

Sunday 4 June 2023
Holy Trinity – Holy Communion
Trinity Sunday

Isaiah 40:12-17 & 17-end

2 Corinthians 13:11-end

Matthew 28:16-end

You may be pleased to hear that we are not going to have a normal sermon this morning - please, no cheering, that would be quite unseemly!!

I thought we might do something different.

Instead we are going to have a look at the structure of our service today.

We usually bill this as a 'Family Communion' service.

What does that mean, what is involved, what do we think is happening and what part do we each play?

Whatever we might think the meaning of this service is, I guess that it is common ground that it is close to the very heart of our faith as Christians.

A central act of Christian worship which, on the one hand, is the gift of Christ's self giving - he said.... "this is my body" and, on the other hand, it is our response to his command....."do this in memory of me".

I said this is a central act of Christian worship and so it is. However, it is not known by just one name.

The various names it has give some indication of the different dimensions that various traditions hold to.

For example, it can be called.....

Holy Communion - this is the principle term used by the Anglican tradition, and that includes us here at St. Margaret's and Holy Trinity.

It is a term which emphasises unity with God and with others. 'Communion' is a deeply theological word which is often used by the apostle Paul in relation to mealtime companionship and also sharing in the Holy Spirit.

Breaking of bread - used in some free-church traditions. It keeps close to some Bible descriptions, particularly descriptions in Acts and also in Luke's story of what happened to the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Mass - this is the principle term used in the Roman Catholic tradition and in some high anglican churches. This goes back to the time when such services were spoken only in Latin and in particular the dismissal "Ite, missa est" which means....'go, the mass is ended'.

The Lord's Supper - this is preferred by some Protestant traditions, for two reasons really. One, it emphasises Jesus' institution of the meal at the Last Supper and secondly because it emphasises the presidency of Jesus as host.

And then we have the Eucharist - this is a term which is probably familiar in most traditions. This comes from a Greek word meaning 'thanksgiving' and it stems from Jesus' practice at mealtimes as described in all four of the Gospel accounts.

Whatever you want to call this service, it is clear that its roots can be traced right back as far back as the Last Supper itself and the meal on the road to Emmaus and, whilst there have been both cultural and theological changes over the centuries, Jesus' instruction to... 'do this in remembrance of me'..... has been honoured throughout.

You may have noticed that our Family Communion services each week are made up of four distinct parts.

We start with what we call the 'Gathering' - here the people and the priest greet each other in the Lord's name. They confess their sins and receive assurance of God's forgiveness. They might keep a time of silence (not something that we have here very often, but this is where it would come if we did) and a Collect is prayed.

Then we have a section described as the 'Word' - basically this involves the reading of scripture, responding to the word of God, often in the form of a sermon or talk and reciting a creed; and then praying for the church and the world in the form of our intercessions.

The third part of our service is sometimes referred to as 'the meal'. This includes exchanging the peace, preparing the table with the bread (wafers in our case) and the wine, praying the Eucharistic prayer, breaking the bread and then actually receiving communion.

Finally, we have what we call the dismissal or the sending. A natural conclusion to what has gone before where each one of us undertakes to be sent out in the power of the Spirit to live and work to the praise and glory of God. We then depart with God's blessing to go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

Basically, a four fold structure with, hopefully, clear signposts to where the service is leading. Moving from the gathering of the community through the Liturgy of the Word to an opportunity of transformation with the sacraments. And after all this, those present are sent out to put their faith into practice.

Let's look at the first three of those component parts in a little more detail.....

Gathering.....

Before the advent of Common Worship, this part of the service would have been called the 'preparation'. But theologically that didn't really match up to what was really happening. Another word for what we are talking about here is 'liturgy' but this is a deeply misunderstood word.

Many assume that liturgy is just another description for the words of the service - far from it. The real meaning of liturgy goes to the very root of what it is to worship. Liturgy is derived from two Greek words which mean 'people' and 'work'. So, liturgy is, people's work! It is then a communal exercise and, however personal it may be, it is never private. Fundamentally, it is congregating, it is assembling - quite simply, it is coming together.

What can we take from this then? Well the primary thing I think we can take from this is that we, as the congregation, are not an audience. We are not a group of spectators. Liturgy is the people's work, not just that of the priest or presiding minister. Following on from this, it then becomes obvious that liturgy is to be done by the people. Therefore, most definitely is not to be done to the people or for the people, but by the people.

All of this brings with it certain challenges for those of us who are up front, as it were, but also equal challenges of those of us sitting in the pews.

Gathering for Christian worship is, therefore, without any doubt, an inclusive activity. It throws out the challenge that to relate to God means also engaging with others. We must each act out the great commandment: Jesus said....." You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'".

Word.....

There is a tendency to equate the Eucharist only with what happens at the table and communion rail. This is a complete misunderstanding of what happened in the disciple's encounter with Jesus on the road to Emmaus. Luke's account tells us that the disciple's hearts burned as Jesus opened up the scriptures to them. Clearly, on that occasion the word of God preceded the breaking of bread and Common Worship has now given that word equal value to the sharing of bread and wine.

Meal.....

Before we explore in any detail what happens at this point of the service I think it might be helpful to go through the various elements of the Eucharistic prayer that I will recite shortly.

In your service books this will be Eucharistic prayer 1 and you might like to turn now to page 7 in your service books.

So, starting at the top of page 7, the table has already been prepared with the bread and wine and we start the prayer with what is known as the Sursum Corda - that is "Lift up your hearts", an acclamation that goes back as far as the early third century.

Next we have a preface which ends towards the top of page 8 with the Sanctus - that is "Holy, holy, holy".....taken from Isaiah 6:3 and again, this is one of the oldest known parts of the liturgy going back to the third century.

Shortly after that we have what is called an Epiclesis - this is simply a calling down, an invocation, of the Holy Spirit....."grant that by the power of your Holy Spirit".

This leads to what is known as the 'Institution narrative' - that is to say, a reciting of the account of the Last Supper from scripture. It follows by and large what is the very first account to be written which is found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians which predates any of the Gospel accounts.

This then concludes with a passage called the Anamnesis; which is simply a Greek word for remembering. Basically the church is saying here what it understands by reciting the words....."we remember his offering of himself made once for all upon the cross" and this is followed by a second epiclesis with the words "renew us by your Spirit".

The Lord's Prayer follows on page 15 and then what is called the 'Fraction', which is simply the name given to the breaking of the bread.

I have set out all this because the words are important. They are key to everything we do and say in this Eucharist. We have already discussed how liturgy is the work of the people and, without some understanding of all this, our devotions are in danger of becoming meaningless.

What is going on then with all these words.

Well, my own theological understanding of what is happening here at the Eucharist is that the bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper are not in any way changed into the actual body and blood of Christ. Neither are they changed to the point where they somehow contain the body and blood of Christ. There is no magic going on here.

Rather, I prefer to accept that the bread and wine symbolise the body and blood of Christ. They are, therefore, as the Book of Common Prayer puts it, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace - the outward sign is the bread and wine, with the thing signified being the body and blood of Christ.

I would also want to go further and say that Christ is spiritually present in a special way as we eat and drink the bread and wine. Other Christian traditions would say something different. Roman Catholics would certainly do so, and that is fine.

So, if Christ is spiritually present in this sacrament, what does that do? I believe it does a number of things.....

First, it connects us with Christ and is a "participation" in His life. It actually draws us up into His divine life and allows that life to flow through us, just like plugging an electric cord into a socket. It is as if it opens a "portal"

of tangible, touchable, intimate connection with the historic, physical Jesus Christ.

Second, it assures us of forgiveness, because it is the "blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins". By taking part in this communion, we are participating in the very action of our forgiveness.

Third, it strengthens us for service.

Jesus says that His flesh is "real food", and His blood is "real drink".

This spiritual food and drink strengthens our spirits to work and live for God. It is a meal of grace and power to recharge our spiritual batteries.

Fourth, it connects us with the Body of Christ across the world.

Just as the elements are called "the body of Christ", so also the Church is called "the body of Christ". When two or more Christians are gathered for Communion, they are united not only to Christ, but to each other as well.

Fifth, it remembers the act of Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

It serves as a memorial that reminds us every Sunday, what Christ did on the cross.

Sixth, it proclaims the hope we have in the resurrection and second coming.

It is a foretaste of the glory, of the power, and the community that we will have in Christ's presence forever.

Finally, it is a bloodless sacrifice in which God sacrifices Himself for us, and we sacrifice ourselves to Him.

It is not a repeat of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, which is "once and for all", but, in return, we offer the only sacrifice we can give to God: ourselves, our praise, and our thanks for what Christ has done for us.

I'm conscious that there is some pretty deep theology here, and I know I said that it is important to understand what is going on, and I do believe that is true. But, having said that, there is still a very real sense in which this is all a complete mystery. We will never come to the bottom of that mystery, and it will take a lifetime of communion to have been even for the smallest moment as utterly present to Christ as he is to us in this holy sacrament.

He is present in our brokenness, even as bread is broken.

He is present in our woundedness, even as wine is poured out like blood.

He is also present in our betrayals, just as he was present to Judas Iscariot, his betrayer, whom he also invited to his table at the Last Supper. We can never know what passed between Christ and Judas. It is hard enough to understand our own communion with Christ, our own recoveries from sin and betrayal.

All I know is that, as we approach this communion rail, we have reached what I call a really thin place - that is to say, a place where the gap between earth and heaven has become amazingly small.
I believe I am never closer to God than when I receive these gifts of bread and wine.

It is a truly sacred place and a holy time.

And to summarise all of this - the bottom line for each one of us is that we should do our best to keep all these thoughts in mind and approach the communion rail accordingly. The problem is that we use pretty much the same words every week and they can become all too familiar, and that familiarity can lead to insignificance.

As we come to this communion rail we are an audience of one - it is just us and God. Something sacred, something precious.

Amen.