

What is the Point of Holy Communion? Part 2- Transforming the Church

Sunday 13th August 2006 7:00p.m.

We continue tonight our series on “real church” with the second of two sermons on the subject of Holy Communion. Last week we were basing our thoughts on 1 Cor. 11, which is usually reckoned to be the first and oldest account of the Lord’s Supper. Tonight we’ll be continuing to reflect on that passage. But we’ll also be ranging more widely. We’ll be looking at St. Luke’s account of the breaking of bread and we’ll compare him with St. Paul and also with St. John. Because it’s often in making these kinds of comparisons that we shine new light on old and familiar subjects. Last week we were thinking particularly about how Holy Communion feeds and nourishes the individual. This week, I’d like us to think a little more about how Communion works at the corporate level, how it challenges and transforms the church.

One of the really unfortunate things that happened in the history of the church was that Holy Communion came to be seen as a largely private transaction between the believer and his or her Lord. People used to talk and still do of “making my communion”. The tradition of having quiet early eight o’clock or in our case nine o’clock communions can perpetuate this idea. (Though actually at Holy Trinity they’re not so quiet because half the congregation are usually children!)

In the church in which I grew up, we had a weekly non-eucharistic service of morning prayer, this was back in the 1960s. After that had finished, once a month, there was a service of holy communion, to which, it seemed to me, the really serious and usually elderly people stayed. A reverential hush descended on the church and all the children were ushered out of the buildings. The old people were making their communion. And sadly, even today, there are many churches where the communion or Mass is a highly individual experience with very little social contact with others.

In fact the word communion itself suggests that the activity is basically something to do with community. And this evening I’d like us to explore this community dimension, which I think is actually hugely challenging and important. I’m going to that by looking at five pairs or doubles. These are five different and sometimes apparently opposite characteristics that we find in scripture that open up to us the meaning of Holy Communion. Having gone through the scriptures I’ll then conclude by setting the Holy Communion in a bigger context, and try to suggest how, on a grand scale, it might have a vital part to play in achieving God’s purposes for the world. So to begin with five pairings.

The first pairings arises directly from a comparison between 1 Corinthians 10 and Luke 24. Last week, you may remember, St. Paul stresses that the Lord’s Supper is an event that remembers the Lord’s *death*. Paul says, “every time you eat the bread and drink the cup you celebrate the Lord’s death until he comes.” Here in Luke, and tonight’s reading, by contrast we find that it is the *risen Lord* who makes himself known in the breaking of bread. At the last supper Jesus had taken the bread, given thanks and said “do this in

remembrance of me”. Here after the resurrection, the risen Christ takes the bread, gives thanks and breaks it. And it’s then that they recognise his presence among them. Which is simply to say, that Holy Communion is both a celebration of the Lord’s death and a celebration of his resurrection. It isn’t just a memorial to someone who has died, it is also a recognition of his living presence with us. Holy Communion has transforming potential because it invokes the Living Lord, bringing the powerful effects of his death into present reality.

Secondly, it is interesting to notice that where St. Paul refers to the Lord’s Supper, St. Luke always refers to the breaking of bread. Here in tonight’s gospel reading, Jesus is recognised in the breaking of bread. In Luke’s second book, Acts Chapter 2, we read that the early Christians gathered for the apostles teaching, fellowship, prayers and the *breaking of bread*. Later in Acts 20 we read that the Christians in Troas met on the first day of the week “*to break bread*”. Luke and Paul are clearly talking about the same thing, but one calls it the Lord’s Supper and other calls it the breaking of bread.

Now over the course of the next 100 years we know that the holy communion emerged as a rite centred on the breaking of bread, as St. Luke puts it. But it was also originally the Lord’s supper, as Paul puts it. In its original scriptural context, the breaking of bread amongst the disciples was always part of a larger act of worship involving teaching and prayers. In the case of Acts 20 Paul was preaching, and he went on so long that one of the congregation falls asleep and sadly fell out of an upstairs window! All of which is to say that Holy Communion is not exclusively about sharing bread and wine. It is always about a wider community context. And it should always involve a wider worship context, with the reading of scripture and preaching. The breaking of bread only gains its meaning, and its power from being part of a much bigger event, a much bigger drama - involving everyone in sharing, in worship, in prayers, in teaching and learning.

Thirdly, Paul emphasises that communion is about sharing in the body of the Lord but he also says that is to do with sharing in the fellowship of the church. His sharp criticism of the Corinthian church is that the feast they celebrate *is not* the supper of the Lord because there are social divisions within the church. If you asked Paul what makes for a valid celebration of communion, he wouldn’t have worried about the precise words that were used. But he did worry very much about the state of the community using the words.

The point Paul makes is a very profound one. “The bread we break is a sharing in the body of Christ. And by sharing in the one loaf we who are many are made into that one body.” (1 Cor. 10) The “body of Christ” refers both to the bread *and* to the community of believers. By sharing in communion, the individual is both built up themselves and is incorporated more closely into fellowship with other people. The quite extraordinary thing about the body of Christ is that the more fully a part of it you become, the truly you grow into your own person. To share in communion is to be part of one body with our brothers and sisters – yet not in such a way that our own identity is threatened, but so that it is affirmed.

Fourthly, the gospel writers seem to take different views as to what is at the heart of the communion. When they tell the accounts of the Last Supper each of them tells them so as to emphasise different parts. You can check the texts for yourselves, but St. Matthew's account of the Last Supper focuses on what you might call "the religious parts" – the sharing of bread, the pouring of wine, and the saying of prayers and the singing of a final hymn. St. Luke in his account of the Last Supper includes an account of Jesus rebuking those who would be great amongst the disciples and telling them that he comes among them as one who serves. And in his account of the Last Supper, St. John doesn't have any reference to the bread and the wine at all – instead the central act is Jesus washing the disciples' feet. The gospel writers don't disagree but they do place the emphasis in different places. Now all this is very interesting and makes us ask: is the most important part of holy communion the religious element or is it the element of mutual love and mutual service? Is the heart of the Lord's Supper the sharing of bread and wine, or is it metaphorically washing one another's feet?

You see usually, even those of us who are very low church, very protestant, think that the heart of the Lord's Supper is the religious element. That after all is why we come to church. But supposing our mutual care and love is equally important. Suppose the real test of the Lord's Supper was not just the quality of the *worship* experience but also the quality of the *service* experience. Suppose the true worshipper is the one who washes the feet of the others – in our terms, the one who puts out the chairs, gets the books ready, locks up at the end, cares for the visitor, speaks to the difficult person. Usually we think that true Christian service springs from true worship. But suppose that true worship depends upon a true attitude of service. Well that might have a radical effect on how we prepare, plan and conduct our gatherings.

And then fifthly, is Holy Communion really about healing and sustaining the internal life of the church, or is it about equipping us for our work in the world. Certainly when we look at the different accounts of the Last Supper, we can see that Jesus is building the 12 disciples into a fellowship and trying to strengthen their love for one another. But in Luke's account (ch 22) there is also a hard-edge of challenge to the world. At the end of the last supper Jesus says: "now go out into the world. If you have a purse take it, and also a bag, and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one." Jesus sends his 12 disciples out in conflict with the wider world. There's a surprising switch in tone from the warm atmosphere of fellowship around the table to the hard realities of living in a hostile world.

Doing communion properly is sometimes going to mean conflict with the world. We already see what this might mean in St. Paul's experience with the church in Corinth. Here, celebration of the Lord's Supper challenged deep social divisions between rich and poor, between slaves and free, between Jew and Gentile. Still today, proper celebration of the Lord's supper challenges divisions whether they be racial, ethnic or economic. A church which is a real church, a Lord's Supper which is really a Lord's Supper will have disturbing implications for the wider social order, as its message of justice and love ripples outwards.

Here at Holy Trinity, there are many people who have gone out from the warm fellowship of this church to difficult places. To give two examples, we think of Filip Amelout, who, at this moment is on an African Enterprise mission to Soweto in South Africa, taking the gospel to schools, orphanages, prisons and police officers alike. Or we think of Tinneke Knigge, working with the international justice mission in South Asia doing potentially dangerous work to free girls forced into prostitution and to bring those involved in human trafficking to justice. Holy Communion is both about bringing warm fellowship within our community, and about revealing the love and justice of God to the world.

So to sum up so far, I have suggested five biblical pairs of doubles associated with the Lord's supper: a remembrance of the death of Jesus together with a celebration of his risen presence; a setting of the breaking of bread ritual within a wider framework of teaching and worship at the Lord's Supper; a balance between elements of religious worship and loving service; and lastly an inward focus on fellowship combined with an outward thrust towards justice.

In summary, I want to suggest that the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion, when it is performed properly, is doing nothing less than bringing about God's ordering in the world. The whole of creation is, I believe, designed to reflect God's ordering purposes. Each level of the universe, from atoms, through molecules, cells, natural life and human society expresses the ordering power of God. The Holy Spirit works at each level to bring order and God is present at each level.

The Lord's Supper or Holy Communion works at the highest level; it brings a new high-level ordering of human life. The Lord's supper is a human drama in which the church enacts one of its most powerful symbols – a symbol with connotations of covenant, sacrifice, death, resurrection and hope. In this way the fellowship of believers is built into a new society by God. And so the church is re-constituted and re-vitalised. In the Lord's Supper, the Church performs in a dramatic way elements of forgiveness, peace-making, mutual service, thanksgiving and sending out. Through this performance, God is, I believe, able to act in such a way that we can say that Christ is really present.

Too often Holy Communion is vastly under-rated. It is seen as a religious ritual. It is thought to be mainly about personal comfort and solace. It is seen as pointing to the death of someone in a far away place and time. In fact, when it is done properly, Holy Communion is an event which touches the mind, heart and will. It is a fundamentally social occasion. It isn't just a symbol of truth; it is the performance of truth. When holy communion is done properly, the church opens itself to transformation. In that way it begins to embody the kingdom of God in its own life and relationships. And it is in doing this that the church is empowered to bring salvation to the world. Real fellowship, real communion, real church. They are bound together. May God raise all of them to higher and higher levels - in our evening service, in our whole fellowship, here at Holy Trinity Brussels.