

### **“What’s So New?” – 1Cor 11:23-26**

I know we just read these words, but we cannot hear them too many times ...

- <1Cor11:23> 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 a loaf of bread,  
<24> and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”  
<25> In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”  
<26> For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

These few but powerful words of institution that we use in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper come directly from Paul’s first letter to the congregation at Corinth. In reviewing them for this evening’s service I was struck again at the succinctness yet power of this short passage.

This is the earliest Christian account of the institution of the Eucharist (“good gift”). Paul wrote this letter sometime in the early 50’s (that’s the early zero-50’s!), preceding the written Gospel accounts by at least fifteen to twenty years, and not much more than fifteen years after the supper on the night our Lord was betrayed. To help you put it into perspective, think of the earliest gospel being written right now – then Paul’s letter is like an article written in the mid 1980’s about something that happened in the late Sixties or very early Seventies.

Yet as early as this account is, it is not the earliest. Paul speaks of “receiving” and “handing on” this tradition, using technical language familiar to both Jewish and non-Jewish traditions to describe passing on a sacred tradition or teaching. Tradition implies something from the past, a cherished ceremony or rite previously established. Teaching looks forward, providing something for the future. Even with his opening words, Paul signals that he is standing between the past and the future, experiencing the Lord very much in his “present”.

I think it helps to remember that Paul wrote that letter to the faithful in Corinth to deal with some problems that had developed in their practice of the Lord’s Supper. Apparently their celebration of the sacred meal had turned in to a way to highlight the differences in social status within the church, with the rich being distinguished from and pampered in comparison to the poor. Instead of the sacred meal being an opportunity for them to come together and to reinforce their sense of community, it was becoming a force and occasion for divisions and separateness. And if that wasn’t bad enough, the sacred meal had also become for some or many an opportunity to overindulge, to ‘pig out’ and otherwise behave inappropriately. It had ceased to be the Lord’s Supper, it had lost its sacredness, and I think we can say that the one thing missing from the sacred Supper was the Lord. Those good people had apparently lost their roots in the sacred event of the past, and were heading to an uncertain future.

Paul, in his letter, re-anchors them in their present, reminding them of the established tradition and pointing to a reverent and holy future. The bread is celebrated as the “body that is for you”, reminding them of the sacrificial act of Christ performed not for himself, but for others, for them. It is important for us to note that while this expression is often mis-quoted as “body broken for you”, as Paul quotes Jesus here the emphasis is not merely on a past painful act but subtly signals that the body not only is but will continue to be “for you”. In a similar way the expression “is the new covenant in my blood” connects the sacrificial act upon the cross with a new future, sealed forever in a Holy covenant.

A new future. A new covenant. What's so new about either of both of these? In a word, nothing, and yet everything. That God loved the creation seems quite clear. That God even loved those most pesky of critters in creation – humans – is also pretty clear. Establishing a covenant with people wasn't really new, because the people of God understood pretty clearly that God had established covenant after covenant with them. First was the covenant through Noah, in which God declared the rainbow was a reminder for him. The covenant through Abraham, in which a sacrificial goat would be acceptable instead of the first born son and a promise was given of innumerable descendants. The covenant through the blood of the lamb on the doorposts of the Hebrew slaves in ancient Egypt. The covenant through Moses, with the promise of land and life. The covenant through David, with the promise of a succession of kings that would protect the people.

That God established a new covenant with the people of God wasn't so new. But the terms of the covenant were new and continue to be new. In all the previous covenants – with perhaps the exception of the covenant through Noah – the obligation was upon the people to keep the covenant. Their faithfulness was what determined whether the covenant was broken or not. Beginning with a simple rite of sacrifice with Abraham, the terms of the covenant – at least in the eyes of the priests – got more and more onerous. Ritual after ritual, observance after observance was piled upon the requirements of faith. Sadly it was no coincidence that the system of levies and fees that accompanied the rituals and observances piled higher and higher over the centuries.

And then God, in Christ, offered a new covenant. New, and different, in that the sacrifice was made by God – in echoes of the covenant with Abraham – in the form of God's son, Jesus Christ. Gone is the requirement to keep the observances to keep the covenant in force ... this covenant is established by and maintained by God.

So why do we participate in this Holy and sacred rite of communion? That's the part that's really new ... we participate because this unending covenant has been established, not to make it effective. Gone are the obligations of prior covenants – not thrown away, because our performing those rites and rituals, adhering to the commandments for example, these are all good things to do in God's eyes, and demonstrate our thankfulness to God for establishing the new covenant in Christ. But, and this is a huge but, we do them in response, not as a pre-condition or requirement. There is no need for us to cover ourselves in sackcloth and ashes; there is no need to follow fastidiously a million intricate and arcane rules and laws; there is neither need for nor benefit from beating ourselves passionately in public with our faith, showing to everyone else how pure, how deep, how solid our faith is. Under the new covenant there is only the need to believe that the covenant in Christ is for you. There is only one demand, to remember in the communion the sacrifice made on your behalf by Christ. There is only one rule, the new commandment to love one another, just as Christ has loved – and continues to love – you. That's what's so new!

Let us then with our eating the bread and drinking the cup of this new covenant also proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.