, the people of Israel remembered who they were: they were the Lord’s own people whom he had rescued and to whom he had given freedom.

The regulations for observing Passover were and are very precise. The person who presides over the meal must explain the significance of each element: the unleavened bread, the salt water, the bitter herbs and so on. The Jewish Mishnah says this is to be done “as if in every generation the person himself came forth from Egypt”. In sharing in Passover, the faithful Jew calls to mind the events of the Exodus, he imagines himself to have been there crossing the Red Sea, and he thanks God for his freedom and salvation. Every Jew knew how the words in the Passover went, they had been taught them from childhood.

But this is a Passover with a difference. Here in the Last Supper shared in the Upper Room, Jesus makes an astonishing, completely unscripted innovation. After sharing in the opening hors d’oeuvre and the introductory blessings, the disciples would have been expecting Jesus to recite the words of the Haggadah: “This is the bread of affliction that our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt”. Instead, he picks up the bread, and says: “This is my body which is given for you, do this in remembrance of me.” And then he says similar words over the cup. “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Drink this in remembrance of me.” Do you see the extraordinary significance of these words recited in this place at this time?

The Exodus was the decisive founding event of the people of Israel. And the Passover was the festival at which the meaning of the Exodus was recalled and made present. Jesus takes this Passover meal and gives it a new meaning with reference to his own body and blood. The Jews celebrated Passover in every generation as if the person themselves had come forth from Egypt. So, from now on Jesus followers are to celebrate this meal, bringing to mind the events of his death. Just as the first Israel is constituted through Exodus and through its remembrance at Passover, so the new Israel is constituted through Jesus death and through the remembrance of this in the sharing of bread and wine.

Its for this reason, that the Last Supper is recorded in great detail in Matthew, Mark and Luke, a little differently in John, and also by Paul. St. Paul hardly refers to any events in the life of Jesus apart from his death and resurrection. But in the case of the Last Supper he recalls the event faithfully and takes great care to teach his readers in accordance with what he believes the Lord himself instructed.

You see, it's not putting it too strongly to say that the church, the new people of God, comes into being at the Last Supper, and that its identity is re-established every time the Lord's Supper is shared subsequently. Far from being a kind of decoration or ornament, the Lord's Supper is essential to the founding and continuing of the new people of God.

Jesus left us no constitution for the church. He left no instructions about elders or bishops or buildings or dioceses or services. He drew up no creeds. But he did leave instructions on the night he was betrayed that we should break bread and share wine in remembrance of him. And the sharing of bread and wine, has, as a matter of fact, been the one thing that has provided the key meaning, formed the central act of worship, and reconfirmed the core identity of the church ever since.

I want us to think next week, about exactly how the Lord's Supper serves to constitute and to transform the community of the church. Because I believe that this Supper is a far more powerful vehicle of transformation than we usually think. But for now, I'd like to focus on the meaning of verses 24 and 25 of tonight's reading. "This is my body – do this in remembrance. This cup is the new covenant – do this in remembrance."

I have to say, that I don't think the church has always got the point of these verses quite right. In the early Christian centuries, people began to get overly concerned with exactly *how* the bread became the body of Christ, or exactly *how* the wine became the blood of Christ. What kind of change took place, they asked, and when did this change happen? Alongside this, there grew up an excessively physical account of the Last Supper, so that people thought that bread became Jesus body in a very literal sense. In early medieval times stories began to circulate of people who had seen consecrated bread bleeding. These were superstitious days. Partly to counteract these stories, the Catholic Church formulated a more sophisticated account of what was going on. The Greek philosopher Aristotle had distinguished between the "substance" of an object, "what it really is", and its form – what it looks like, what it appears to be. The theologian Thomas Aquinas, applied this to the bread and wine, suggesting that the bread in all its outward appearances remains bread, but in its inner substance changes at the moment of consecration into the physical body of Christ. This was the doctrine of transubstantiation, promulgated in the 13th century and remaining official Roman Catholic teaching to this day.

At the Reformation, there were few doctrines more controversial than transubstantiation. Different reformers took up different positions on what, if anything, happened to the consecrated bread, but they all agreed that ideas of a Greek philosopher had no place in story. Our own church's position, as set out in the 39 Articles, follows that of the Geneva-based reformer John Calvin. This is that Christ is really and spiritually present in the consecrated bread and wine. As we eat the bread and drink the cup, so we are inwardly and spiritually fed by the body and blood of Jesus. The outward symbols of bread and wine really do act to convey the inward grace of Christ, if we are open to receive in an attitude of faith. From what I have said about the roots of the Last Supper in the Passover, I hope you'll realize that I don't think that when Jesus held up the bread and said "this is my body", he was indicating a physical change in the bread, anymore than any of the other elements of the passover underwent physical changes. The emphasis in the Lord's Supper is not on the nature of any change taking place in the elements. What is important is what is going on at a spiritual level between the believer and their Lord. If you ask me, "is Jesus really present at the Lord's Supper", I would say, yes indeed he is. But for me the key to this presence is not through any changes going on in the bread and the wine as through what we might call "active remembrance" of Jesus.

"Remembrance" is a powerful phenomenon that changes who we are and how we act. When the Jews celebrated Passover they were to do it in such a way as if they themselves had participated in the events of the Exodus. Jewish identity was formed through its remembrance of the Exodus. To be a Jew was and is to be someone who thankfully remembers freedom from slavery in Egypt. Likewise, Christian identity is formed through its remembrance of the cross. To be a Christian is to be someone who thankfully remembers freedom from slavery to sin. So when Jesus says, "do this in remembrance of me", he means that we should share the supper in such a way that we ourselves are caught up in the event of his death.

Our own personal identities are formed by the things that we remember about ourselves, about our pasts, and about the people of whom we are a part. So every time we share in the Lord's Supper, we recall Jesus death, and we build and re-build the event of that death into our own psychological make-up. As St. Paul says, "every time we eat this bread and drink this cup we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

Some people regard communion as a bit like the wake at a funeral. You know, people usually have a meal after someone has died to share their memories of the deceased. But Holy Communion is a lot more than a commemoration meal to someone who died a long time ago. Because Jesus is both died and risen again. And so when we remember Jesus, we remember someone who is living and active. When we call him to mind, we are calling to mind the presence of someone who meets us today. Communion can be powerfully comforting, strengthening, challenging, because it focuses the presence of the living Jesus for us in the familiar and basic sensations of eating and drinking.

We keep in the safe of our church, this little communion set. It is very precious because it is the little chalice and paten from which Edith Cavell received communion on the night before she was led out to be shot by a firing squad in the first world war. People sometimes receive the Lord's Supper in the most extreme situations, even when they are facing death. Sometimes our lives are filled with joy, celebration, optimism and hope. But we can also run into darker times. We may fall into sin and temptation, and wonder whether we can approach God with any kind of integrity. We may experience periods when saying very much positive about our faith is difficult, when we aren't sure what if anything we believe. Whatever, we can still take part in Holy Communion, with as much faith or integrity as we can manage. And when we do that, we can still find a sense of belonging to Jesus, a sense of being spiritually fed, a sense of feeling again that he died for me. The Lord's Supper was ordained by Jesus to be a principal means of nourishing our spirits. We are one body, says Paul, because we all share in one bread. Communion works to nourish the individual. It also works to form and transform the church. How it does that, we will need to leave to next week.