

SERMON – 17/2/19**Thinking about Communion: Thanksgiving**

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

“I received from the Lord the teaching that I passed on to you: that the Lord Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, took a piece of bread, gave thanks to God, broke it and said, 'This is my body which is for you.'” (1 Corinthians 11:23-24)

So far, as we have been reflecting on the Lord's Supper, we have considered what communion is as an act of remembrance – 'Do this in memory of me' – and as an act of proclamation – 'As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.' This morning we come to look at the Lord's Supper as an act of thanksgiving. Now, when I was thinking about the headings I would take for this series, I have to confess that I almost thoughtlessly included this one because one of the names that is given to the celebration of Communion or the Lord's Supper in the worldwide church is Eucharist, which comes from the Greek word for thanksgiving and so it seemed like a logical theme to explore. But I have been well and truly caught out because when I came to prepare this week I discovered much, much less on the topic than I expected to given that the overwhelming majority of Christians around the world will use some variant of the word 'eucharist' to describe what they are doing when they come to the Lord's Table.

I was well aware that the idea of eucharist or thanksgiving was not a major one in our Presbyterian tradition but I had never really considered why and when I included it in this series of studies perhaps I even wondered whether it was something that I (and we together) should perhaps be giving more emphasis to and learning more about from the wider church, but when I started to search the Scriptures, so stunned was I by the scarcity of biblical references to communion as thanksgiving that I thought I must be missing something very obvious. I got in touch on Wednesday with my Anglican and Roman Catholic colleagues to ask them to give me a steer on the subject from their theological perspective – unfortunately they did not manage to get back to me in time for this morning so I am still left wondering and I will need to come back to this if they come up with

something that I have missed. Meantime let me lead you where I have gone in my studies this past week.

It would seem that the use of the word 'eucharist' to describe the Lord's Supper comes from the words of the institution which are read every time we celebrate communion. They are the words of our text this morning: "I received from the Lord the teaching that I passed on to you: that the Lord Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, took a piece of bread, gave thanks to God, broke it and said, 'This is my body which is for you.'"

Now, clearly, thanksgiving is a theme that is to be found throughout the Scriptures. From the thank-offerings commanded for God's people in the Law of Moses to the worship offered in the Temple, from the poetry of the psalms and the prophet to the utterances of individuals giving their thanks to the Lord for His goodness and love and faithfulness through the Old Testament centuries, the New Testament writers take up the cry, exhorting Christians to give thanks in all circumstances. Thanksgiving is to be found at the very core of the Bible – it is of the very essence of our response to God. But that (as we have seen before during this series) is not something that can or should be limited to those times when we break bread together – as Paul writes to the Ephesians: "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ *always* give thanks for everything to God the Father." (Eph.5:20)

So where does the specific connection between thanksgiving and communion come from? Well, quite simply when the Lord Jesus, on the night of His betrayal took bread, He gave thanks. Perhaps a better translation would actually be that He 'blessed God' because it is almost certain that the prayer He offered would be in the form of the blessings used not just in the course of a Passover meal but in Jewish worship generally. There is a style of prayer used by Jews to this day that begins with the phrase:

'Baruch Atah Adonai Elohenu Melech ha'olam' which means 'Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the universe' (or King of the ages)

In the context of the Passover meal Jesus and His disciples were giving thanks for the great act of redemption wrought by God when He brought the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, through the waters of the sea and on towards the Promised Land. Blessed are you, Lord God. You did this for our people and we want to thank you. And that approach to God is to be found everywhere from the offerings commanded in the Law of

Moses - Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the ages, for you have brought forth bread from the earth – to the sung worship of the Temple – Give thanks to the Lord for His is good, His love endures for ever – to the personal blessings enjoyed by individuals like Daniel who gives thanks to God for revealing to him the meaning of the king's dream. And it is also what is to be found in the practice of saying grace at the beginning of a meal and in giving particular thanks for the in-gathering of the harvest or the safe delivery of a baby or at a funeral for the good things that have been known through the life of the person who has died.

What is it that you have special cause to be thankful for today? Don't wait for a special occasion to do it – get on to it today, right now. One of the most challenging episodes in the Gospel concerns the occasion when Jesus was walking along the borders of Samaria and Galilee and there were ten men who were in isolation because of a dreaded skin disease shouting to Him from a distance to have mercy on them. Christ sent them to the priests, who would be able to determine whether or not they were cured and therefore able to be restored to society, and as they went they realised that they were undoubtedly clean. One of them came back to the Lord and fell at His feet praising God loudly and thanking Jesus for his healing – this man, we are told, was a Samaritan, while the other nine, who were Jews, had simply gone off to start their new lives. How much do we take for granted of the many good things with which we are each blessed, and how regularly do we pause to thank God in any way, never mind loudly for all to hear? Is it once a year at Harvest Thanksgiving that we turn our thoughts to the Giver of all good gifts, or is it every time we sit to eat and every time we fill our baskets with bounty at the supermarket? Is it only when we have a room decorated or get a new chair to sit in or bed to lie on that we are thankful for the comfort of our homes, or is it each day we rise and each night we rest, in sunshine, wind or rain? Is it only when it's a special occasion like a birthday or an anniversary that we thank God for His faithfulness to us? As I have often said, the wonder of Christ's coming to us is for every day, not just for Christmas, and He is risen indeed today every bit as much as He is when we celebrate Easter.

'Be persistent in prayer, writes Paul to the Colossians, and keep alert as you pray, giving thanks to God.' (Col.4:2) Take time today just to count your blessings and spend some time thanking God for the many good things you enjoy, even if you find yourself travelling a difficult road at the moment. It

has certainly been my experience over the years that lifting my eyes above the struggles of life and thanking God for the blessings that exist brings an altogether different perspective to the difficulties I may be facing. 'Better to light one candle than to curse the darkness' – although that is often quoted as a Chinese proverb, it actually first appears in a Christian sermon from 1907. Regardless of its origins, it is wise advice. Be thankful.

Where there is a particular thanksgiving to be made when we gather at the Lord's Table is in recognising the supreme blessing that we have been given through the suffering and death and resurrection of Christ and that is the point that I want to highlight in closing as we begin to prepare ourselves to gather at the Lord's Table a fortnight today.

As I have been reading around the subject of communion over the last few weeks I have been enjoying reading a series of sermons given by Robert Bruce, one of the first post-reformation ministers of the Church of Scotland preaching in the High Kirk of Edinburgh 430 years ago this week on the 15th February 1589. It can be a wee bit hard going reading the old language but there are some real gems to be found in what he writes and I want to give you a flavour of it this morning. Speaking about what our focus should be as we come to the Table, he writes:

“First, in this point, in recording and remembring faithfully, how he died for vs, howe his blood was shed vpon the Crosse. This is the first point; a point that cannot be remembred trulie, except it be wrought be the mighty power of the halie spirit. The second point of the spirituall eating, stands in this; that I, and euery ane of zou, beleue firmlie, that he died for me in particuler: That his blood was shed on the Crosse, for a full remissioun and redemptioun of mee, and my sinnes... that that flesh was deliuered to death for my sins, that that blood of his, was shed for the remissioun of my sinnes: and except euerie saull come neere to him selfe, and firmly consent, agree, and be perswaded that Christ died for him, that saull cannot be saued; that saull cannot eat nor drink of Christ. Then stand in ane faithfull memorie, in ane firme beleife, and in ane true applying of the merites of the death and passioun of Christ to my awin conscience in particular.’ (Robert Bruce, 3rd sermon on the Lord's Supper, 15/2/1589)

Come to the Table, my friends. Do this in memory of Christ. Here let us proclaim His death until He comes, and here let us sing with the psalmist, 'What shall I return to the LORD for all his goodness to me? I will lift up the

cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD. I will fulfil my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people.' (Psalm 116:12-14)

Be thankful.