

**SERMON – 10/2/19****Thinking about Communion: Proclamation**

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

“Every time you eat this bread and drink from this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.” (1 Corinthians 11:26)

Last Sunday we considered how very simply over a Passover meal in an upper room with His disciples on the night He was betrayed Jesus took a piece of bread and broke it, and took a cup of wine and shared it – “Do this in memory of me,” He said. And in remembrance of Him down the last 2000 years His followers have done just that in what we call the Lord's Supper or Communion. As we took time to reflect on the remembrance aspect of the Lord's Supper I suggested that it was not something that should be restricted to our quarterly or monthly celebrations of communion here in the church but should be part of our everyday life but that whenever we take a piece of bread or a cup of wine we should remember Christ and what He has done for us, in the course of ordinary life.

Next Sunday, God-willing, we will be looking at communion as Thanksgiving and the following week at the Fellowship aspect of communion before we think on Communion Sunday itself about Jesus as the Bread of Life, but this morning we come to shine light on the Lord's Supper from a slightly different angle, thinking about Communion as Proclamation. In the words of our text: “Every time you eat this bread and drink from this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.” (1 Cor.11:26)

I suggested last week that the Lord's Supper is a very different kind of memorial from the kind of stone memorials that human beings put up to try and ensure that someone or something is not forgotten. In some ways it has more in common with a Burns Supper, although that analogy also quickly breaks down because at a Burns Supper the memory is focussed on the poetry that is read and the toasts that are given rather than on the actual meal. The Lord's Supper is a living memorial in which we need to be active participants rather than spectators or passers-by, and so this morning I would like to encourage you to think about what it is that we are doing collectively when we gather at the Lord's Table and I want to draw to your attention a link between the passage we read earlier from 1 Corinthians 15

and the one from which I have drawn this morning's text – 1 Corinthians 11 – the record of the institution of the Lord's Supper, the passage that I hope to look at in more detail next week.

There is a parallel in the wording of each which is surely no accident given that it came from the teaching of the one man, the apostle Paul. In ch.11 Paul writes about receiving from the Lord what He is now passing on to the Christians in Corinth, namely that on the night of His betrayal the Lord Jesus took bread and wine. In ch.15 Paul again writes about passing on what he received, in this case the good news that died for our sins and was raised again on the third day. In the Greek the two words are identical in each case: *parelabon* - *paredoka*, I received, I passed on. And the point I want to make is that the Lord's Supper is inextricably tied to the Gospel message that is received and passed on from person to person, from mouth to ear in the case of the message and from hand to hand in the case of the bread and the wine. Communion is part of the proclamation; it is a teaching tool, a crucial link in the chain of sharing the Good News of Christ and that is what I would like to reflect on with you this morning as I seek to pass on to you three teachings about communion that I have received and that are part of the teaching and practice of the universal church.

Firstly, let me offer you a little history lesson about the practice of the Church of Scotland. It's interesting that we should be involved at the moment in a consideration of the nature and role of elders' visits in our congregational life. Some of you will remember a time when your elder brought you a communion card. The quarterly magazine which at the moment is brought to most of you by your elder includes an invitation to you to the quarterly celebration of Communion as part of our Sunday morning service. What most of you probably cannot remember is a time when your elder led you through the catechism and examined you on your understanding of the Christian faith. At one time a communion card (or previously a communion token which was like a little metal coin) was not given to a member unless they displayed some evidence of being sufficiently prepared to come to the Lord's Table. And while that may seem judgmental or censorious from our modern perspective, it was based on a genuine desire to honour the exhortation given by the apostle Paul to the believers in Corinth to 'examine themselves first and then eat the bread and drink from the cup.' And why? Because it is important that we do not share in communion in a way that dishonours the Lord and in particular

that when we come to the Lord's Table we recognise the very presence of Christ Himself when we break the bread and share the cup.

So here is today's first teaching point: when we celebrate communion it is vital that we come prepared to recognised that it is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself who is here. Question 96 of the Shorter Catechism asks: *What is the Lord's Supper?* And the answer is given: "The Lord's Supper is a sacrament wherein by giving and receiving bread and wine according to Christ's appointment, His death is showed forth and the worthy receivers are, not after a corporal and carnal manner, but by faith, made partakers of His body and blood, with all His benefits to their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace." And Q.97 *What is required to the worthy receiving of the Lord's Supper?* "It is required of them that would worthily partake of the Lord's Supper that they examine themselves of their knowledge to discern the Lord's body, of their faith to feed upon Him, of their repentance, love and new obedience, lest coming unworthily, they eat and drink judgment to themselves."

Is any one of us truly worthy to sit at the Lord's Table? Not one. But we are all invited and exhorted to come, in complete dependence upon the One who gave Himself up for us that we might live. My friends, come to the Table and find Christ there. Without Him we have no hope. In Him we find redemption and new life. At the Table, we proclaim that Christ is to be found. So come.

The second thing we proclaim at the Table is the message of the Supper itself. As we saw last week, we are apt to make this far more complicated than it really is. What we have received from the Lord and pass on to others is of the utmost simplicity. That fact came home to me very forcibly last summer when we were in Debrecen. At the end of a long week at the camp and after preaching at the morning service I was pretty tired. We attended the youth service in the evening and although the sermon was being translated for us by people sitting alongside us in the pews I wasn't quite in earshot and I didn't get much of the message. But the service concluded with a celebration of the Lord's Supper and although again the words of the service were largely unintelligible to me, given that I am not fluent in Hungarian, I was moved to tears as the minister took a piece of bread and broke it and poured wine into a cup. There on the Table in front of us was just what Jesus had done in the Upper Room, a visual

representation of what happened the following day at the Cross – His body was broken; it was torn for us by nails; His blood was shed for us; it was poured out for our salvation.

We live in a visual age where we expect to hear messages through images and moving pictures. How amazing it is that from the very beginning the Gospel message has been received and passed on not only in words, not only in images and moving images but it a physical representation of the very core of the Good News, what theologians call the *kerugma* – the central message received and passed on as being of the greatest importance: that Christ died for our sins, that He was buried and that He was raised to life three days later. So when we share in communion we proclaim that message: Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again. Will you come regularly and receive that message afresh and participate in passing it on? Come to the Table.

And finally, let me remind you of an amazing little incident recounted for us in the Book of Acts. The apostle Paul is on his way to Rome to stand trial before Caesar and the ship he is on as a prisoner is caught in a ferocious and protracted storm to the extent that even the crew do not think they are going to survive. What does Paul do? Just before dawn, he begs them all to eat. 'You need it in order to survive,' he says, 'for not even a hair of your head will be lost.' After saying this, we read, Paul took some bread, gave thanks to God before them all, broke it and began to eat. They took heart, Luke tells us, and every one of them also ate some food. (Acts 27:33-34) With daylight came sight of land and they grounded the ship on a sandbank and made it to shore on Malta. Saved.

We live at a time of great uncertainty where many people are at sea or, to use another biblical image, they are like sheep without a shepherd. As a Church in our time we have lost confidence but the truth of the matter is that we have a Gospel to proclaim that people are longing for, yearning for, crying out for. Christ the Good Shepherd is seeking out the lost. Christ is the anchor, sure and steadfast against all the storms and tides of this world, who offers hope in the midst of uncertainty. At the Table we proclaim that Christ is here in Person, longing to bless all who come to Him in faith. At the Table we proclaim the core message as a reminder to ourselves and as a witness to the world: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. And at the Table we pass on the Good News that we have received

from those who have gone before us and that is the most important message the world needs to hear. Far from closing the door to outsiders on Communion Sunday it is perhaps the very time that we should be most active in inviting others, that they too may find Christ and take heart.

My friends, what we do when we celebrate the Lord's Supper is of the utmost significance. We are called to receive from the Lord and to pass it on. Will you join regularly with others at the Table – find the Lord Jesus Christ here, celebrate and proclaim the Good News of His death and resurrection, and offer hope and light to the world: *Parelabon, paredoka* - receive and pass on. Christ is for all people. Let us proclaim Him.

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