

Thinking about Communion – study 3

In the last two studies we looked at the background in the Hebrew Scriptures in particular the Passover meal. We then looked at how this was taken by Jesus as the key symbolism of the new covenant. WE will now look at how this covenant meal was understand and celebrated by the first Christians.

Read Acts 2: 42 - 47

Were they celebrating Holy Communion every day?

I think the answer has to be no. At this very early stage, they would not yet have had chance to think through and work out the details of how it all fitted together. They were celebrating the reality of being part of the new covenant community and the difference in their lives, but communion had not yet taken on a greater significance in terms of a formal celebration in memory of what Jesus had done.

However, the phrase “breaking of bread” is not insignificant. In the Emmaus road story (Luke 24) Jesus was recognised in the “breaking of bread.” Echoing the words in Luke’s account of the last supper, there must have been some connection between the two. Luke means more than “they ate together” but it was certainly not a Passover Meal at this stage of the Church’s life.

Now read 1 Corinthians 11: 17 - 22

What kind of meal was this?

Again, it is hard to say what is going on. Paul isn’t talking about shared suppers, as he uses the words “Lord’s Supper.” Clearly as he goes on to remind them, they are gathering to celebrate a covenant meal. It was a full meal, and there was wine involved. It didn’t have a set start or ending time. Yet it was also a Christian gathering, where Jesus’ death and resurrection were remembered and proclaimed. That Paul feels the need to instruct them to do it properly implies that it was a meal with religious significance.

Are the problems related to the fact that a predominantly gentile church would not understand the rituals of covenant meals? There are many questions that we don’t know the answer to, but there are some really helpful things we can draw out.

Read 1 Corinthians 11: 23 - end

What are the problems that Paul is addressing?

- *the “unworthy manner” is going ahead and eating and drinking without recognising the needs of other members of the church. It would be unworthy to eat all the bread and drink all the wine because you were hungry or thirsty. Unworthy isn’t about the sins of an individual, but rather the manner in which the meal is undertaken. The poor were excluded it would appear. Good to think who the poor might be in our context?*
- *Notes that they (the Corinthians) did not discern the true nature of 10:17 – that we are all one body. The church is the gathering of all those who are part of the covenant community. Good to think about who we think is a member of the covenant community, and how we know.*
- *In v.29 “the body” refers to the body of believers – the church. The examination of v.28 is to examine whether or not our relationships within the church are right, or whether we need to make our peace with someone we have wronged. (See Matthew 5:23-24)*
- *Notes that the pastor of the church is to issue the warning to self examine, but it is the responsibility of the individual to do it. The pastor is not to examine other people’s lives.*

One of the clear functions of the celebration of the Lord's Supper is to proclaim the Lord's death and resurrection. How do we do this? What might this look like for people of different ages? If people do not do this, does that invalidate the celebration?

These are challenging questions but important for people to consider. What does it mean for families and their children? What does it mean for those coming without their families?

What have you learnt from the three studies? What has been challenging to think about?

Hopefully some of the following might come out:

- *The Last supper was the proclamation of God's new way of dealing with people.*
- *It would fulfil all the covenants that foreshadowed or promised a new work of God, yet its scope - forgiveness, new life, blessings and curses would be continuous with the old covenants.*
- *The celebration of this meal was often messy and fraught, but was a communal rather than individual exercise.*

Some things for families to think about.

These are very personal questions for each family to work through, as we have our different backgrounds and approach. The idea is not for us all to come the same way of doing things, but to better understand what we are doing and why, therefore helping our children to understand our family's chosen approach.

- How do we help our children to think about belonging to the covenant community?
- How does the truth of belonging get reflected and spoken about in our approach to baptism, to communion?
- Is our approach understood by our children?
- How will we explain to our children why other children do it differently?