

“Pass the Bread” – 1 Cor 11:23-26

Well, here we are in Holy Week, and more specifically here we are at Maundy Thursday. This is the night we come together in worship remembering the gathering of Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper, on the eve on which he was betrayed. We will in worshipful adoration reflect upon the events of that supper, and we will hear the words of institution that highlight our sacrament of Holy Communion.

It’s interesting to me that the gospel passage selected in the Lectionary for tonight is from the gospel of John. As we noted in the introduction, John’s gospel has a somewhat different slant on the Last Supper, not only placing it “before the Passover”, and thus giving it a different time altogether from the other gospel accounts, but also providing a totally different focus. John relates to us the footwashing incident, but the closest he comes to a communion act is to use a piece of bread to identify the one who would betray him. How much different a perspective is that use of bread from our usual understanding of the bread, and the wine also, being used in remembrance of his saving acts of death and resurrection?

Where then do we get our understanding of the communion rituals of the Last Supper? From the other gospels, of course, but even more so from the Apostle Paul.

Many of you I think know, and some of you from participating, that I have been teaching a bible class this spring looking at the letters of Paul. It has been a fascinating study for me, and I think for the students as well, and has brought Paul’s role in the spreading of the gospel back into clearer focus for me at least.

Once again I have been reminded that we chase a rather backwards path in our search for understanding about our faith. We start with the gospels for that understanding, and while there may be some valid reasons for doing so, there are many good reasons for not doing so. I think the main reasons we start with the gospels are twofold: on the one hand the gospels appear at the beginning of the New Testament, and that gives us an impression that if they’re first they must be more important. On the other hand, the gospels are written in a historical style as though contemporary with the events involving Jesus and his disciples, and that makes them seem more ‘real’, and thus more accurate.

When we understand that Paul wrote his letters to actual congregations only some twenty years or so after the events of Jesus’ ministry, and death, and resurrection, while the earliest of the gospels were some twenty years after that, we are reminded that Paul’s perspective is actually much closer in time to the events, and so bear a certain ‘freshness’ compared to the gospels. By the time we come to John’s gospel almost an additional two decades have passed allowing much more reflection to colour the description of the events. By contrast, Paul’s understanding is much more raw, much less smoothed into understanding.

We see this same effect in the sequence of Paul’s writing, if not in his thoughts. Our reading from 1 Corinthians is from one of the earliest of his works that we have, and over the course of his letters we see a polishing and development of his understanding of what the death and resurrection of Jesus meant, until in Romans we have a more-or-less fully-worked out understanding, or Christology.

But here, in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, we have his early understanding. Not so much of an understanding as a simple creed. “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 bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ...” You can finish the sentence from memory, I’m sure. We will do so in a few minutes. But what is important to note is the simplicity of this defining act of faith. Paul has received it from the Lord, he relates. This is not an invention; neither is it some churchy thing developed in Jerusalem, or Antioch, or wherever. This is from the Lord, Paul tells them. He doesn’t relate how, or when he received this from the Lord; for him it is a simple matter of fact.

Neither has Paul kept it to himself – he has passed it on to the Corinthians, and presumably to every other church he has founded or visited, and the simple way he reminds the Corinthians about it certainly implies that they were very, very familiar with this most important definition of faith. It is also clear that the Corinthians had had enough time to also lose track of the importance of this simple yet all-powerful act of faith, for apparently some were so into the wine they were getting drunk, while others saw the gathering at table as a wondrous opportunity to pig out, even if others went hungry at the very same table.

Remember, says Paul, I gave it to you simply, and in a straightforward manner, and here it is again. “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you...”

What he handed on of course was, and continues to be, the words of institution of this sacrament, Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist (good gift). In a simple, yet faith-defining moment, Jesus offered to his gathered people, bread which he blessed and committed as the symbol of his body, broken for them, and for us. In the same way, Jesus presented the cup as the continuing definition of the new covenant established by the spilling of his blood.

Most importantly we need to focus on realizing that this was not a scene from a movie, it was not a script to be written in either a letter or a book, it was not great theatre. This was an act of faith, with Jesus passing the bread to his followers, and following it with the wine. This was an act of faith to be passed on to Paul, and to the early church, and to all who would participate. Bread, passed from Jesus to his disciples. The passing of the bread passed on in turn to Paul, who passed it on to the churches, who passed it on in their turn.

And now it is our turn. “Pass the bread”, we proclaim, that we may eat and drink and proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Pass the bread, and the wine, and pass on with it the terrible and numbing remembrance of Jesus’ suffering and death. Pass the bread, and the wine, and pass on with it the remembrance that his death was not meaningless, but instead provided meaning and life to and for all of us. Pass the bread, and the wine, and pass on with it the joyous understanding that a new covenant has been established by God with us, and that as inheritors of the new covenant we are sealed into a relationship with God in Christ that can never be destroyed, or withered, or removed in any way. Pass the bread, and the wine, and know that the responsibility is ours to pass not only the bread and the wine but the joyful knowledge of our salvation in Christ. Pass the bread, and the wine, and participate in an ongoing act of proclamation of faith that began with our Lord, through the disciples, through the Apostle Paul, through all the saints who have gone before us, and that continues through us even this night.

“On the night that he was betrayed...”, on this night where we reflect, and ponder, and give thanks for the death of Jesus, we reflect, and ponder and give thanks also for the gifts of reconciliation and life that he gave us through his death. It is this evening our turn, both to celebrate together, and to celebrate as part of an unbroken chain from that fateful night through to his coming again.

Pass the bread, please, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.