Holy Communion – Week Three
Communion: Unity of the Church with Christ

Discussion

> ***Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. In verse 27 Paul warns against eating and drinking the Communion "in an unworthy manner", and again in verse 29 against eating and drinking "without discerning the body." What is the error or bad behaviour he is warning against? And why?***

The Deepest Possible Union

From the beginning the church understood the Lord's Supper as more than a mere custom. The meal and its liturgy conveyed theological meaning. As early theology and liturgy began to develop the one aspect of the Eucharist that emerged as a constant theme was the fact that the Eucharist was always experienced as a community event. The Eucharist was not only experienced *in* the community united around the table it also became an expression or symbol *of* their unity.

Nevertheless, although the meal was experienced as unity between the participants, the earliest theological reflection on the meal focused on another aspect of unity, namely the unity of the participants with Christ. Isidore(370-450), Abbot of Pelusium, defined the sacrament as follows, "Koinonia (fellowship) is the name for the reception of the divine mysteries, for thereby we receive the gift of being made one with Christ and partakers of His kingdom." Following 1 Corinthians 10:16, to communicate meant to partake of Christ's body and blood and thereby to become one body and one blood with him. It was in this sense that Ignatius of Antioch (1st Century) could speak of the sacrament as "medicine of immortality", because by partaking of Christ, we are united with him in his eternal life. Similarly, Cyril of Jerusalem (313-386) could say that after eating the sacrament we become "carriers of Christ" because we are one body with him.

Reflecting on our union with Christ should inevitably return us to reflection on our union with one another. As John makes clear at length in his first letter to the churches (1 John 4:7-21) love for God and love for our neighbours are reciprocal and inextricable, we cannot love the one if we do not love the other.

> "If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother." (1John 4:20-21)

This is precisely the same point that Paul is making in 1 Cor 11 with the importance of "discerning the body." If you cannot recognize your neighbours at table as the "Body" of Christ and treat them as such,

then any union you may claim with Christ himself at the meal is just an empty pretense.

I will go one step deeper here. Some Christian thinkers have pointed out that full communion with our neighbour is only possible as a result of our communion with Jesus – who acts as a mediator between us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for example, in *The Cost of Discipleship* reflects on Jesus' statement in Luke 14:26 that we must hate father, mother, wife, etc. in order to be his disciples and concludes that "our relation to the world has been built on an illusion" and that "direct relationships [with others] are impossible." His point is that any relationship I have with others apart from Christ's love is necessarily selfish and manipulative. It is only when we love one another through Christ that true selfless love and intimacy are possible.

Discussion Question

> ***Why would Jesus choose a Table as the place to celebrate the unity of the Church with Himself and one another?***

The Table as a Place of Intimacy

In his book *With Burning Hearts: A Meditation on the Eucharistic Life*, Dutch Catholic theologian, Henri Nouwen offers this beautiful insight into the intimacy of a table:

> The table is the place of intimacy. Around the table we discover each other. It's the place where we pray. It's the place where we ask: "How was your day?" It's the place where we eat and drink together and say: "Come on, take some more!" It is the place of old and new stories. It is the place of smiles and tears. The table, too, is the place where distance is most painfully felt. It is the place where the children feel the tension between the parents, where brothers and sisters express their anger and jealousies, where accusations are made, and where plates and cups become instruments of violence. Around the table, we know whether there is friendship and community or hatred and division. Precisely because the table is the place of intimacy for all the members of the household, it is also the place where the absence of that intimacy is most painfully revealed. Henri Nouwen

Nouwen goes on to note that "Bed and table are the two places of intimacy. Also the two places of greatest pain. And, maybe, of these two places, the table is the most important because it is the place where all who belong to the household gather and where family, community, friendship, hospitality, and true generosity can be expressed and made real."

The Reformation: From Altar to Table

By the time of the Reformation, the Roman Mass had not only become formalized well beyond any actual meal, its emphasis had also shifted almost entirely onto penitence and sacrifice at the expense of koinonia

and celebration. It was still celebrated on a Sunday but its content and meaning focused almost exclusively on the events of Good Friday. The Reformers objected to several aspects of the sacrament as practiced by Rome. In respect of its symbolism as a sign of communion their objections included the following:

- Rome had moved the Table to the front of the church and turned it into an altar, thus obliterating its symbolism as a table of fellowship;
- Communion was only served in one kind (i.e. bread) to the people.
- The Mass was often celebrated as a private rite administered to a particular person or family for their personal benefit alone.
- Even when the whole community was gathered for the Mass on a Sunday, it was most often a one-man-show in which the priest alone participated. In veneration of the host as "the body of Christ" and in fear that they might receive these holy things unworthily, the people mostly went only to *watch* the Mass and only *received* communion once a year.

The Reformers moved the altar back down into the body of the church, placing at the centre of the building or, later, in front of the pulpit as a table around which the community could gather. Private celebrations were abolished because the sacrament should be seen as a celebration for the entire community. Calvin and Knox insisted that if a person was present for the sacrament, they should be present for the whole service (i.e. not just "pop-in" to see the magic show at the end) and that all the faithful who are present should receive the elements in both kinds.

An interesting aside is that Calvin wanted the sacrament still to be celebrated every week in the churches in Geneva. Yet, because the people themselves had become accustomed to communicating once a year, this was too big a change for them to accept. Once a month in each congregation was the highest frequency Calvin ever achieved, although through careful rota planning between the churches he made it so that Holy Communion was available somewhere in Geneva every Sunday. In Scotland, Knox was hamstrung by a shortage of ministers and was never able to achieve frequent Communion. Eventually, most congregations only managed Communion twice or four times a year.

To shift the emphasis further back towards a table fellowship, Reformed churches began receiving the elements seated, first at actual tables and later, with their advent, in pews. Moreover, instead of the minister being the only participant and the only one who actually served others, the Reformers insisted that people serve the elements to one another. The theological implication of this was to emphasise the role

of the people as the "priesthood of all believers" (1 Peter 2:5). The point here is not that every believer is a priest individually, but rather that the priestly role of making Christ present to the world resides with the community of faith as a whole and is not limited to certain individuals.

…And then we made our own mistakes too

As I hope is clear by now, there should not be a choice between seeing the sacrament as either a remembrance of Good Friday or a celebration of Easter Sunday. Instead, both penitence and celebration should be held in tension alongside each other. Despite the best intentions, Reformed Presbyterian churches have also not always got the balance right and have made their own mistakes along the way.

Firstly, through the infrequency of celebration and partly under the Zwinglian influences of Baptists and (some) Puritans, for whom the sacraments were either unimportant or to be spiritualized, the sacrament itself withdrew from prominence in Reformed Presbyterian worship to be overshadowed by the preaching of the Word. Today we can hardly say with any evidence that the Eucharist is still the central act of presbyterian worship.

Secondly, the emphasis on penitent preparation for the sacrament (in order to attain the requisite worthiness) along with the cultural assumption that greater formality denotes greater respect and veneration, resulted in a very austere and solemn atmosphere at communion. This atmosphere, while perhaps appropriate for a penitential sacrifice, does nothing to reinforce the idea of joyful celebration or warm community spirit.

Thirdly, the evolution from sitting together at table to sitting at an imagined table in the pews, along with the fact that communion is often shared in silence or to the accompaniment of meditative music has robbed the sacrament of almost any sense of togetherness. It is far easier for the individual worshipper to have a private moment with God while eating and drinking than to have a sense that they are doing this together with the rest of the community. And if the elements are also passed wordlessly around the congregation then there is not even a sense that people are serving one another.

Finally, the long absence of children from Holy Communion has impoverished the sacrament and the church. Until 1992 children were excluded from Holy Communion in the Church of Scotland. One reason for excluding them was that they could not yet understand the sacrament and should only be admitted once they do. While working in a very Jewish neighbourhood in Johannesburg I was impressed by

the way the Jewish community passed on the faith to its children through their inclusion in the festivals, fasts and rites of the faith. I felt then that we Christians had missed a trick by excluding our children from our most important ritual. More so as I noticed that by the time we deemed our young people old enough to know, many of them were too old to care. Fortunately the Church does now recognize that, since children are part of the family of faith, they can be included at the family table where they can participate in the family meal as they learn the family values.

Discussion

How are we doing?

Finding Communion in the Liturgy Today

After all that discussion, you may well feel that the Communion stream of meaning contained in the Eucharistic meal would benefit from less formality and something more like an actual shared meal. Nevertheless, I will point out that there are some of the formal elements of the liturgy that do promote a sense of community with God and one another.

The Peace: By sharing the peace we declare first that the work of Jesus commemorated in the meal actually establishes peace and reconciliation between us and God. We can only sit at God's Table and be God's family because Jesus' work of salvation on the Cross made it possible. Secondly, I believe the words of peace shared between worshippers should also be seen as their own commitment to reconciliation. Technically, in the light of Jesus' admonition in Matt 5:24, we should first go and seek reconciliation with others before making our offering of thanks to God. At least by sharing the peace, we are reminded of this obligation. And who knows, on some Sundays the reconciliation may be necessary and real within the gathered congregation.

Intercessions: We haven't really touched on the fact that the communion is intended to be far wider than the physically gathered community. The table in each church is symbolic of the table in every church. At this meal we are, through Christ, in communion with all Christians across time and geography – also across ethnic, political, racial, linguistic or any other divide. Our prayers of intercession should remind us about this wider communion. United with Christ, we offer with Him our prayers for our brothers and sisters everywhere.

Conformity: Despite its shortcomings, the formal conformity of the sacrament has its own power to unite. As we mentioned in the first week, the broad universal similarity of the liturgy makes is possible for Christians to recognize their unity wherever in the world they worship.