

Why bother with Communion – Mark 14:12-25

October 6, 2019 PM

Father God, we have so much to be thankful for, so many reasons to celebrate your faithfulness and goodness to us. As we come to your word this evening, may we hear you speaking to us, drawing into an ever deeper communion with you. For we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

We are continuing our series looking at the things we do week by week when we gather together as Church, to see the purpose behind them and the benefit to us who gather in the Lord's name.

So far we have looked at the Church itself. We've looked at the Bible and preaching and then last week, Graham helped us take a fresh look at why we make confession.

This evening we come to Holy Communion – the sharing of bread and wine, a meal instituted by Jesus himself, on the night before he died, at that Last Supper with his friends.

Let's hear that now as Anne bring us our Bible Reading

READING – MARK 14:12-25

Let me describe something to you. It has twelve gold stars in the form of a circle on a blue background, and has been around since 1983.

If you can picture it, and know what it is that I am describing, what feelings does it engender in you?

It is, of course, the flag of the European Union. It is only a symbol, yet I reckon that if I took a straw poll this evening I would get a whole range of responses from you.

I raise this because this evening we are looking at Holy Communion. As with anything that has profound symbolic meaning, this shared meal at the Lord's Table can be both a force for unity and a source of division.

The very fact that the sharing of bread and wine is known by so many names, is a sure indicator of difference of opinion and belief. These

differences are not confined to the meal itself, but also to the place from which it is distributed? Did you note that I referred to the Lord's Table rather than the altar.

Between 1555 and 1558, 288 Protestant Reformers were burned at the stake here in Britain, including clergymen, women and children, because of what they believed, or rather failed to believe about what was happening as the Church shared bread and wine.

They refused to *"believe or admit that the body and blood of Christ were really, literally, corporeally, locally, and materially present under the forms of bread and wine after the words of consecration were pronounced."*

That is they did not believe that the bread and wine literally became Christ's body and blood.

Canon Law in the Church of England, stipulates that we must share the bread and the wine at, at least one service, every Sunday.

Now, unlike those 288 Christians here in Britain, and the hundreds more across Europe, for whom it was literally a matter of life and death, perhaps our very familiarity with this meal has contributed to our failure sometimes to embrace the significance and seriousness of what we do and what we share in.

While each of the names that the church uses for this shared meal derive from the central truths of what we are about when we come together to take bread and wine, which name we use came to be invested with a disunity that was never intended, and which still in many ways, still keeps us apart today.

I'll very briefly mention each of these names, and where they have their origins.

Let's start with a name that you will hear used across the denominations as an alternative way of referencing this sacrament (all we'll talk more about sacrament later): and that name is the **Lord's Supper**. The name

itself is a reminder that what we share in was instigated by Christ himself. It's our connection to the past in the present until he comes again.

The name perhaps most familiar to us here at Christ Church is **Holy Communion**. Communion means "togetherness" or "sharing", and 'Holy' means set apart. So this meal we share reminds us that we are a people set apart for God, and brought together with Him under the cross of Christ. So that's the second name.

Across much of the Anglican church this meal is also known as the Eucharist, which simply comes from the Greek word for 'thank you'. It's a reminder that we share bread and wine in thankfulness for what God has done for us through Christ on the cross.

The final name I want to mention is most widely used in the Roman Catholic church, where it is commonly called the Mass. It's from the Latin phrase "Ite – missio est", which means, "Go – you are sent out". And in the days when all services were conducted only in Latin, this phrase concluded gathered worship. It reminds us that as his Church, we do not simply look to the past, but have a present purpose in Christ's mission to the world.

Each of these names reminds us of what we hold in common. Each of these names reminds us of what is at the heart of our gathered and scattered lives as followers of Christ Jesus: remembrance, togetherness and covenant relationship and thanksgiving, and I want to look at each of these elements in turn this evening.

We begin with remembrance.

The prayer that we will use a little later as we prepare to take Communion, twice says "do this in remembrance of me."

Though we didn't actually hear those words in the passage Anne read to us from Mark's gospel, they are there in Luke's account of the Last Supper. Paul also uses them in his letter to the Church in Corinth, when

he reminds them of the dangers of sharing the Lords' Supper lightly and without proper personal and corporate reflection and responsibility.

But what is it that we are remembering?

"While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many." (Mark 11:22-24)

First and foremost we are remembering the gospel message of hope, that on the cross, Christ died for our sins. His body was broken and his blood was spilled instead of ours. He paid the price so that we didn't have to, and on the cross, sin was dealt with once and for all.

We are also remembering his resurrection, when death was defeated and the promise of eternal life was given to all who believe. When the disciples met with Jesus on the road to Emmaus after the resurrection, they did not recognise him until he broke bread and poured wine with them.

Holy Communion, Eucharist, whatever we call it, is about reminding ourselves that our life depends as much on the body and blood of Jesus as it does on the food and drink we consume each and every day.

But when we remember, we don't merely go back to the Last Supper, because that meal itself was set in the context of Passover. *"On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, 'Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?'" (Mark 14:12)*

Each year the Jewish nation celebrates the Passover, as they had been instructed to do, so that they would remember the faithfulness of God, in liberating his people from slavery in Egypt.

If you've ever been to our Maundy Thursday Supper, you'll have heard Graham take us through the various elements of that meal and their significance, not only for the people of Israel, but, in the light of the death and resurrection of Christ, for the whole people of God. Because the Passover meal itself was a signpost to the greater liberation from slavery to sin and death that Christ won for us on the cross. That's why Paul refers to Jesus as "Christ our Passover lamb, who has been sacrificed for us." (1 Cor 5:7)

When we celebrate Holy Communion we remember the faithfulness of God from the beginning, restoring his creation to himself by breaking down the barriers of sin and death. We remember the God who brings to completion in Christ Jesus, his covenant promise to bless all nations through Abraham and his offspring.

But we don't just remember the past, but we look to God's promises for the future, when the earth will be remade and we will come to the banquet prepared for us in heaven.

The people of Israel were instructed to celebrate the Passover every year so that they would remember the faithfulness of God, and they celebrated with joy. So we too celebrate communion not simply because Christ instructed us to do so lest we forget what he has done, but because he invites us to enter into his death and resurrection, to take hold of his kingdom life. We too should come with joy.

Communion is about remembrance.

But did you notice how often I used the word 'celebrate'? We celebrate Holy Communion, and you can't truly celebrate anything on your own. The second element of Communion is togetherness.

Christ died for each one of us; it is a personal decision to repent and follow him, but he is making a people, his church, not a collection of individuals.

Going back again to the context of the Last Supper, it is by design a shared meal – master and disciples, together, in communion with one another.

Communion, or togetherness, is the fruit of God's promise to his people to be remaking them as his own. Through Christ's sacrifice on the cross, he bridged the chasm that separated us from enjoying true fellowship with the Father because of sin. Now, in Christ, we are in communion with God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit and we are in communion with one another as the body of Christ.

We are in communion, but we are also in a covenant relationship, with God and with each other.

Verse 23 "Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them."

In the Old Testament it was the practice to set a seal on a covenant or binding agreement with blood.

In Exodus 24, beginning at verse 3 we read: *"When Moses went and told the people all the Lord's words and laws, they responded with one voice, "Everything the Lord has said we will do." Moses then wrote down everything the Lord had said.*

He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he splashed against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey."

Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words."

God has made an everlasting covenant with his people, sealed with the blood of Christ himself. Sharing in the bread and drink the wine we not only remember what has been done for us in Christ, but we affirm our joyful acceptance of his covenant relationship with us. Communion renews our commitment, our covenant relationship with Christ, which by default, renews our relationship with his body, the church.

When we come to the Lord's Table to share bread and wine, we come as a sign of our unity. That's why it is so important that we come prepared.

You may remember that earlier I mentioned Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, in which he rebukes them for their behaviour and their disregard for one another when they met to share the Lord's Supper.

He's very blunt with them: *"So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgement on themselves."* 1 Cor 11:27-29

That's why we begin the service in praise, to remind us of who God is and what he has done, to help us set aside the cares of the world and focus on him. That's why we say confession together, to empty our hands and our hearts of the things that might come in the way of that communion God longs to share with us. That's why we hear from God's word and work through it together before we come to communion, to draw us into God's story with its climax in Jesus.

If we are truly engaging with this drama that God has drawn us into then we should not, in all conscience, come to the Lord's table if, for any reason, we are not in communion with one another.

Though we don't do it outside of our 9 o'clock service, that's what the Sharing of the Peace is all about. An opportunity to make peace with any one with whom we might have had a falling out, so that we approach the Lord's table reconciled to one another.

We come in remembrance. We come in togetherness and in covenant relationship and finally, we come with Thanksgiving.

If you've been coming to Christ Church for any length of time, you may have noticed that there are several different prayers that might be used as the minister goes to the table to prepare the bread and wine for distribution. A number of them include the phrase "this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving". We also often say it after we've taken communion when we pray together: "Through him we offer you our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice."

Now you might have wondered what that's all about? Surely there's nothing that we do or give that plays a part in our salvation?

In one way that is to misunderstand 'sacrifice' in the Bible. A sacrifice is not an action or an offering initiated by us in order to earn favour, but, as Nick Wright puts it, a God-given means of establishing and maintaining fellowship between God and his people. In the Old Testament, God provided the offering of a sacrifice – whether animal, grain or drink as a means of keeping open the lines of communication between himself and his chosen people. There was nothing that they could do to bridge the gap between themselves and God, so God gave them the bridge. In the Old Testament the sacrifice that dealt with sin was the blood of an animal. On the cross, Christ became the ultimate and eternal sacrifice permanently opening the way for us to come into the very presence of God.

So taking Holy Communion doesn't earn us any merit with God – Jesus has done everything necessary for us.

Holy Communion doesn't force God's hand to accept us.

When we break bread and wine together, though we are remembering Christ's death on the cross, we are not sacrificing him again and again. He died, once for all and rose in glory, conquering sin and death.

So when we talk about a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, what we give is our willing acceptance of God's invitation to share fellowship with him. We bring empty hands, but we come with praise, joy and thanksgiving. We participate in the relationship that begins with God's own actions.

We come with thanksgiving for the forgiveness we have received when we turn to Christ in repentance and faith. A forgiveness we could otherwise never earn or deserve. This the grace of God.

The bread and wine that we share are symbols of that grace. That's what a sacrament is – something physical and tangible (in this case the bread and the wine) that helps us take hold of and understand God's work within us. That doesn't mean that we become any more worthy of God's grace by taking part in Communion. Rather, as we open ourselves up to the love, mercy and forgiveness of God that is already there for us, we become more ready to receive that love and to respond to it. A sacrament makes something that is already true and available, real for us so that we might fully benefit from it.

Remembrance, togetherness, covenant relationship and thanksgiving – all praise to Christ our Lord. Amen.