

### **Matthew 26:26-30**

**While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.” Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father’s kingdom.” When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.**

For most people, a celebration seems to mean an event with plenty of food and drink

- And ample opportunity for indulgence, maybe even over indulgence in one or both
- The invitation, therefore, to celebrate the Lord’s Supper (or Holy Communion)
- Is undoubtedly a celebration like none other

People celebrate all kinds of interesting things these days

- And here again the celebration of the Lord’s Supper is different
- For Jesus commands his followers to commemorate
- Not his birth
- (people manage to do that so well at Christmas, his birth is all but forgotten)
- nor his life, nor his miracles – but his death!

The Lord’s Supper originated from the Last Supper that Jesus celebrated with his disciples

- this took place in the upper room at Jerusalem on the last night of his earthly life
- this special meal was a Passover meal
- which commemorated the deliverance of the Hebrew people from bondage in Egypt
- central to the meal were three foods: unleavened bread, bitter herbs, Passover lamb
- and four cups of wine

During the course of this Passover meal, Jesus took a loaf or cake of unleavened bread

- and, probably with a traditional prayer that we would call ‘grace’, gave thanks
- “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe
- who bringest forth bread from the earth.”
- Then he personally gave the bread to each of them
- With the words, ‘Take and eat; this is my body’

Although most Christians are familiar with these words

- We should not miss the stunning effect that these words would have had
- For the words ‘this is my body’ had no place in the Passover ritual

Jesus also took one of the cups of wine, probably the third of the four traditional cups

- And, again gave thanks to God, probably with a traditional prayer such as
- “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe,
- Creator of the fruit of the vine.”

From the gospel accounts and the account that Paul gives in 1 Corinthians it becomes clear

- Just as the bread has been broken, so Jesus’ body will be broken
- As Israelites were commanded to celebrate their deliverance with the Passover meal
- So the Messiah’s people are to remember Jesus’ death (as Saviour) in this way

Although Christians celebrate the Lord's Supper in a variety of ways

- It soon becomes apparent that it not the amount on offer to eat and drink
- That is really significant – instead, the small amounts focus our attention on Jesus
- For many people the experience of peace in a world of chaos sounds impossible
- People face bereavement, strained or broken relationships, disappointments
- Jesus said that wars, calamities and tribulation would be our common experience
- Yet these often leave us wondering how or why such awful things could happen
- And where is God when such things happen, to others as well as to us
- Where can we find peace in God's will? Only in the work of the crucified Messiah

American Bible commentator, Michael J Wilkins, sees the celebration of the Lord's Supper

- As giving us a unique opportunity to experience God's will for us
- Because in the symbolism 'realities beyond verbal expression are acted out'
- Michael Wilkins sees at least six dimensions of the Lord's Supper worth exploring
- He labels these: Backward, Forward, Inward, Upward, Around and Outward

## I THE BACKWARD DIMENSION

Remembering Jesus is undoubtedly the crucial thing we do in the Lord's Supper

- But it must not be reduced to a sentimental remembrance
- Or to something similar to modern day nostalgia
- The heart of the Lord's Supper is remembering his body given and his blood shed
- It was Jesus' words 'This is my body' that transformed the Last Supper
- From a Passover meal where the celebration was the Exodus from Egypt
- Into a remembrance of all that he was just about to accomplish for his people

When Jesus died upon the cross

- It was not because either the Jewish or the Roman authorities got the better of him
- It was because Jesus, of his own free-will, accepted God's eternal plan
- To offer himself as a sacrifice for sin that sinners could be reconciled to God
- The sacrificial overtones of the breaking of the bread and pouring of the wine
- Are interpreted by the words of Jesus – this is my blood of the covenant

'Blood' and 'covenant' are found together in only two OT passages

- Immediately after what we know as the Palm Sunday prophecy in Zechariah 9
- Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, O Jerusalem!
- See, your king comes to you
- righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey
- on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zechariah 9:9)
- come the promise, 'As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you
- I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit' (Zechariah 9:11)

Yet, it is more than likely that Jesus is drawing on an even more significant passage

- In which Moses ratified the covenant with the people at Sinai
- Through the shedding of blood
- And that Jesus understands, not only the violent and sacrificial death he will undergo
- But also that by this event the Messiah will save his people from their sins

Then (Moses) took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey." Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

(Exodus 24:7-8)

The relationship between God and his people is here defined in terms of covenant

- It is a relationship based on promises
- Promises for the forgiveness of sins, sealed by the shed blood
- This blood 'which is poured out for many'
- Is inextricably linked with the Passover sacrifice
- In which so much blood had just been 'poured out'

The Lord's Supper looks backward to all that Jesus accomplished by his death on the cross

- And even further to the saving acts of God that prompted the Passover meal
- As a memorial to his sacrifice, the Lord's Supper focuses our hearts and minds
- On Jesus and on his finished work upon the cross
- But there is also:

## II THE FORWARD DIMENSION

There must have been a sense of mystery when Jesus told his disciples:

I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."

'Fruit of the vine' was a common Jewish way of referring to wine

- It seems that some time is going to elapse between the Last Supper
- And the great Messianic banquet, that we familiarly call 'heaven'
- The disciples will celebrate the Lord's Supper until Jesus comes
- But he will not sit down with them at it

Perhaps it was only after his death and resurrection that they realised

- That they could look forward to the coming Kingdom of God
- With confidence, assured that their future in Christ, in life or death, was secure
- Though Matthew does not mention the Passover lamb here
- The timing of this supper, during the feast of the Passover
- Shows that the Exodus and the Passover lamb are a shadow, a type
- Of a new and greater deliverance
- In the Old Testament the Hebrew people celebrated the first Passover in Egypt
- It was the means by which they escaped from Egypt
- And it anticipated their arrival in the Promised Land
- It is by his substitutionary death that Jesus ransoms the people of God
- And it is this saved people that collectively look forward to heaven

After the BACWARD DIMENSION

And the FORWARD DIMENSION comes also:

### III THE INWARD DIMENSION

The inward dimension is less obvious from the Gospel of Matthew

- But very clear in Paul's writings about the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:26-29)

For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.

(1 Cor. 11:26-29)

In the modern desire to be inclusive and to bring an upbeat dimension of celebration

- Thoughts of solemn self-examination sound strangely unfashionable
- Not so long ago, the Lord's Supper was still primarily a solemn self-examination
- Prior to a renewed realisations of the benefits of the death and resurrection of Christ
- While the possibility of becoming too self-obsessed and inward-looking remains
- We must not lose the important times of self-examination and accountability to God
- The Last Supper is celebrated in the context of betrayal and denial
- Are rather sober reminder for us all – yet each time we gather at the Lord's table
- The grace of God are held before us in the broken bread and wine
- Poured out for the forgiveness of sins

There is no doubt that repentance and forgiveness are tied together

- On the one hand, we exclude ourselves from God's forgiveness
- If we do not seek it with repentance and humble trust
- On the other hand, God's justice and mercy appoint a means for that forgiveness
- Through the shedding of blood
- For without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (Hebrews 9:22)

### IV THE UPWARD DIMENSION

Our celebration of the Lord's Supper must also look upward

- For the death and burial of Jesus are not the end of the story
- Rather his resurrection proves that his dying on the cross was effective
- So we can look up with conviction and joy know that he is alive
- And is seated at the right hand of the Father

The words of Charles Wesley's hymn, 'God of my salvation hear'

- Standing now as newly slain
- To thee I lift mine eye (HP 729)
- Remind us that the heavenly vision in Revelation
- Includes worship of the risen Christ, the crucified Lamb of God
- It is because Christ has taken his place in glory
- That we also have hope of sharing in his eternal kingdom

The picture of heavenly worship includes the singing of a new song:

"You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation."

(Revelation 5:9)

It is because Christ has died for us that we can be saved and that we worship him

- The life of Jesus, surrendered in sacrificial death
- Brought about the release of forfeited lives
- Jesus acted on behalf of the many by taking their place
- It is by this one death that many are ransomed
- The 'many' remind us of the

## V THE AROUND US DIMENSION

In John's Gospel some detail is given to Jesus washing the disciples' feet

- To do so was a great sign of his humility
- And the lesson that his disciples are to serve each other

We have all heard people say that they can be good Christians without going to church

- It's time to stop letting them get away with it
- We know that people who never darken the doors of our buildings
- Often appear to be very nice people
- We also know that church sometimes attracts people
- Who can appear to be not very nice people
- But, although being a Christian is not only about going to church
- Gathering with the people of God is certainly an important dimension of it
- The most common lament I hear from devout Christians who can no longer attend
- Is how much they would love to be with us Sunday by Sunday

John Wesley said that the Bible knows nothing of solitary Christianity

- In the New Testament we find that when the disciples became isolated
- Were the times that they were more likely to fail
- Jesus' disciples need each other to help them, to help us, stay faithful
- The Lord's Supper is essentially a corporate occasion
- And just as at a family celebration it is sad if one or more of the family cannot come
- So it is sad to see empty places at the Lord's table
- Which brings us to the sixth and final dimension

## VI THE OUTWARD DIMENSION

As Paul recounts the institution of the Lord's Supper

- He reminds us that as long as we eat of the bread and drink of the cup
- We proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Cor. 11:26)
- This is the corporate nature of communion
- And the outward dimension of the Lord's Supper

After Jesus had celebrated the Last Supper with his disciples they sang a hymn

- It is difficult to know whether this was a spontaneous hymn of praise
- Or one or more the traditional Psalms (the Hallel) at the end of Passover
- If it was the Hallel then it was Psalms 114-118
- In the Psalms Jesus would have sung words
- Pledging that he would keep his vows (Psalm 116:12-13)
- That he would ultimately triumph despite rejection (Psalm 118)
- And calling all nations to praise God and his covenant love
- Psalm 117 is the shortest of all the Psalms and yet its contents are most significant

Praise the LORD, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples. For great is his love towards us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures for ever. Praise the LORD.

(Psalm 117:1-2)

As we renew our commitment to the Lord Jesus

- And affirm the good news of his saving death upon the cross
- We must remember that we are also proclaiming his death until he comes
- And that the world is waiting to hear the good news of God's saving grace
- And our personal witness and testimony
- The bread and the cup are profound memorials of the most important event in history
- Jesus uses bread, not the Passover lamb, to initiate the commemoration
- For after his death, the sacrifice of a lamb will no longer be necessary

The earliest preaching of the church was the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus

- And the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness of sins
- In our celebrations of the Lord's Supper we renew our commitment
- Reflecting upon

#### I THE BACKWARD DIMENSION

Remembering his body broken and his blood shed

#### II THE FORWARD DIMENSION

Anticipating the Kingdom of heaven

#### III THE INWARD DIMENSION

Examining ourselves

#### IV THE UPWARD DIMENSION

Our joining in heavenly worship

#### V THE AROUND US DIMENSION

That we are Christians together

#### VI THE OUTWARD DIMENSION

Proclaiming the good news to all ... until he comes