

SERMON – 24/2/19**Thinking about Communion: Fellowship**

1 Corinthians 10:15-24

“Because there is the one loaf of bread, all of us, though many, are one body, for we all share the same loaf.” (1 Corinthians 10:17)

Over these last weeks, we have been looking from different perspectives at the Lord's Supper, reflecting on communion as remembrance – Jesus said, 'Do this in memory of me'; on communion as proclamation – the apostle Paul wrote, 'As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes'; and communion as thanksgiving – 'On the night He was betrayed the Lord Jesus took bread and when He had given thanks, He broke it.' Today, as we prepare ourselves to come to the Table next Sunday, we take the theme of communion as fellowship or sharing, you might say communion itself, the act of participating in the Lord's Supper, and this morning I would like to look with you at what that means both from the perspective of our Bible reading this morning and of what it is that we will do practically speaking when we come to church next week and find the Table set with a cloth and with gifts of bread and wine for us to share.

Some of us have been part of the church – in some cases part of *this* church – for as long as we can remember and we have grown up just accepting certain practices as the done thing, even though we might not always be able to explain to others why it is that we do what we do. Others have had experiences of other churches and of other ways of doing things and have perhaps found it difficult to adjust to the way things are done here. Still others may be new to the faith altogether, infants in Christ, still coming to terms with what it means to be a Christian at all never mind understanding that there are many different ways to practise that faith. But *all* of us need to submit our practices to the teaching of God's Word. Just because something is a long-established tradition does not mean that it is the only way, nor even necessarily the most appropriate way, and so it is good for all of us to take time to measure what it is we do against what the Bible has to say.

Part of what I hope we have been able to see over these last few weeks is that there are various strands that weave together to make the Lord's Supper

what it is, that one of these strands on its own does not constitute the whole experience and that one way of weaving the strands together does not paint the whole picture.

In our Reformed tradition, the Lord's Supper is often popularly called Communion in the way that in other traditions it may be commonly known as the Eucharist or the Breaking of Bread and as we approach Communion Sunday it is appropriate that we take some time to consider the strand that is emphasised through the use of that word – communion speaks of fellowship and of sharing; it speaks of participation. So what does that involve?

We should focus on two things, I think, and as we do so I would invite you each to think about what that will mean for you personally as you prepare to come to next Sunday's service.

Firstly, Paul teaches the Corinthians that in sharing the cup of wine for which they give thanks to God and in sharing the bread which they break, they are sharing in the body and blood of Christ. That is to say they are entering into fellowship with Christ, communion with Him by participating in His death and resurrection. Now what a lot of words have been written over the centuries about what is actually happening spiritually and physically at the Lord's Table to the gifts of bread and wine that are shared and to those who gather at it. In some traditions, the Lord's Supper is fundamentally a memorial, a re-enactment of the Last Supper to remind us of Christ's death. At the other end of the spectrum, some traditions believe that there is a mystical change to the substance of the bread and wine that means that Christ is physically present and that a sacrificial offering is actually being made upon an altar. The Reformers teach something in between, calling upon the Holy Spirit to change not the bread and wine on the Table but the worshippers who come to the Table so that in receiving the physical gifts of bread and wine we may just as truly receive by faith what Jesus won for us through His body broken for us and His blood shed for us upon the Cross. Robert Bruce, minister of the High Kirk of Edinburgh in the 1580s, whom I quoted last Sunday, speaks in another of his sermons on the Lord's Supper about how we can grasp Christ more firmly in the sacraments (and he means baptism as much as communion) than we can by hearing the Word of God alone.

“For be the Sacrament, my faith is nurished, the bounds of my saull is enlarged, and sa, quhere I had but a little grip of Christ before; as it were,

betwixt my finger and my thombe; nowe I get him in my haille hande, and ay the mair, that my faith growes, the better grip I get of Christ Iesus. Sa the Sacrament is fell necessarie, and it were na mair, but to get Christ better.” (Robert Bruce, 2nd sermon on the Lord's Supper, 8/2/1589) To get Christ better, that is to say to participate, to share in His death that we might also share in His resurrection. So firstly communion is a sharing in Christ Himself.

But secondly, Paul teaches the Corinthians that in sharing in the one loaf we are sharing in the Body of Christ in the sense of sharing with our fellow church members. As so often with this remarkable act that we call the Lord's Supper we are engaging in something incredibly simple and yet incredible powerful. “Because there is the one loaf of bread, all of us, though many, are one body, for we all share the same loaf.”

At the beginning of the service the bread that is brought in and laid on the Table and then passed around the building for us all to take a piece is cut from one loaf of bread. At the end of the service, although this is not necessarily something to dwell on in too much detail, in a physical sense that loaf of bread is in each one of us and somehow unites us even as we head off home and to the work of the week ahead in many different directions.

In addition to the intensely personal and private communion that we are intended to enjoy with the Lord Himself, that feeding by faith upon the life and death of Christ, we are also intended to enjoy fellowship with one another as one body, one company, and not just in this congregation and within these four walls, but with the whole church in heaven and on earth, unrestricted by time or by geography. Here at the Lord's Table, you are marvellously in communion with those who have participated in the Lord's Supper in this parish for a thousand years and more; you are wonderfully in communion with our fellow believers in the shanty-towns of Brazil, the mud-villages of Malawi, and the smart residences of places like Singapore and London and New York; and, hardest of all to act upon, you are in physical communion with the people sitting around you - that is why there should be no divisions among us, no matter what there may have happened between you and others present here in the last week or the last year or decades ago. There should be an openness to God and to one another that begins to have a noticeable effect not only among us but beyond us as

others see the transforming power of God at work breaking down the barriers we tend to put up and erasing the distinctions we tend to make as human beings. The bread we eat is all from the same loaf, the wine is all from the same case; there is a real tangible, physical sharing going on among us in a communion service that deepens our fellowship and draws us towards a greater unity of spirit, of worship and of service to the wider world.

So in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, I invite you – no, in fact, I plead with you – to come to His Table next Sunday. Prepare yourselves this coming week – examine yourselves and consider what it is that needs to change in your words and actions and attitudes for you to follow Christ more nearly and to keep in step with His Spirit.

Come to remember Him and to give thanks to God for all that He has done for us, yielding His life to death to bear the penalty for our sin and rising again for us to open the way to everlasting life. Come to proclaim the Good News to a needy world and to join the worldwide prayer of longing that He will come again to right all wrongs and make all things new. Come, my friends, prepared to meet with the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, to share in the feast of the Kingdom and by sharing in bread and wine to participate by faith in Christ's body and blood and to enter a holy communion with all God's people around us here, throughout the world and throughout eternity. It is to Christ Himself, the Bread of Life, that you are called to come.

And when you share in the elements, when you take a piece of bread and a cup of wine be very conscious of what it is that you are sharing in. The body of Christ was broken for you; the blood of Christ was shed for you – by faith you are sharing in the death of Christ that you may share also in His resurrection. And the body of Christ, the Church of God is all around you – you have a part in it with others, with those you can see and reach out to around you with a handshake or a hug and with that great cloud of witnesses across the world and throughout time who also participate in Christ. Our communion is with God in Christ; our communion is with one another in Christ – vertical and horizontal, a great cross raised in the midst of all things, that many may be drawn to the Saviour and find life in all its fullness.

Come and share.