

19 June 2022, Pentecost 2

(Thanksgiving for the Holy Communion—Corpus Christi)

(Ex. 24:3-8, Ps 116, 1 Cor. 10:14-21, Mark 14:12-16,22-26)

My sermon last week and my sermon this week both involve something very familiar to all of us—sitting around a table. Last Sunday I had an icon which depicted God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit sharing God's love around a table. Today we as Christians, members of Christ's body the Church, are giving thanks for and participating in, a special meal, with its various names of the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, the Eucharist, and Mass, and which takes place around an altar or table. We share in this Service most Sundays, but today we are especially focusing on it and reflecting on its importance in our lives.

We have meals each day to nourish us and strengthen us for living. At an important event such as a birthday, marriage or funeral, and recently the Queen's Platinum Jubilee, we often are invited to a meal. The food for the meal is provided and cooked by someone or a group of people, such as our catering group, and served to all who gather. There may also be some entertainment, speeches or just the pleasure of conversation shared with friends. A meal is best when people offer it and take part in it with care and thought for the others present. For example, we may need to look around occasionally and make sure everyone has the food they should have, or we may remind ourselves not to dominate the conversation but carefully listen to others and give them an opportunity to speak. These are small things but contribute to making a meal a pleasant experience for all.

Holy Communion takes an ordinary meal, and turns it into a communal sharing of, and participation in, the life of Christ. It is based on the Passover meal eaten just before the Israelites departed from their slavery in Egypt. That night, the hand of God killed the first born of the Egyptians and their animals, but passed over the Israelite houses where the lintels and door posts had been smeared with the blood of a slaughtered lamb. The Israelites were then freed by the Egyptians who wanted to be rid of them, allowing them to begin their journey to the land of Canaan, which God had promised to them.

On their way to their new home God made a Covenant with the people, as we heard in our Old Testament reading. Moses, their leader, was directed by the Lord to offer burnt offerings and to sacrifice an oxen on an altar. He then had to take 1/2 the blood of the animal and dash it against the altar, which represented God. Next Moses read the book of the Covenant to the people. They responded by agreeing to do whatever the Lord asked of them. The other half of the blood was then thrown over the people confirming the Covenant now made between God and the people.

In our reading from Mark chapter 14, we have a description of a Passover meal, held yearly by Jews in memory of their past escape from Egypt. This particular Passover meal was the one that Jesus ate with his disciples in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, the night before he was crucified. During the meal, Jesus **took** a loaf of bread, **blessed** it, **broke** it, and **gave** it to the disciples saying, "Take, this is my body." Then Jesus took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them saying, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many."

When Jesus said, "This is my body", he did not mean his physical body but his person or life which was given as bread to his disciples. They were to be nourished by Jesus' words and teaching, and to be guided by the Spirit to follow the way Jesus had lived on earth in obedience to God the Father. Jesus did this by forgiving people who were sorry for what they had done, caring about and healing the suffering, loving all and giving his life for all.

Again, when Jesus said, "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many," He was not cutting himself to make his blood flow out, but referring to the Covenant made between God and Israel, when both sides pledged their loyalty to the other. Blood was an outward sign marking the seriousness of this covenant and showing that it involved life and lives. God's part in the Covenant is seen in Jesus' life broken and given in love for others; the people's part in obedience to God.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is recounted at the meal as also saying, "**Do this in remembrance of me.**" This command was twofold. A command to perform this ritual meal in remembrance of Jesus, and also for those involved to carry out in their lives what the meal's ritual indicated. For us that means to break and give our lives for others as Jesus did. In other words, by eating the bread, we take inside of us the life of Jesus. We are to open ourselves so that Christ can enter us, be present in our lives, and be recognised by others as being present among us as Christians.

Today when we carry out the ritual of the service of Holy Communion, we have some differences from the Passover service as described in Mark. Jesus took one loaf and broke it into pieces so everyone could share it. This clearly demonstrated the symbolic nature of this meal where we are many, but also one, because we eat and share together bread from the same loaf. (We heard in 1 Corinthians, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.") Today because it is easier to have wafers than breaking a loaf of bread we have in a sense lost that important symbolism. We still have one large wafer, that of the priest, which is broken but it does not feed everyone. (At Home Communion when I take the Sacrament to one person, I sometimes break one wafer in halves and share it with that person.)

Now we come to the wine. To drink the wine from the one cup is not allowed by our bishop at present because it could increase the spreading of COVID-19, but this direction could change at any time. In fact, as you know, we at Kempsey, as at the Cathedral at Grafton, are not having the wine at all. This can be upsetting for some, but it does not stop God coming to us in this Service of Holy Communion. We still receive the person of Christ into our lives, and share God's life with all the other Christians around us. When we do receive the wine again, as a symbol of the blood used in the Covenant, we can also understand it as a symbol of our life's commitment to God, and in Christ, to one another as members of the body of Christ.

There are also two other aspects of this meal that are important and about which it is helpful for us to be reminded. First, in John's Gospel, we are not told about the actual eating of the Passover meal. Instead, John tells us that Jesus took a towel, poured water into a bowl and washed the feet of his friends. John emphasised Jesus' stress on serving others in our participation in the life of Christ.

Second, the passage from Mark we heard this morning is framed by two stories of the betrayal of Jesus. First, by Judas in the verses omitted just before the actual eating of the Supper, and then just after the reading, concerning the later desertion by Peter and the rest of the disciples. This can remind us of Christ's generous forgiveness and desire for us to share in God's love, and our need to forgive others. We are continually forgiven and cleansed by Christ allowing us to experience in our lives a foretaste of the unity of life in the Kingdom of God.

Last week I spoke of how we are invited to take our place at God's table and are gathered up in the love being shared in the Trinity. Today we are invited to open ourselves and receive the life of Christ at the altar or table at this service. Regardless of whether we receive just the bread, or bread and wine, we are united to the person of Christ who dwells in the Trinity of God's love, and also united to one another and all Christians as fellow members of the body of Christ.

After we have received Christ's life here, at the altar, we are sent out to share that life of God's love in various ways with all whom we meet, family, friends and strangers. Amazingly, a weak, broken, flawed but forgiven and forgiving congregation, comprising of you and me, is invited and strengthened, along with the whole of the Church, to embody Christ and assist in God's work of healing, redeeming, thanking and bringing new life, into our world.

Sister Helen CSC

19.6.22