

Sermon Transcript
15th January 2023

Why Holy Communion?

1 Corinthians 11

I want you to imagine that you have never been to church before, and that this morning is not simply your first time at St Paul's, but the first time in any church building anywhere.

It is clear from the architecture that this space was organised with a particular purpose in mind. There is an intentionality to its design. You look around, and the orientation of the furniture, the chancel wall, the East window, all conspire to direct your attention to the table that sits in the sanctuary. What's so important about the table? you wonder. Maybe not the table itself, you reflect, but what happens on that table?

Later in the service, the man at the front, the one wearing the strange robes, goes and stands behind the table, and leads some prayers from a book, which mention Jesus' body and blood. Since this is your first time at church, it is by definition, your first Holy Communion service - what is your impression when you leave? What is it that you take away? What stays with you?

Maybe it's the warm welcome you received when you first stepped into the building? Maybe it was something to do with the prayers or the music? And hopefully, you leave with a sense that the sharing of bread and wine is somehow important to the Christian community.

But *why* is that the case?

You see, this morning is the first in a series of talks, where we will explore some of the practices and assumptions in church life that are so easily taken for granted. Church life has a pattern to it, a rhythm and routine, and it can sometimes be the case that we adopt the routine, without asking why it is we do what we do. And there are two questions I want to grapple with today, one which calls us to imagine church from an outsider's perspective, and one that calls us to imagine church from a disaffected perspective.

1. Why is Holy Communion important?
2. What if Holy Communion no longer feels special?

So first of all, why is Holy Communion important?

Well there is a short answer, and a longer answer to this. The short answer is because it is something Jesus Christ commanded his disciples to do. It is one of two markers of the Christian life, Holy Baptism being the other. Because Jesus *ordered* us to do these things, we sometimes call them *ordinances*. But you may have heard the term sacrament. So simply put, we have Holy Communion because Jesus told us to.

But at a deeper more mysterious level: "you are what you eat!" You are what you eat. Holy Communion is how we literally, and figuratively, take into ourselves the story that defines the Christian faith. Holy Communion is how we participate in the story that recalls Christ's

sacrifice on the cross by which our sins are forgiven, and share in the story of his resurrection by which we may know his risen life. In this sense, Holy Communion is a constant process of reorientation, of keeping the main thing the main thing. Of keeping the message of Christ's death and resurrection at the centre of our own lives, but also, at the centre of our worshipping community. In fact, the most ancient Church communities around the world, call their Communion prayers, *the anaphora*, a Greek word, which literally means, *a carrying back*, a sense of returning to the source. In the prayers of Holy Communion, we are carrying the church, ourselves, back to the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Holy Communion is therefore for sinners, for the imperfect, for the incomplete, for all those who wish to return home.

But this is just the interior aspect if you like. This is what Holy Communion means for the Church, but we might also ask what does it mean for the world? You see, Holy Communion is no inward-looking thing. In a moment, the prayers you will hear at the table transport us back to the Upper Room where Jesus first shared this meal with his friends, but Jesus' death and resurrection is not a message to be contained within four walls, it is a message for the world.

And this is where our reading from Paul is so helpful. Paul describes the Church in a spiritual sense, as the Body of Christ. In fact, when I break the bread at the Lord's Table today, you will hear me say the words,

Though we are many, we are one body because we all share one bread.

Now that line is not made up by some Church of England theologian; that is a direct quote from Paul. And in our reading today, where Paul instructs the Church in Corinth how best to observe Holy Communion, he writes,

On the night when he was betrayed, Jesus took bread, gave thanks, and broke it, and gave it to his friends. This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

Now this is important. What happens to Jesus literally must happen to the Church spiritually. Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it. Jesus' body, was taken, it was broken, it was given the world. But how then, in a spiritual sense, is the Church being taken by God, broken, and shared with the world? How am I, how are you, being taken by God, and being broken open and shared with the world? How is Holy Communion transforming you into an ambassador of hope? How will your taking Holy Communion today mean that you are a gift to your workplace tomorrow?

Holy Communion is important because Jesus commands us to observe it. Because it is our way of keeping the main thing the main thing. And because it's God's way of keeping the Church outward-looking.

But what then of the second question, which a number of people have asked me this side of the pandemic: *what if Holy Communion no longer feels special?*

And this is an important question, one we must handle with care, because behind it is a sense of fatigue and sadness.

And we begin to address this by saying that, you are right. Holy Communion is something special, but sometimes it can feel routine and mundane. Sometimes too, if we are honest, the traditions, symbols, and words the church wraps it up with can get in the way. And we can approach the communion rail feeling as if we are going through the motions. Is there any way of getting out of this rut once we've fallen into it? I think there is.

One of the things I find useful is to remember that Jesus used bread and wine for a reason. That Holy Communion is food and drink. Food nourishes us, drink sustains us. But that is not to say I can remember each and every single meal I have ever eaten in my life. While I don't remember every meal I have eaten, they have nonetheless sustained me.

There are some meals I always hope to remember. Christmas Lunch with family, Wedding Breakfasts, Paella and beer in Spain, introducing rugby friends to oysters in Dubrovnik. But the truth of the matter is, come lunch time most days of the week I have a pretty unmemorable sandwich or a baked potato. Unmemorable, but not unimportant. It sustains me.

You may not remember this service of Holy Communion this time next week. But spiritually speaking, it is a meal that will nourish and sustain your soul. I can't remember every meal I have ever have eaten, but they have all sustained me. I can't remember every Holy Communion service I have attended, but they have all nourished my soul.

I would just add this word of caution too. It is true, that when we come to the Lord's table, if we are expecting to reproduce an experience or feeling, we can be disappointed. So let's turn again to the words of St Paul.

Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Friends, if you have fallen into this trap, as I have, of chasing a particular feeling or intimacy with God, remember, before Holy Communion is an "experience", it is a proclamation. Before Holy Communion is an "experience", it is a proclamation. That is to say, we do not share the Church's Family Meal because we expect it will make us feel a certain way, but because we deliberately and freely choose to align ourselves with Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. We eat and drink because we choose to proclaim the truth of God's love and mercy irrespective of whether we feel on the mountain top or the valley floor.

So then, I can't remember every meal I have ever eaten, but they have all sustained me. I can't remember every Holy Communion service I have attended, but they have all nourished my soul. And before Holy Communion is an experience to be pursued, it is a proclamation of the Lord's death until he comes again.

Friends, whether this is first, or thousandth Holy Communion, may it bless you, sustain you, orientate you toward Christ's death and resurrection, and send you out to love and serve the Lord.

In the name of Christ.

Amen.