

HOLY HABITS: BREAKING BREAD

It is not clear from Acts 2, verses 42-47 whether the Holy Habit of “Breaking Bread” was a celebration of Holy Communion or simply about the common action of families and friends breaking bread together as they shared a meal.

However, since we know from St Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth that the early church quickly established the custom of celebrating Holy Communion, I have chosen to relate the Holy Habit of “Breaking Bread” to our celebrations of Holy Communion, given that “Eating Together” will be explored later in the year.

SUGGESTED BIBLE READINGS:

Exodus 16, verses 10-26

1 Corinthians 11, verses 17-26

1. THE MEAL THAT UNITES?

One of the questions we often ask is “why has Holy Communion caused so much division trouble in the church?” It is a sad fact of life that Christians have never agreed about what Holy Communion means or how it should be celebrated. As early as AD55, Paul was writing to the church in Corinth, who were clearly not of one mind when it came to celebrating “The Lord’s Supper.” Since then, long-term church divisions have been formed, wars fought and Christian martyred by other Christians over their understanding and practice of Holy Communion.

But why was it ever thought that every Christian should believe exactly the same and do exactly the same when seated around the Lord’s Table. Did the original 12 disciples present at the Last Supper all understand what Jesus did in precisely the same way? Almost certainly not because, even from the little we know of them, they came from a variety of different backgrounds and had a variety of different agendas when it came to following Jesus.

In the Early Church:

- those of a Jewish background would make a connection with the Jewish Passover Celebration, when the blood of the sacrificed lambs had kept the Hebrew people safe from the horror that struck the Egyptians.
- Some would recall manna in the desert: the bread of heaven, the gift of God to save his people when they were in a desolate and dangerous place.
- Some would link it with Jesus’ resurrection appearances when, on more than one occasion he ate with his disciples to show that he was alive.
- Some would think back to the feeding of the multitude, when people of all kinds sat down together to eat the food provided by Jesus: the meal that united.

- Some would see a hope for future banquet in the kingdom of heaven, when people from all places would sit at table in the kingdom of God, barriers would be broken down, there would be no hunger and there would be reunion with those they had lost.
- Those from a Greek background would have thought it only right to celebrate the food and wine of life as a thanksgiving to God. From what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11, it all had a tendency to get out of hand... but this was thoughtlessness rather than bad theology.

In later years:

- Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy wrote a poignant little poem on what Communion meant to a mother whose son had been killed in the First World War, linking the broken body of Christ with the broken body of the woman's son.
- Social activists have written liturgies for Communion, focussing on the hope of an equal sharing of food for all.
- Former enemies have found reconciliation in the sharing of Communion together
- In our church, where the youngest children take part in the Communion Service only once a year, I saw them run in excitedly: *us too, today!* It was about belonging.
- The dying find comfort and hope of eternity in receiving Communion.
- At our Christmas Eve Communion, the little figures from the Nativity Set stand on the Communion Table amongst the elements of bread and wine. For on this night it is the miracle of the Incarnation, we celebrate: that, as John Betjamen wrote, "*Christ was born in Palestine and lives today in bread and wine.*"

So at every Communion, there will be people present for whom it will have a different significance. Is this wrong?

2. WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED?

According to the earliest record (1 Corinthians 11, verses 23-25), *The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."...after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."*

- This was an act of supreme self-giving. Jesus had given himself to the world in life; now he would give himself to the world in death.
- His death was the means of creating a new covenant (relationship) between God and humanity.
- Sharing food together has always been seen as creating a bond between people. Sharing food in Jesus' name would create a bond between his followers and a bond with Himself.

An anecdote: I was sitting at a restaurant table with two members of our church and a Sikh couple. Something was mentioned about Communion and the Sikh lady wanted to know what it was. This was a social occasion and no time for extensive theological discourse. So I more or less repeated what St Paul had said: "Jesus Christ, just before he died, shared bread and wine with his closest followers. He broke the bread and poured out the wine symbolising his death and asked them to do this in remembrance of him."

"How nice," said the Sikh lady, sincerely. It obviously made some sense to her. I turned to my fellow church member: "why have we made it so complicated?"

3. WHAT IS A SACRAMENT?

A sacrament is visible sign of God's grace. A means by which we receive God's grace.

- The United Reformed Church recognises only two: Baptism and Holy Communion.
- Other Christian denominations celebrate more, such as marriage, ordination and confession.
- But surely the Church does not have a monopoly on sacraments? God's grace is received and made visible in many ways. There is a story in the Holy Habits booklet on Breaking Bread where a homeless man shares his bread with a Minister on a park bench and it is clear that both men receive the grace of God in that sharing.
- To celebrate a Sacrament as a church is a high responsibility, as St Paul makes clear. We do well to compile carefully and prayerfully prepared liturgies and to insist that those presiding at the celebration are properly trained and authorised to do so. But what is Paul really concerned about? That all present are enabled to come closer to the living Lord Jesus and closer to one another. He does not discuss the theology of the sacrament. In the same way, in the Old Testament, the gift of manna must be properly and fairly distributed amongst the people so that they honour each other and honour God (by ensuring that the Sabbath day is kept holy).

So long as our Holy Communion honours God, honours Jesus Christ and honours those sharing it, it becomes a means of God's grace in our lives and we are "getting it right."

4. A HOLY HABIT?

Why is "Breaking Bread" a Holy Habit?

- Jesus Christ asked us to do this. It is his gift to us. His body was broken and his blood poured out in love for humanity and in the hopes of reconciling us to the God who loves and redeems us.
- It is an action, rather than just words. The Word of God becomes "flesh" (ie physical material) and we take it, taste it and eat it. We enter into communion

with the Lord Jesus who actually walked the earth and who suffered physical pain and death. It is an act of solidarity: God's solidarity with suffering humanity and our solidarity with God.

- It is a sacrament- a means of God's grace coming alive in us. We need these sacraments in order to know the power of God in our lives.
- Because it is Christ's gift to us, we do not need to feel that we "deserve it." As the prayer of "humble access" says: "we do not presume to come to this table trusting in our own righteousness." It is not an award of merit but a means of grace.
- It is a "communion" with our fellow Christians. As we celebrate Holy Communion we are made one with all God's people. And communion is a gift of God. It cannot be broken even by those denominations who refuse to share Holy Communion with others.
- It is a "communion" with God's people in heaven. Heaven and earth come together in the sharing of this sacrament. Those who are grieving need this reminder that they may still be made one with those they have lost.
- It is a Holy Habit which can be performed more or less anywhere: people have shared Communion in prisons, hospitals, labour camps, airports, workshops, family homes, even on the street. And in each different place it will have a new and deeper significance.

5. KEEPING IT HOLY

- The "method" by which this sacrament is celebrated is of minor importance compared with the spirit in which we partake of it.
- Ask if we honour God and our Lord Jesus in this sacrament?
- Ask if we honour other people in this sacrament: do we make them welcome, ensure they know what to do, whether or not they wish to receive the elements? Do we make provision for those with possible gluten allergies or alcohol issues?
- Look for the visible signs of the grace of this Sacrament in our lives outside the act of worship: how do we speak to people after the service (especially those we find it hard to like)? How do we give time, attention, provisions to those who most need them? How does our working life become filled with the grace of God after we have received Communion? What do we give back to God in joyful thanks for what He has given to us?

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