



A taste of welcome

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

I hope my sermon title gives more than a passing hint as to what our theme is about and how I want to approach it. It has been my practice over many years to preach from time to time on the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. As I do that this evening, I use the four verses from 1 Corinthians 11, namely verses 23-26, as a very helpful text.

- they come from an interesting chapter which focuses upon worship issues
- they come from a section which is an extended commentary upon correcting abuse in the early church.

Communion or the Lord's Supper is a matter that calls for our consideration. I know it to be a challenge for many people.

As you will know, I came from outside the church as a teenager and I responded to the invitation to join the minister for membership classes, where over ten weeks we explored the Christian faith and spent two evenings considering the important theme of the sacraments and the essentials of believing and belonging.

In our own tradition because of John Wesley's passionate emphasis upon Holy Communion, it was a valuable part of my ministerial formation. Communion is not just a service or an event in which we participate, but a pattern of the Christian faith. It is a drama which speaks of what it means to belong to Jesus Christ in the fullest sense of that word.

This service of the Lord's Supper demonstrates what we believe and how God gives us a taste of his eternal welcome. However, I can remember from the very earliest days that there have been those who have chosen not to participate in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Such people have not been lesser people because of this and have made their choice for a whole variety of different reasons. I have never felt it my role to question the decision they have taken, but it has convinced me that we should talk about the importance of the sacrament, to remind ourselves why it is that we celebrate the feast of communion and what it is we are sharing with each other.

The fact that the subject is familiar to us is part of the difficulty. When the terrain is familiar we often traverse the pathways we know best. Invariably people choose two aspects to explore:

- how is Jesus Christ present in this service?
- what does it mean for us to remember and recall?

As his earthly life drew to a close, Jesus took his disciples to an upper room – and there, just a short time before he was arrested, he celebrated a significant meal with them. However, it is not the meal but what happened after the supper that will forever mark out the importance of this Holy Communion.



Almost every New Testament book refers to this meal and almost all Christian churches have the service at the centre. In fact different denominations are often referred to as 'Communion' which is an insight into what this service means for us.

The communion itself has important components, including the setting of the table, the offering of thanksgiving, and breaking bread and the sharing of wine. There is what is called a four-fold action which defines what is happening as we refer back to the ministry of Jesus.

These four conveniently give us a picture of what we are doing together.

- he took bread and wine
- he gave thanks
- he broke the bread
- he gave this bread and wine to the disciples.

These actions are present as we celebrate Holy Communion and I hope they give the pattern of invitation which I describe as a Taste of Welcome.

J B Phillips, the biblical writer, once wrote a splendid little book of thoughts on Holy Communion and he tells the story of a nurse who remarked, "I wish to goodness Sister wouldn't go to the early service on the third Sunday. She always comes back in such a filthy temper!" Phillips was not being uncharitable but speaking of the foolishness of going to communion 'merely out of duty'.

As I refer to and explore this theme, I do so by making some initial comments which put it into its context:

- it lies at the centre of all Christian worship
- prayer, devotion, service and witness flow from it
- it was what Jesus told us to do
- it deepens and enriches our lives
- it is what we might call 'essential Christianity'.

C H Spurgeon, the remarkable Baptist leader, talked about the poor quality of human nature in the way we have made mischief of the important ordinances of Jesus Christ. He referred to the elaborate ceremonial that alienated so many. Whilst I think he was harsh in many ways, he was wonderfully accurate in talking about the power of remembrance. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is a particular place where God offers his enormous promise and a hope that sustains us day by day.

Using the words that Paul has offered us, we receive them as an encouragement to explore what Holy Communion means for us today. I do so by suggesting that there are three components to our understanding Holy Communion in a meaningful and spiritual way.

It is a place to recall

We recognise that this service of communion began with the ministry of Jesus. He refused to divorce religion from life and throughout his teaching ministry and in the actions of his healing ministry he brought together word and action – which we have developed into Word and deed.



To understand this, we know that we enter into a powerful Jewish tradition of storytelling. We cannot even begin to understand the power of Passover without realising it is about remembering that which has come about through the painful experiences of a people.

As we recall in this gathering together, we are given an understanding of his suffering and the journey to the cross. There are spiritual memories which come to mind and we not only remember the events of Jesus Christ, but also those things that have helped to shape our own lives.

Spurgeon, who I referred to earlier, in a sermon entitled 'In Remembrance' suggested that there are many aspects to remembering or recalling. He talked about:

- remembering well the time when we did not know Jesus
- remembering the times when God's Spirit first began to work in us
- remembering the time when we first came to this table.

He then went on to talk about sacred memory and how bread and wine remind us that Jesus was truly part of our humanity.

The kind of remembering that we experience at this table is to enter into an experience of recalling creatively in the presence of God. What we are recalling are the merits of what happened, as if it were happening now.

The meal is not simply a tradition, even though some may have it mechanically observed. We do not keep this table alive – it is alive of itself. This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

The danger for those of us who come from what we might call a 'low church' tradition is that we talk about merely remembering. The ordinariness of the elements takes nothing away from the extraordinary power of this meal.

- is a wedding cake merely a fancy fruit cake? Of course it is far more, because it is not the contents that make it unique, but the event also
- when someone is awarded a special military honour or recognition of service, they may wear such a medal, but would it be right to call it simply a small badge? It is far more because of what it represents.

We grasp a powerful sense of understanding in recalling God's mighty acts. Three words are important at this table: Obedience – Instruction – Blessing.

There is a power to remake

The gracious presence of God at this table is demonstrated to us not only in the words alone, but in the ability that this Holy Communion has to shape and remake our lives.

- many have come in broken and yet have been able to leave the table with a sense of wholeness
- many have come in bruised and yet have felt the comfort and strength of God and left blessed
- many have come in doubting and yet have left believing. It is perhaps why John Wesley was able to talk about Holy Communion as 'a converting ordinance'
- many have come in defeated by the world in which they have experienced struggle and yet they have been able to go out in the victory of Christ.



This power to remake comes because Holy Communion is set in the context of a Christian community and we share it together. Because of this, we are able to speak about the life of God and its transformative power as we:

- unite together as a people around this meal
- historically in local communities the power of extended communion has been taken to others
- holy Communion gives us a sense of spiritual solidarity.

The nature of Holy Communion and the service we share in reminds us of what God has done for us in Christ, as we retell the story with visual and active symbols. In doing so, we are changed.

Memorial is one aspect of this service, but it can never be the only aspect. There have been times when I have been asked to give a 'memorial address' for someone who has died. The person that I have spoken about is no longer with us. But as we share in this meal, we recognise that Jesus Christ is alive and ever present with us.

When I am hungry, I do not want a picture of food – I want food! We are genuinely fed at this table. We could take this a step further and say that there are times when we long for the contact of a friend and, if we simply receive a note, it is not the same as a visit.

One of the most painful aspects of imprisonment is when people are cut off from those they love. How many of us have seen in the movies glass panels separating husbands from wives, and so on? Living contact is vital to be remade and that is what happens in this celebration.

A person from whom we receive

There are few words in scripture that are more indicative of the Christian life than the invitation to 'take and eat'. It is not just memory but commemoration that is at the heart of Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 11.

Paul does not deliver a nostalgic recitation of the words of Jesus; he proclaims his understanding of the meaning of the meal.

There is an enormous taste of welcome in this meal. The hunger and thirst we bring to communion enables us to open our hearts and receive from Christ. The meal is an opportunity to empty ourselves as Jesus did on the cross, so that we may be filled with the power of God's grace and love as we are renewed.

- the setting of the meal is not merely a physical one, for God graces the communion tables of high cathedrals and bush chapels alike
- the setting is a place of repentance and faith. We know that we must come to this table with repentant hearts. We must never come to the table with unconfessed sin or malice of heart – or we may go away worse than if we had not come
- it is a place where we receive the absolution of God which clears the way for his powerful healing love.

There is a sense of genuine anticipation about this service, which speaks of a kingdom which is to come. We receive from One who gives us identity and belonging, not only in terms of the present but also of the future.



In this meal we proclaim the merits of what God has done for us in Christ. The cross is ever central and therefore we can talk about it being a feast in his presence.

Every time we eat the bread and drink the wine, we receive from him, even though he has gone from us in a physical sense. We know this is only for a while and there will be a meal we shall share in the fullness of eternity.

We await the day when he will join us in the fullest sense and yet we celebrate that truth in this meal. We are seeking God at this table and we don't just need to feed on the living bread, but to be continually fed.

Making a will is a salutary experience and a solicitor should not and does not make suggestions of how he or she thinks we should leave things. The person's job is to see that we record properly our wishes. They do not reinterpret our wishes and we trust that one day they will be carried out appropriate to those requirements.

In both the gospel accounts and in this extended passage in 1 Corinthians 11, we learn how Jesus bequeathed to us this precious sacrament. We can't tamper with it, for we believe that when we receive bread and wine we receive in a very real way the presence of Jesus Christ.

There is far more to say than just the mere words of a preacher and yet I encourage you to understand new depths when you come to this table and, in doing so, open your heart to a new vision of what it is that God can do in and through our lives.

Sadhu Sundar Singh was a great Indian evangelist who lived in the foothills of the Himalayas. Like so many from the subcontinent, he valued deeply the commodity of salt. He said, "Salt does not cease to exist because it is dissolved in water. We can be sure of its presence by tasting the water. Likewise, the indwelling Christ, though unseen, will be evident to others from the love which he imparts to us."

I like to think that Jesus Christ is evident to us in this communion. The words of Psalm 34 speak so powerfully, as they call us to 'taste and see that the Lord is good'.