

'No Communion Sunday' !!

20th June '04am

1st Corinth 11:17-34

(1) 'No Communion Sunday' ! - What a daft title for a Service – It just doesn't make any sense at all when we think about how clearly the Bible tells us, in more places than one, that Jesus said, '***Do this in remembrance of me***' – a clear and straightforward command about Communion.

Luke's gospel tells us that, on the night before his death, Jesus took the bread and wine, and said, *This is my body given for youDo this in remembrance of me.....this cup is the new covenant in my blood which is poured out for you* (Luke 22).

And, then, there's Paul, the great teacher and preacher of the days after Jesus, who tells us the same thing, again, in the Communion chapter we read from 1st Corinthians – where it is clear that Communion was a special part of their worship from the very beginning. Acts 2:42 also tells us what the church was like in those early days. It says that *they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer*' - Communion was clearly at the core of their faith and worship.

And ever since those early days, Christians have taken Jesus' clear command to 'do this in remembrance of him', very seriously. Even though Christians in different churches have observed Communion with different emphases on the details, and with great contrasts in the form and frequency of Communion, it has always been a very important part of the faith of Christian people and the worship of their churches – and so it should be, for Jesus' command is very clear: '***Do this in remembrance of me***' – and so to suggest that we should have a 'No Communion Sunday' is a bit daft.

Communion is a precious gift that Christ has given to his people and his church – it is a powerful way of remembering the very essentials of our faith – Jesus and his body broken and his blood ***poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*** –

the only foundation for our faith, and the solid assurance of our hope.

And so when we ought to come to a Communion Service we should come with a very serious sense of all that it means, but also with a sense of great rejoicing and thanksgiving that because of Jesus and his death, we are able to have a faith that is for real, a life that is forgiven by God, and a hope that is for sure and for ever.

And everybody who is trusting in Jesus as Saviour and Lord, no matter how weak and poor we feel our trust to be, ought to ***do this in remembrance of him*** – it's not just for 'some' Christians, or 'better' Christians - and so it is good for us to be here today, and it is good for us to be here often, to *do this in remembrance of him*.

And, our desire should be that God will make this Communion Service a time of renewing our trust and hope in Christ – and our response of commitment to him.

However, even though it is right to say that 'No Communion Sunday' is a daft title for a service, it is nevertheless important for us to notice that in the reading from 1st Corinthians 11, Paul does talk about the need to think very carefully about what we are doing when we come to Communion – and he maybe even gets close to suggesting that there are some situations when it might be sensible for people to stop completely, and think very hard, before Communion. Indeed he comes pretty close to recommending a 'No Communion Sunday', at least until a few matters are sorted out. He has a very positive purpose in doing so – he wants these people at Corinth to get both Communion and, more importantly, faith itself, right – so with the same purpose, let's try to pick out those points.

1. Firstly he says, No Communion if the Bread and (2A) Wine do not express the essentials of our Faith.

The bread and the wine take us to the very heart of what Christian faith is about – to the fact that we only have faith and hope in God because of Jesus and his death – because he gave up his life in suffering and sacrifice, as the means by which our lives could be forgiven, made right, and made ready for heaven – for the verdict of all Scripture is that apart from this mercy of God in Christ, our lives are, and would continue to be, sinful and unacceptable to God,

This is my body, which is for you ... this cup is the new covenant in my blood ... poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Therefore, if this sacrificial death of Jesus for our forgiveness is not the ‘dead centre’ of our faith, then it may not be proper faith in Jesus at all.

Jesus, and the rest of the Bible, always speaks of Jesus’ death, not just as a terrible injustice and tragedy – even though it was all of that and more. However it always speaks of Jesus’ death as something which he accepted and endured for us, in our place, as the punishment which makes our forgiveness possible.

- *This is my body, which is **for you**; my blood which is poured out **for you**. (1 Cor.11:24-25) (2B)*
- *The Son of God who loved me and gave himself **for me**,* as it says in Galatians.
- *Christ died for sins, once for all, **the righteous for the unrighteous**, to bring you to God,* as 1st Pet.3:18 puts it

And so our faith **has** to have this sacrificial, substitutionary, sin-forgiving death of Jesus as its essential foundation. As the old hymn puts it: *My hope is built on nothing less, than Jesus’ blood and righteousness; I dare not trust my sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus name.*

Communion, with its powerful reminders of Bread and Wine, brings us right back to those basics – when we take the bread

and the wine we are saying to ourselves and to God – I accept and acknowledge that it is because your loved me and Christ died for me, that I have faith and hope. I confess, again, the sin of my life which made the awful death of Jesus necessary – that he is not only the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world – but that he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of my world!

Therefore we cannot and should not ever come to Communion with any kind of feeling that by trying our best to live decent lives and to avoid the worst excesses of sin, we have enough to have hope in God for now and for the future – if that were the case the bread and the wine, and all they represent, would not be necessary. Such a feeling, no matter how vague it is in our minds, is no basis for Communion, or indeed for faith itself. Notice the very serious words of warning that Paul issues in vs. 29 of 1st Corinth: *For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord, eats and drinks judgment on himself.*

The Bread and the Wine must express the essentials of our faith in Christ – the Saviour by whose death, alone, we are saved and have hope in God. This must be our faith as we come to Communion.

And such essentials are the basis for us, today, to have the very greatest hope and a faith that is full of joyful thanksgiving. As we come in this faith today, Jesus' promise in John's gospel should thrill our minds and our hearts and our souls: *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.* (John 6:54)

So, 'No Communion' if the Bread and Wine do not express the essentials of our Faith.

2. **Secondly Paul says, No Communion if obedience to the Communion Command is not the flavour of our whole life. (3A)**

Communion is clearly a command – Jesus did not make it as a suggestion, or a possible idea that some Christians might like to take up – He said, ***Do this*** – and so everybody who trusts in Jesus as Saviour and Lord should ‘do this’. It is a matter of Christian obedience – and when we obey with faithfulness, Communion is a source of Christian strength and renewal. However Communion must never be thought of in isolation from the rest of our lives, and it certainly should not ever be thought of as a way of ‘making up’ for the rest of our lives – as if somehow, the outward actions of Bread and the Wine would cover up everyday lives that show little sign of Christian faith or Christian discipleship. That is not how it is – ‘taking Communion’ must be a reflection of taking faith seriously. Of course our lives as people of Christian faith are still full of sinful thinking and behaviour that repeats itself over and over again – we would be foolish and dishonest to say otherwise – but Paul’s teaching in our passage seems to tell us that this is a very different thing from people who seem to live two distinct lives – on the one hand, taking Communion, but on the other hand, living the rest of life with very few obvious signs of Christian faith and obedience – a life where obeying the command about Communion does not seem to be reflected in the overall flavour of their real, everyday lives.

When it’s like that, says Paul, it’s hard to see how we can really take the bread and the wine which speak of Christ’s death for the sinfulness of our everyday lives.

This seems to be what Paul is speaking about in 1 Cor. 11 vs.27, *Whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.* (3B)

He seems to be thinking about the dangerous possibility of taking the bread and wine, with all that they mean, and yet living a daily life that is characterised by careless, wilful, regular, repeated, unrepenting, sinfulness.

If that should ever be the case, then the obedience of taking Communion is not connected, as it needs to be, to the obedience of everyday life – the obedience of Christian faith is not the flavour of our whole lives – and, says Paul, there is a problem!

This thought was also in Paul's mind in the previous chapter, where he talks about the OT people falling into this trap. 1 Corinth 10: 3-5 talks about them being part of the outward privileges of their faith - eating the spiritual food, and drinking the spiritual drink of their days - but at the same time the flavour of their real lives being one of idolatry and disobedience. They perished in the wilderness, says Paul - as he puts it: *These things happened to them as examples, and were written down as warnings for us* (ch.10:11) *You cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons.* (10:21)

And so against the background of that rather stark and extreme background, Paul says in the chapter we read: *A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.* (ch.11:28)

It's a good thing for us all to do on Communion Sunday - to take a look at ourselves – and the very good news of the Christian Gospel is that faith in Jesus, and the reminders and renewal of Communion, is for the weak, sinful people we see ourselves to be when we do examine ourselves – for otherwise, there wouldn't be much hope for any of us.

But, if when we examine ourselves, we should discover that the real flavour of our lives – the 'real me' - is what I am when I am somewhere other than church on Communion Sunday – that the life I really prefer is the life that I live elsewhere in other company and contexts; that the priorities that drive me and motivate me are not the bread and wine, and all that they represent – then I ought to think very seriously indeed – hopefully, in a way that makes me want to re-examine my life

and get it focussed on Jesus Christ and faith in his truth and love and hope.

And, for all of us, Communion is a good day to think about how we should be living out daily lives as reflections of our Communion faith – in the priorities of worship and Christian service and in the realities of daily living and its responsibilities.

As Jesus himself, put it to his disciples, *If you love me, you will obey what I command* (John 14:15) – and that means that obeying his Communion command needs to be matched by a desire to obey all his commands that relate to daily life – Christian obedience needs to be the flavour of our whole lives. And one of the important reasons for coming to Communion is that we can again receive God’s mercy and grace for all the ways in which we fail and fall short, and so that we can be renewed in our desire to be more consistently obedient.

So,

‘No Communion’ if the Bread and Wine do not express the essentials of our Faith;

No Communion if the obedience to the Communion Command is not the flavour of our whole life.

3. **Thirdly, and finally, No Communion if the Sharing in Communion is not a picture of everything else about our Church membership.** (4A)

Communion is something which we share in together, and which ought to produce a very strong bond of wider Christian commitment to each other. Communion is not, and cannot be, something individual or private. You don’t normally have Communion by yourself. Listen to what Paul says about it in 1 Corinth. Ch.10:16-17 (*Is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?*) Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. (4B)

Paul is using the word ‘body’, cleverly, in two ways – on the one hand he’s thinking about the body of Christ who was crucified, but he’s also thinking referring to the people of faith, the people of the church, as the body of Christ – As he says, those who share the bread and the wine, must see that they are tied together in a very strong, deep way – *‘we who are many are one body’*. His point is, that we ought to recognise that this faith in Jesus that we all share in a very special way at Communion is far more important than all the other things which make us different from each other; and that it imposes a commitment to each other that is more important than anything and everything that might separate us from each other. *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus* is how Paul emphasised it to the Galatians.

Now Paul did not mention this just because it sounds ‘nice’ – he saw it as a very practical matter, and he recognised that the church at Corinth had not understood it well – for in the chapter we read he told them off, very sharply, because there was no sense of this oneness in their Communion worship: *When you come together it is not the Lord’s Supper you eat* (ch.11:20) – and when you read further you find that the problem at Corinth was one of terrible social and class divisions, with a terrible lack of sharing and caring in practical ways.

Now it’s not quite like this for us – although it’s a good reminder that there must never be any such divisions. However, it is maybe a very important reminder to us that Communion does connect us to everybody else around us in church. Communion is about being ‘connected’ – *‘because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body’*, and, therefore we are to be caringly committed, to everybody else with whom we meet for worship and Communion.

- So at a very simple level this means that we ought to go out of our way to welcome the other people we see and meet at

church, especially if we don't yet know them well – especially if they join us in the same seat or nearby: *Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body.*

- It means that it shouldn't really matter whether they're newish people or have been here for years, whether they are younger or older, how they are dressed, what they do in life, where they live, or any other distinction we might care to think of - *Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body.*

- It means that we cannot simply think of church life in terms of what we like and want, but rather in terms of what is truly good for all, *Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body.*

- It means that if there is something that we can put right between ourselves and somebody else with whom we share Communion, we ought to do so, *Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body.*

- It means that we ought to feel a sense of care and commitment to one another in everyday life situations, so that if we can, we will support and help one another in practical ways, *Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body.*

Sharing in Communion ought to encourage and commit us to sharing in every other possible way with one another, and to overcoming everything that would be contrary to such Christian care and love.

We shouldn't really talk about 'taking my communion' – it is much better and far more Biblically accurate to speak about 'sharing in Communion' – and it leaves us no justifiable reason for being disinterested in, or contentedly separate from, everyone else with whom we share Communion.

So maybe our title for today, 'No Communion Sunday' actually does make us think about some important matters.

(5) Bread and Wine – the essentials of our Faith.

Communion Obedience – the flavour of our life.

Sharing – the picture of our Church.

But let's finish by putting these things more positively.

- Communion is a glorious privilege in which we come right back to the essentials of our faith – the body and blood of Jesus given for us, so that our faith is one of forgiveness and hope.

- Communion is a good time to think about our whole lives as people of faith in Jesus, and to renew our commitment and obedience.

- Communion is a strong reminder that our faith in Christ binds us together in Christian love that far transcends all secondary issues.

May the Lord make Communion to be these things for us today.

(1) ‘No Communion Sunday’ !

(2A) No Communion if the Bread and Wine do not express the essentials of our Faith.

(2B) *This is my body, which is **for you**; my blood which is poured out **for you**.* (1 Cor.11:24-25)

(3A) No Communion if obedience to the Communion Command is not the flavour of our whole life.

(3B) *1 Cor. 11 vs.27, **Whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.***

(4A) No Communion if the Sharing in Communion is not a picture of everything else about our Church membership.

(4B) *1 Cor.10:17 **Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.***

(5) Bread and Wine – the essentials of our Faith.

Communion Obedience – the flavour of our life.

Sharing – the picture of our Church.