

Margaret Collins sermon 6th May 2007

This will be the last service I will lead at St John's for some time, as I am having a few months off - I'm taking a communion service at Beckenham next Sunday, and then nothing until the end of October. When I thought about it, it seemed fitting that I should end the majority of my services this year by presiding at 2 communions -and then I thought why? Why does that seem so fitting? What is it about communion that is so important? So important that even an astronaut wants to celebrate it as the first thing he does on the moon?

We are almost at the end of the Easter period in the church - almost at the end of that period which begins with Palm Sunday, goes on to the Last Supper, the crucifixion, and ends with the resurrection and the ascension - but our commemoration of the Last Supper continues throughout the year as we celebrate our monthly communions together.

The Eucharist - The celebration of Holy Communion - The Mass- The Lord's Supper - different names for what is, to all intents and purposes, the same celebration. A symbolic meal.

Food and drink feature in all religions, from libations and offerings of food, to ceremonial banquets, with formal toasts afterwards. And at the centre of Christian worship is a meal. A meal at which, we believe, Christ, God's presence in the world, is there.

At Communion we believe that the risen Christ is present symbolically in the bread and wine, but we also experience the presence of the risen Christ not *simply* in bread and wine, but in the Christian community gathered together to celebrate and try to live out that presence of God in our own small spheres of influence.

The central message of Christianity is that God is to be found in humankind, and it is through humankind that the world is to be transformed. We meet around his table to equip us for that task.

And we meet together.

Communion is not something that we do alone; when we experience Christ in this celebration, he does not simply unite with each one of us as an individual, but enables us all to be one, both with Him, and in Him. A communion celebrated in hospital with only two people present still unites those people with the whole family of God, and enables them to be one with Christ. That oneness with Christ gives us the confidence to believe that we can transform the world - that oneness comes above all, in the celebration of Holy Communion, around his table.

But communion is not always easy to understand. Like so much of our ritual, the words can seem unusual and difficult, the concepts foreign, particularly to those who have not been brought up in the church. What about for example:

"This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is poured out for you." The *new covenant* - so, what was the old?

'Covenant' seems a very difficult, 'theological' word; the dictionary defines it as a mutual agreement, (between you and the tax man, say!) but in the Bible it usually signifies a promise or undertaking given by a single person, or by God.

There are three major covenants in the Old Testament; firstly God's promise to Abraham when he was prepared to sacrifice Isaac, his son,

"I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the sea shore - all nations on earth will be blessed because you have obeyed me."

Secondly, after the exodus from Egypt,

"The Lord said to Moses, I now make a covenant with the people of Israel. In their presence I will do great things, such as have never been done anywhere on earth among any of the nations."

And thirdly, God's promise to Jeremiah

"The time is coming when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and the people of Judah.... I will put my Law within them, and write it in their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."

The people had not kept faith with God; despite his promises to them, they had worshipped other gods, and had forgotten Him - finally they were punished with exile, but not before God had promised Jeremiah that eventually, a new covenant would be made.

A new covenant - a fresh start - that would bridge the gap between the demands of the exodus covenant - the ten commandments, which the people had patently not kept, and God's promise that he would always be with them, no matter what. That gap between God and his people would be bridged by the death of Christ. That gap between God and his people would be filled by the grace of God. That grace, that unconditional, unmerited love of God pardoned them, and took up again the relationship which they had broken off.

But it was not to happen overnight. Again in Jeremiah, *"The time is coming..."* "You couldn't mark it on the calendar, and say.. *"that's it - the new age has dawned"* - at least, you couldn't if you lived in the time of Jeremiah. But the anticipation of the new age assumed greater and greater significance, and eventually came to assume a central place in the story of the New Covenant - or as we know it - the New Testament.

"This is the new covenant, sealed with my blood, which is poured out for you." This is the start of the new relationship with God for you,, made possible because I died; this is the start of something different."

Christians believe that with the death and resurrection of Christ, the new age was inaugurated, and a new relationship was formed. That new relationship enables us to make a personal response to God, and that is what we are doing every time we celebrate communion. That is what Christ taught his disciples in the upper room, and that is what he still reminds us of today.

And Jesus' second instruction at that first Supper was, *"Do this in remembrance of me"*. This is commemoration, and it comes as a command, not as a request. *"Do this in remembrance of me"* - not *"I suggest you do this"* or *"perhaps you could do this,"* or *"try to do this"* - no, Christ simply says *"Do this"*. Quite clearly a command.

And it was not simply a command passed on to the original disciples, and meant to stop there.

In the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul says *"For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you."* Clearly Christ meant the command to be passed on to the church - everyone was to remember in this way, what he, Christ, had done for them by his death. I believe that we have no choice if we are to follow the will of Christ - we are commanded to remember his death at our communion celebration. That is why we receive new members in to our fellowship at a communion service - that is why we ordain new elders at a communion service, and I'm sure the only reason that we do not celebrate communion at the ordination of new ministers is that the service lasts for hours already, and it would just be far too long!! To celebrate communion is not a choice - it is a command.

So what about those members who never, or very rarely celebrate communion?

"Oh, you mean those who are ill or can't get out - they can have communion at home, can't they if someone takes it." Yes they can, and they do. But I'm not thinking about those people. I'm thinking about the leaders of Beginners and Primary, who don't come in to communion. I'm thinking of those single parents in our church family who find that access Sundays are always the first in the month,

so they have to take the children to the other parent or grandparent, and can't get to church. I'm thinking of the children of those single parents who also miss out. I'm thinking of those carers in our church family who perhaps get to one or two communions a year, as their attendance at church is necessarily spasmodic. There are a lot of people for whom getting to communion is difficult; I don't have easy answers, but I do know this.

Our Lord commanded, and it is up to those of us who can readily obey that command without really thinking about it, to try to help those who cannot. Can you spare a Sunday morning once a year to relieve the leaders of Beginners and Primary? Will you let Jennifer or Johnstone know if there is someone whose personal circumstances mean that they cannot get to church for communion as much as they would like to? Do we care enough about each other to ensure that no one who wants to celebrate communion misses out - *"do this in remembrance of me."*

And why did Christ tell us to commemorate what he did for us at his death? Because he knew that as humans we would forget, and that we would need reminding - reminding of the great unconditional love of God for us that communion represents.

When we see the bread and the wine we are reminded of the cross - the body broken for us, and the blood spilt for us; the communion table with its simple emblems stimulates our memory, and reminds us of Christ's death for us. The symbols purposefully and deliberately call Christ to mind.

And finally. Christ did not say, "*Do this in remembrance of my death*" but, "*do this in remembrance of me.*"

It is not the date or the place of his death that we have to remember, but Him. Of course his death underpins everything we celebrate at this table, but I think what he is trying to say is, "*Do this in remembrance of all that I am to you.*" Don't let's focus so much on the fact of Christ's death, that we forget the person.

This must always be the central focus of our minds whenever we come to the communion table - not just the time, the date, the action, or the place, but Him.

We come each month to the table of the Son of God, to renew our covenant relationship with him, and to commemorate all that he did for us, and all that he means to us.

We come, and he is there. Amen.