

## **A Conversation about the Celebration of Communion at St James \***

Janet Kay and Evan Mann: morning service 19 Nov 2017

### **Readings**

#### **1 Corinthians 11:23-26**

*[Words of Paul, addressed to the church in Corinth, giving his account of Jesus' words at the Last Supper and providing a model for the young churches to follow. Traditionally known as the words of institution of the Lord's Supper, these words are probably those which are most strongly associated with the celebration of communion.]*

<sup>23</sup> For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, <sup>24</sup> and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is [broken] for you. Do this in remembrance of me." <sup>25</sup> In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." <sup>26</sup> For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

#### **Mark 14:22-25**

*[Mark's account of the Last Supper, part of his narrative about the events leading up to Jesus' death.]*

<sup>22</sup> While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." <sup>23</sup> Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. <sup>24</sup> He said to them, "This is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many. <sup>25</sup> Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

#### **Luke 22:14-19a**

*[This reading omits v19b -20 also part of Luke's Last Supper account in our Bibles. Most scholars believe these verses are later additions.]*

<sup>14</sup> When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. <sup>15</sup> He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; <sup>16</sup> for I tell you, I will not eat it [again] until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." <sup>17</sup> Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; <sup>18</sup> for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." <sup>19</sup> Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying "this is my body"

## **Didache 9:1-4**

*[The Didache also known as "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles" is an early church instruction manual, dated by most modern scholars to the first century. It is therefore broadly contemporaneous with, perhaps a little later than, our first two readings. Some early church fathers thought it part of the New Testament but in the end it was not accepted into the Canon. It is a work from the Jewish Christian community (like Matthew) and covers topics such as Christian ethics, church administration and Christian sacraments including baptism and communion. From chapter 9 .... ]*

- 1.** And concerning the Eucharist, hold Eucharist thus:
- 2.** First concerning the Cup, "We give thanks to thee, our Father, for the Holy Vine of David thy child, which, thou didst make known to us through Jesus thy Child; to thee be glory for ever."
- 3.** And concerning the broken Bread: "We give thee thanks, our Father, for the life and knowledge which thou didst make known to us through Jesus thy Child. To thee be glory for ever."
- 4.** As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains, but was brought together and became one, so let thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into thy kingdom, for thine is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for ever."

## **Janet:**

As you may know, Church Council has recently decided that Chris, our Minister, will lead communion in the morning service on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in the month only ie once a month not twice. Whether we ought to continue with our long held practice (going back at least to the early 1980s) of celebrating communion twice a month, or perhaps just celebrate on the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday, is to be resolved in the new year after consultation with the congregation. This conversation today is part of that consultation. Realistically, any communion in addition to the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in the month would be led by a lay presider.

The reason for these changes is partly practical. Doing communion twice a month severely constrains what Chris, a part-time Minister, can do in the services he has with us. We are also short on lay presiders. But there are other factors as well. A number of people have noted that we don't do aspects of communion very well – for example the lack of clarity and consistency in the words spoken at the distribution of the elements; and we do not clearly convey the meaning of the sacrament to children who participate. But there is something even more fundamental here that nags many of us. As liberal or progressive Christians we struggle to find meaning in this ancient ritual. Perhaps we might start here, Evan, with this uncertainly about meaning?

**Evan:**

In part I think this is a 'Protestant' problem. I am speaking generally here, but for people like us, of the Reformed and Methodist tradition, compared with Catholics or Orthodox, the sacramental dimension of our religion is less important than the Word. We have never believed that the bread and wine are transformed during communion into the actual body and blood of Jesus; and our services are not centred on the Mass. That said, neither the Reformed or Methodist traditions has maintained that communion is just about "remembering". Somehow Christ is present but how has always been something of a mystery. [In fact the United Methodists in the USA actually describe it as a Holy Mystery.] I think for many this has been a hard thing to grapple with.

But the problem is now more acute. The tradition of communion with which most of us are familiar sees the elements as a symbolic representation of the broken body and shed blood of Jesus. According to this tradition, Jesus died for sinful humanity and by partaking in the elements we may be forgiven and our lives transformed, a process initiated by baptism but sustained by communion. But many of us cannot accept that Jesus came to earth to die a sacrificial death. The whole idea of the sacrifice of Jesus and its supposed cosmic salvific implications is unappealing and implausible.

Of course churches like St James have responded and revised communion liturgies. The word *blood* is no longer heard and Paul's words of institution (our first reading this morning) only heard rarely. Much creativity has been evident in the crafting of numerous new liturgies. But unmoored from tradition, communion now seems to have many meanings not one, a source of confusion for many. Even the bread and wine don't have consistent meanings or significance – for example the bread might signify the offering of life; or broken humanity. Nor do many of us find the consolations in communion that have sustained earlier generations of Christians, a sense of forgiveness for example.

In our new liturgies, particularly at St James, there is to be sure a strong focus on *community*. But there are other ways of fostering a sense of community in our congregation – passing the peace, singing, prayer, discussion, working together or indeed sharing in a real meal, and indeed ways that don't involve the rigmarole of sharing bread and wine!

**Janet:**

I am sure there is hyperbole in your last statement but the direction of your thinking is clear. So let me put this to you. Surely a practice that goes back to the very beginnings of the Christian movement and has been continued with for over two millennia up to and including today in almost all parts of the Christian church is not a practice we can lightly abandon. It is a link to our past and a link with countless Christians across the globe. We may differ in all sorts of ways but we have this one thing in common, the sharing of bread and wine. Isn't this a defining and unifying Christian practice?

## **Evan:**

Yes it is, and a practice I think we should work hard to retain. But I say this not just, or even mainly, for reasons of sentiment or connection with our past. Rather I believe we can find, like our forebears, meaning and transforming experience through regular celebration of communion. Let's start with meaning. Our traditional understanding of communion – which I described earlier – is not the only interpretation which one can reasonably draw from the Bible and early Christian writings.

One of the things that modern Biblical scholarship has taught us is that in the C1st there was not one but many Christianities. The same can be said about the practice and the meaning attributed to communion amongst C1st Christian communities. There were many. Let's take the four sources which are included in the handout, and which we heard read earlier. [Matthew also has a Last Supper account but I have omitted here because with one significant exception it follows Mark.]

- All 4 describe the breaking and sharing of the bread and the sharing of the cup.
- All involve the giving thanks, sometimes in the words of Jesus.
- The 3 NT sources have Jesus saying "this is my body".
- In Mark and Luke, perhaps too in Corinthians, the meal is about looking forward to the fulfilment of the Kingdom of God.
- The instruction to "do this in remembrance of me" occurs only in Corinthians but it is also clear the Jesus is at the centre of each of these accounts.

On the other hand

- Only in Corinthians and Mark is there mention of blood or blood covenant. This clearly has overtones of sacrifice (remember the Last Supper occurs just before Jesus' execution at the time of the Jewish Passover). For Mark however scholars believe this is more about martyrdom (or discipleship) than sacrificial atonement. Indeed it is possible to see this interpretation also in Corinthians.
- Only in Matthew are the words "forgiveness of sins" included in Jesus's words at the Last Supper.
- In the shortened account of Luke's Last Supper account, there is no reference to blood or covenant nor is there any intimation of atoning sacrifice. And nowhere else in Luke does Jesus say his death will bring salvation. Rather Luke's meal is about celebrating the promise of the Kingdom and Jesus' association with it.

The Didache deserves special mention.

- Unlike the New Testament accounts, this passage from the Didache contains no reference to the Last Supper or death of Jesus.
- The cup and the broken bread have quite different symbolic meanings: the cup denoting connection with those who have gone before us (think of the hymn "for all the saints"); the bread the bringing together [into the church] of that which was previously scattered.

- Note that the cup is drunk before the bread is eaten, like in Luke, but reversing the traditional order we take from Paul and Mark.
- Above all, this passage is about gratitude, especially for Jesus, his life and wisdom.

In summary then, there were a variety of interpretations of communion in the early church. It was not all about death, sacrifice and forgiveness. There is much here, from Biblical and early church sources, on which to build a contemporary progressive communion liturgy.

**Janet:**

Yes I agree. Of the themes which you have drawn from the readings, those which appeal to me most are: gratitude; remembering Jesus and the people of God who have gone before us; commitment to discipleship; and new beginnings and possibilities which is the sense in which I understand the phrase the coming of God's Kingdom on this earth.

But I can't help think there are some important aspects of communion which you have not drawn from the readings. You have not mentioned specifically, for example, the building up of a Christian community which we value very highly here at St James.

**Evan:**

Just as at St James now, so in the young churches of the C1st an important function of communion was to strengthen local Christian community. Sharing of the bread and wine was part of a sit down meal and, as I think all of us would understand, eating together is a way of bonding together.

Which reminds us that communion is not just about thinking and meaning. It is also about our experience and about how we feel. Our communion service is a ritual. It is invested with meaning but its significance is amplified by its sequence of gestures, postures, and actions in relationship with others and with special objects. The participation in this sequence, which we do regularly during the course of the year, helps take us to a different place, away from the mundane.

Just think of some of the things we do in our communion service (as opposed to the words we say) which help us to come together as a community. By preparing ourselves prior to the breaking of bread, through private reflection, confession and resolution and then by way of the passing the peace, barriers between us are diminished and sense of personal connection enhanced. We sing together. When we partake of the elements, all are served equally. We participate in things that are distinctly Christian, notably the formalised sharing of bread and wine, thus reinforcing our sense of being a Christian group. I believe our sense of community is further accentuated if, as we do at St James, we stand together in the round, facing each other, perhaps even holding hands.

In the Uniting Church, including here at St James, we value not just community but also inclusiveness. In the context of communion we express this by way of an open table. It is assigned less importance in other denominations and, the evidence suggests, in the early

church. Our reading from the Didache this morning stopped at v4. The verse which follows reads

**5.** But let none eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been baptised in the Lord's Name. For concerning this also did the Lord say, "Give not that which is holy to the dogs."

You may recall too that in Paul's letter to the Galatians the question of who should be included in communal meals in the early church was a source of conflict between the apostles Peter and Paul. The issue was should Jewish Christians share the meal with Gentile Christians?

These accounts remind us that practice varied in the early church and that rarely will we find a blueprint from the New Testament or early church documents that we can readily adopt.

**Janet:**

A hard question. Is there a special sense of the Divine being present when we celebrate communion? Any more than when we pray, or are alone in our garden, or are witness to an act of compassion?

**Evan:**

I think we can only make sense of this idea when we think of communion as a ritual. Some sociologists of religion see ritual, like our communion ceremony, as a means of accessing the sacred, of communicating with a transcendent reality. I am not sure about this. It sounds a little like magic and that worries me. On the other hand there is something different about the quality of our being together around the communion table. We can encounter each other more openly, even more lovingly, because of our participation in this ritual. This goes to what I referred to earlier as 'transforming experience'. Perhaps it is here that we find an element of the divine?

**Janet:**

Communion is something we do together. Can we also see it as a private thing, between us and God if you like? Or does a focus on the individual experience detract from the corporate?

**Evan:**

I think communion has always been an individual as well as corporate experience. It is difficult to disentangle the two but for me, amongst other things, communion provides an opportunity for reflection, confession and resolution. These are essentially private things. We can be helped in this process by periods of silence and a sympathetic liturgy. Communion is also an opportunity for us to focus on the person Jesus – as Paul asks us to – his teaching and actions, his life and death. One reason we do this is to help us on the Christian path, for each of us, as individuals, to become more like him.

Yet having said these things are personal, we do them as part of a corporate ritual. In fact the deeper our experience as individuals, the more open we are to those around us who are

also participating in communion. We support and are supported by others in our Christian community through communion. Communion is both an individual and corporate experience.

**Janet:**

We have covered a lot of ground. Because this is a process of consultation we should give others now an opportunity to speak. But lets first sit in silence for a minute or two, to allow us to reflect on what has been said.

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\* Some of the ideas in this conversation have been taken from and are developed more fully in *Many Tables: The Eucharist in the New Testament and Liturgy Today*, Dennis E Smith and Hal E Taussig, SCM Press 1990. A copy is available in our library.