

15 October 2017

We Break Bread and take wine



Readings:

Old Testament: Isaiah 25:1-9

New Testament: 1 Corinthians 11: 23-26

Gospel: Mark 14: 17-26

This sermon is the latest in the series on who we are as a church – what we do and why we do it. The key word in this series is not the individual things we do, but the word church. Being a part of church involves belonging and behaving, in the same way as being part of a family implies that to make it work you have to behave like a member of a . So what makes a good family ? What makes a good family occasion ? When did you last go to a family occasion that you really felt part of ? Think of what the right ingredients were - an invitation that says you belong, you are welcome, feeling accepted and loved as you took part in the activities. Being made to feel part of the occasion by being talked to and valued. Then lastly, of course, food! This is no accident, it is part of what it is to be human and made in the image of God who is Father Son and Holy Spirit, three in one, love in community, should want us to know the benefits of being in a community of love. To be human is to be social and included; whether we are extraverts or introverts we all like feeling we belong. For relationships to work, we need to spend time together in a relaxed fashion, and that will involve eating together – we have this in our church meals that Lynda Smith organises so well for us, and other bring and share meals that we organise. This spending time together over food is so important, because it emphasises the bonds that keep us together.

It is no accident but completely in line with God's purposes that the way in which the Jewish people would meet together to reinforce their identity as the people of God was over a meal, the Sabbath meals each Friday, and of course in the annual reaffirmation of who they were in the Passover meal. Each year the community would gather in families and have the set readings and prayers where they would retell the story of how the Jewish people were set free from slavery in Egypt, and especially when the angel of death passed over the Jewish community because they had the blood of the slaughtered lamb on their door lintels. Then they would reaffirm their part in the story – in retelling the story they would not just be indulging in a bit of nostalgia, how good it was in the old days, but a joyful celebration that because of God faithfulness, yesterday, today and tomorrow, that they were now truly included in God's family and purposes. So the Jewish people were commanded to re-enact the Passover deliverance with a meal, of roasted lamb as a reminder of the lamb that was killed and its blood shed so that the judgement of God would 'pass-over' their household. Taking part in that Passover meal, re-emphasised that you belonged to the Jewish people, and reaffirmed your commitment to be part of the family, with that that commitment entailed.

It is, of course, no accident that Jesus died at Passover- he had been described as the 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' by John the Baptist. Passover celebrated the deliverance from the physical slavery of Egypt; Calvary celebrates the deliverance from the slavery of sin, by Jesus' offering himself on the cross. So when Jesus is going to bring his disciples together for the last time, he does it in the context of the Passover meal, the symbol of the old covenant, in order to institute the new covenant which he will enact at Calvary on Good Friday. He takes the Passover bread, which all present take a part of, and then says, "**Take; this is my body.**" There are four ritual drinks of wine in the Passover meal – the first is the cup of sanctification, emphasising the holiness of God and that his people belong to Him. The second is the cup of plagues, retelling the story of Moses, the third cup is the cup of redemption or blessing, affirming that God has bought his people back from slavery signified by the blood of the lamb on the door lintels, and finally the cup of praise. When Jesus said '**This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.**' most scholars believe that it was the cup of redemption that he handed round. Previously they had affirmed their belonging by identifying themselves with the freedom won for them by Moses in the Exodus- now they would affirm their belonging to the people of God by identifying themselves with the freedom Jesus won on the cross when he paid the price for our sins and triumphed over the powers of evil.

So now Jesus says to His disciples and to us, you now belong to my family in the Kingdom of God, you will always be with me; but to remind yourselves of all I have done for you and the way that I did it, in the same way as the Jewish people reaffirmed their identity by participation in a meal, you too must eat and drink with the bread symbolising Jesus' body and the wine His blood.

Jesus also said, as we hear from our 1 Corinthians reading

"Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

To remember is not a case of bringing it to mind as something to inspire us, but a much deeper purpose of re-enacting to show that you are drawn into what the symbols mean. We do not just remember, we participate. Just as the Jewish people said, in Moses' acts we were set free, so we can now say by Jesus acts we are set free too. We now belong to God. We affirm this as we take the bread and wine, it also confirms us as God's people.

So what does this mean for us today, as the people who break bread and share wine together?

I want to try to give four reminders of four actions that are in our communion service that will help us as we consider who we are and what we should do. These actions are at the heart of the communion service and you will see these actions shortly

- a) The bread and wine are taken or chosen
- b) The bread and wine are blessed
- c) The bread is broken and the wine is poured out
- d) The bread and wine are shared out

The bread and wine are taken or chosen

The bread and wine are chosen for this service- ordinary elements chosen for an extraordinary moment – to represent Christ's body and blood. In the same way we too are chosen by God, by grace - not on our own merits. We too are ordinary people chosen by God for an extraordinary task – to represent Him in the world, to give a first-hand experience to people in the world of what it is like to be a Christian by being a living demonstration model. Jesus said to his disciples 'You did not choose me, I chose you and appointed you to bear fruit for the kingdom'. In the same way we too are chosen for the task of being the body of Christ here in Melbourne, Chignal and Newlands Spring.

The bread and wine are blessed

In the communion service the priest says 'Grant that by the power of the Holy Spirit, these gifts of bread and wine may be to us His body and His blood.' This is the moment of consecration - making Holy - of the bread and wine and in High Anglican Churches and Roman Catholic Churches they ring the bell at this point. I spread out my hands over the bread and wine at this point as a symbol of God's blessing. In the same way we are blessed by God, given his Holy Spirit to live within us and to guide us. We are the objects of His love and compassion, and He loves you. You are blessed and God wants you to be a blessing to others – an instrument of His peace as the song goes. When the final words of this service are said 'Go in peace to love and serve the world' it means we are to go out to bring a blessing to the world in which we live, schools, families jobs. Are you a blessing after you leave this church? Think of this as you receive the Holy Communion today. You receive so that others may be blessed.

The bread is broken and the wine is poured out

Just as Jesus' body was broken on the cross and the blood poured out as a symbol of sacrifice, so we too are to be broken and poured out – broken of our pride, selfishness and self-centredness in the light of what Jesus has done for us. In the Christian year we have times of celebration, Easter and Christmas, but we also have times of penitence where we remember that we are not what we should be and need to change and amend our lives. We cannot change ourselves; instead we have to co-operate with God changing us, responding to His priorities not ours. Thankfully God is fully committed to the process of changing us so that we can more fully reflect His glory and grace to a watching world.

The bread and wine are shared out

We eat and drink together from the same loaf and the same cup. We are equal at the altar rail, all sinners saved by grace, all freely receiving because of God's love and all then bound together in faith and love as one family, just as the Jewish people were bound together in the Passover meal. We are called by Jesus, in the summary of the Law, to love God and to love our neighbour. But then Jesus gives us a new commandment to the disciples, love one another. You are part of the same family, love one another – easy when things are going well and we are laughing and sharing with one another, not so easy when we have problems, and things start to annoy us about others; they do not do things the way we like them done, they have slightly different views and priorities about the church and faith than us. Why can't they see things the same way as me? This is what drives churches apart, personalities, cliques, pride self-centeredness. The antidote is very simple – love one another; as we learned in our sermon series in February - be kind to one another and compassionate, forgiving one another just as God in Christ has forgiven you. There has often been the tragedy of church splits – I experienced this in my home church 20 years ago. An incident occurred and then people started taking sides, for and against the vicar. At the heart of the problem was a lack of love when it mattered, when the church was hurting. It is the same with us – love and forgiveness really matter not when the church is going well, but when we have difficulties in relationships -impossible, yes in our own strength, but as Paul said in Philippians, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. This is when, with God's help, we need to be a true family and forgive the sins of the past, and look after one another and seek, as far as possible, to be at peace with one another. Then we can truly be, as I said before, instruments of God's peace, knowing that we have not got peace in ourselves but only through the grace forgiveness and reconciliation that Christ has bought for us by his death and resurrection.

So to the question 'Why do we break bread and take wine together?' The answer is simple – because Jesus told us to. Why did he tell us to? Because in the cross he was instituting the new covenant in his body and blood, so that we could be joined to God and to each other, and brought to be members of His family. And just as the old covenant was signified by a Passover meal, the new covenant is signified by a meal of bread and wine. This is the mark of the new community of Jesus, and we rehearse the story of the Last Supper every time we take bread and wine together. It joins us to God and to each other in faith. Then as we consider what Jesus did with the bread and wine, which we re-enact in our Communion service, it reminds us that we, like the bread and wine, are to be taken, blessed, broken and shared , in order to demonstrate the love and grace of God to a watching world, and to join us together as a family in love.

“ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”

We proclaim his death- he died for us, we celebrate that death and all it means in our bread and wine, and we will do it until He comes, until either our lives or the life of the world has come to an end, and we will go on celebrating it in heaven for all eternity, as the prophet Isaiah foretold.

6 On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

7 And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.

8 Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.

9 It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.