

On the Lord's Supper

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 24th of October 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled On the Lord's Supper and is from 1 Corinthians chapter 11 verses 17 to 34.

Well you may like to have the passage from 1 Corinthians 11 open. I think it's page 933 in the church Bibles.

For 2,000 years the Lord's Supper has been a contentious meal. All sorts of different issues about the Lord's Supper have divided Christians.

And in a meal that is meant to at least in part express some Christian unity there has been 2,000 years of division. What name shall we call it?

[1 : 0 8] The Mass? The Eucharist? Holy Communion? The only name that the New Testament calls it is in this passage the Lord's Supper.

Should we use normal bread? Or a special wafer? Or wine or grape juice? Should everyone drink the wine or just the priest?

Should there be one cup? Or many? And who should preside at the service? Should it be only an ordained priest? Or as the Sydney Anglican Synod has just in the last week or two voted overwhelmingly to say that a layperson could be authorised to preside at the Lord's Supper.

I doubt that that law will be passed by the Archbishop of Sydney but the Synod voted that way. Who should participate? Only Anglicans here? Or Christians of other denominations?

What about those of Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons? And what should the minister wear? Does that matter?

[2 : 1 8] How often should Christians take the Lord's Supper? Is it in fact the high point of Christian worship? Well they're just a few of the questions that have floated around for 2,000 years and are still current I think between Christians and denominations about the meal of the Lord's Supper.

And for all the contention that there is, this is the only passage in the New Testament that addresses the practice of the Lord's Supper for Christian people.

Paul is writing about it because he's heard disturbing reports of what's happening at Corinth. In fact by the time that we've finished this letter, we'll wonder that he still bothers writing to them at all.

The various issues and contentions and problems that are there in the church in so many different ways. He says in verse 17, It's a little enigmatic comment at the end of the verse.

To some extent I believe it. I suspect what he's doing is perhaps allowing for the fact that the reports may be biased or exaggerated. I'm not sure.

[3 : 43] But certainly it seems that there are divisions and Paul acknowledges that and recognizes them. The divisions here are not theological. That is, he's not acknowledging the fact that within the church at Corinth there are some people who believe this sort of side of a theological equation and others the other.

Nor is it a personality difference like some of the other divisions that he's already commented on in earlier chapters. That is, some who prefer Apollos and some Paul and some Peter. The division here, as we'll see, seems to be a social one or a socioeconomic one.

The division between the haves and the have-nots, the rich and the poor. Those who are full and those who are hungry. We must remember that in the early church, the Lord's Supper was celebrated in the context of a meal where people would bring food.

Unlike in our celebration where we have, in a sense, a token of wine and bread to eat and drink. The early church would bring food together and they would have a meal.

And in the context of that meal, time would be taken to have bread and wine as a remembrance of Jesus' death and the Last Supper.

[5 : 03] So the Christians would be expected to bring food and maybe in some of the early churches they would share their food with each other. But what's happening at Corinth, it seems, is that the rich are coming, maybe on time or even early.

And eating sumptuously, bringing their food and then devouring it. And getting maybe even drunk, certainly full on food.

And they are ignoring the poor. The poor, many of whom no doubt would have been slaves, it seems come a bit later. Maybe because they're unable to get away, to join in the church.

And they have much less to eat. Indeed, some of them, it seems, go home hungry. That's the problem at the church at Corinth.

Paul says in verse 20 and 21, When you come together, it's not really to eat the Lord's Supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper. And one goes hungry and another becomes drunk.

[6 : 13] Look, these Corinthians are acting individualistically and selfishly. They're not sharing and they're not caring.

They're not acting in love for their fellow Christians. Their desire is to eat their fill. To have a decent meal. And so in practice, it's not really the Lord's Supper that they're celebrating.

Well, Paul's response is scathing. In verse 22, he exclaims, What? Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Well, of course they do.

At least the wealthy do. And they're the ones he's addressing in this verse. In effect, he's saying to them, Go home and eat. Don't bring your food here and eat it and gobble it up and ignore the poor who don't have enough food.

Eat at home. Satisfy your hunger there. His words are full of biting sarcasm, really. Do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?

[7 : 17] They are strong words of rebuke for what the wealthy Corinthians, Christians are doing. They are showing contempt for the church. Because they're not caring for and sharing with their weaker, poorer and hungry brethren.

Should I commend you? In this matter, I do not commend you. They are very strong words in verse 22. That's the problem that this passage addresses them.

The divide between the rich and the poor Corinthian Christians. Not the fact that there are some who are rich and some poor. But the fact that the rich are acting selfishly. And not caring for and sharing with those who are without.

It's a socio-economic division. But it's not a little problem. It's not a trifling problem. It's very serious. We see that because Paul's language is so strong and his rebuke so scathing.

The Corinthians have altogether, it seems, forgotten the purpose of the meal. No longer can they say that it's a celebration of the Lord's Supper. So Paul turns to his remedy.

[8 : 29] But firstly, he lays down the first principles. And then he applies them in the third section. So in verses 23 to 26, he returns to first principles about what the meal is all about.

And here he recites what are called the words of institution. In verses 23 to 26. It's one of the very few times that St. Paul at any length recites or rehearses the words that Jesus himself spoke.

And even though these words are recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke, we must remember that 1 Corinthians was probably, most probably written, before those Gospels were written.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that the Lord's Supper derives from what's called the Last Supper, the last meal that Jesus had with his disciples the night before Good Friday, before his crucifixion.

Paul sets this meal in that context, but does so in a particularly poignant way. I receive 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.

[9 : 47] Not on the night before he died, but on the night when he was betrayed. Could it be a hint from St. Paul here that the Corinthians' behavior is in effect another betrayal of Jesus?

Is that why he describes that night in that way? Well, during that Last Supper in that upper room before the crucifixion, Jesus did a number of things.

He took the bread, he gave thanks to God the Father for it, he broke it, he said a few words about it, and then he distributed it to his fellow or to his disciples, and they ate.

Paul records that in verse 24, that after taking the loaf of bread, Jesus gave thanks, broke it and said, this is my body that is for you.

Do this in remembrance of me. It's normal bread, although because it was a Passover meal, it may well have been unleavened bread, but certainly not sort of specially inscribed wafers.

[11 : 02] And indeed in the New Testament, the fact that it is one loaf is an important statement of the unity of the people who gather around the Lord's table. In the previous chapter in 1 Corinthians, Paul has said in verse 17, because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

It seems to me that it's quite important, at least symbolically, to have real bread from the same loaf, rather than perhaps individual bits or wafers, because of the unity of Christian people that's being expressed in this meal.

I must say, it does puzzle me sometimes when the official Anglican practice is so keen on having one cup, and yet the unity in the New Testament is actually more expressed through one loaf, which most Anglican churches, at least, don't even have.

Well, Jesus' words are, this is my body. And those have been contentious words, not only full of debate in 2,000 years and fairly hostile debate at that, but there have been some people who've been put to death because of their interpretation of these words.

Three Aramaic words, this is my body. Without a doubt, I'm sure, Jesus' meaning was, this represents or signifies my body.

[12 : 35] There's no way that he's holding a loaf of bread and saying, what is in my hands is literally my flesh and blood. This loaf of bread signifies or represents my body.

And not just the fact that he was living, but pointing, of course, to the events of the next day, his death on the cross. They are not words that give substance to the meaning of transubstantiation, which is the Roman Catholic doctrine.

That somehow, when these words are said, this is my body, over a bit of bread, all of a sudden, it's no longer bread, but it's really and literally and substantially the body of Jesus Christ.

That's not what Jesus' intention was. Nor should it be our thinking either. Jesus is drawing people's attention to his death.

This bread, which you are about to eat, represents or signifies my body. He'll do the same sort of thing with the cup. He's saying that when you eat of it or drink of the cup, you are participating in my death and its benefits for you.

[13 : 53] Notice what he says. This is my body, which is for you. Not just the fact that Jesus died is important, but why did he die?

He died for you, for us. That's the point of this meal, that we somehow will receive the benefits of Jesus' death through participating in this meal of the Lord's Supper.

Do this, he said. That is, gather together as Christian followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, take some bread, break it and eat it, and say some words about it in remembrance of Jesus' death.

Those words, do this in remembrance of me, are why regularly Christians for 2,000 years have repeated those actions and words and eaten bread and drunk wine.

The purpose, Jesus says, in verse 24, is in remembrance of me. Not just that somehow we might come to church on a Sunday and somebody might say to us, who died on the cross 2,000 years ago and we think, oh, I can't remember his name.

[15 : 09] Oh, well, this will remind you. Not at all. That's trivial. Do this in remembrance of me is much more than just what's in our mind and memory.

It's about our lives and our action. For throughout the Bible, if we remember God, then it will be demonstrated by obedient and loving lives.

And when God remembers us or his people in the Old Testament or New, it doesn't just mean that God suddenly remembers, oh, yeah, that's right, his name's Moses. It means that God acts for his people, faithful to his promises.

So when Jesus says, do this in remembrance of me, he's saying to us, let this stir you up to be obedient and loving followers of me.

You remember me through the way you live your life, through your actions. Jesus. In all of this, Paul, going back to these first principles, is saying, this meal is Jesus-centered.

[16 : 22] It's not about you eating what you want and eating your fill and having a good time. It is focused on Jesus Christ and especially his death.

life. The same sort of point is made with a cup in verse 25. In the same way, Jesus took the cup also after supper now, the meal having ended, and he said, this cup is the new covenant in my blood.

Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me. When we sign a contract, we attach our signature to it.

In the ancient world, if you were in a contractual or covenantal agreement with somebody, to express the solemnity of it and your obligation to it, blood would often be shed.

Not where you sign your signature in blood, but an animal sacrifice might be made, and at least in part of the tradition of the Old Testament, the parties of the agreement might actually pass between the divided carcass of a sacrificed animal or bird.

[17 : 37] That was to express your commitment to the obligations of the agreement. That's what happens in the book of Genesis, chapter 15, for example. Jesus is saying here that the new covenant, the new way by which God and humanity is brought into relationship, is signed or sealed through His blood.

And that as we participate in it by drinking the wine, we are accepting the relationship that that death enables, as well as accepting the obligations that that relationship entails.

You see, the way that we relate to God is through the death of Jesus, His blood. That's what brings us into a relationship with God the Father.

And so, by drinking the cup of the new covenant in His blood, we are accepting that covenantal arrangement, whereby we relate to God through the death of Jesus Christ.

To drink is to accept that relationship God's established for us through Jesus' death. And to drink is to accept the obligations of that relationship, obedient and loving lives following Jesus Christ.

[19 : 01] Again, Jesus says, do this. That is, the whole thing, the ceremony, if you like, of taking wine, saying some words, giving thanks, and sharing it. I'm not even quite convinced that they would have had one cup to pass around, but I may be wrong on that.

Again, it is to be done in remembrance of Jesus to stir these followers up to obedient lives. And Jesus says, you are to do it as often as you drink it.

That doesn't necessarily mean every time you gather together as church. It may, in fact, mean that every time you drink wine, you are to say these sorts of words.

In one of Tim Winton's earlier novels, *That Eye, the Sky*, he describes a family from memory in the outback of Western Australia, who are converted through an itinerant preacher.

They have no Bible teaching to instruct them, there's no church nearby, but they read their Bibles and they discover these sorts of words. Do this as often as you drink it.

[20 : 11] And so the boy and his mother, every time they have a formal meal or proper meal, they get out the wine, and they pour a little bit, and they break off some bread, and they have their own communion service at home, every time they have a formal or proper meal.

Maybe that's what Jesus is in fact encouraging us to do. Why is it then that Paul has repeated these words? It is because the Corinthians have forgotten what the meal is all about.

The meal is about, as he says in verse 26, proclaiming the Lord's death. That ought to have already been clear from the verses preceding it. The body and the blood are all about Jesus' death.

Drinking and eating is about accepting what his death has done for us and participating in its benefits. It's a proclamation of the gospel, in effect, that God, by his grace, has opened a way for us to relate to him through the death of Jesus Christ.

But by their actions, the Corinthians are not proclaiming the gospel. They're not proclaiming Jesus' death. Their divisions have denied his death and indeed destroyed its benefits.

[21 : 33] Well, in the paragraph that follows, verse 27 onwards, Paul now applies these principles directly to the problem of the Corinthians. He makes a statement firstly that is really a very sharp rebuke.

Whoever therefore eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord.

In effect, he's saying to the Corinthians, you are doing this in an unworthy manner. He hasn't said it quite so directly, but that's what he's really saying here.

You are eating this meal in an unworthy manner. That is, by your ignoring others, by your selfishness, by not sharing with those who are without, by eating your fill but leaving others to go hungry, by lacking in love for your fellow Christians.

The result is that you are answerable or liable for the body and blood of the Lord. That is, you are in effect sending Jesus to death again.

[22 : 51] And therefore, you are not the beneficiaries of his death. To say you are doing this in an unworthy manner is not just saying that you are sinners.

Of course they are and all of us are. But rather it's referring to their particular practice of lacking in love for fellow Christians. You see, to eat in a worthy manner is not to be free from sin, it's to be repentant and to be loving of our fellow Christians.

For the Corinthians, they ate in an unworthy manner. That is, they didn't consider the rest of the church and act in unity. charity. They thought the meal was a private affair.

But it's not. It's corporate. So Paul says in verse 28, examine yourselves and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

Examine yourselves in particular with respect to how you look out for and care for and love fellow Christians. Oh yes, it's appropriate that we acknowledge and examine our own sins and confess them as in fact we do in every service of the Lord's Supper here.

[24 : 14] But in particular the examination is how you look out for the body. How you care for other Christians. Whether you love them or not.

That's clear in verse 29. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. So examine yourselves therefore to see whether you discern the body.

That is whether you love not Jesus' body so much as the church which is the body of Christ. That's his thrust here. That's the examination we are to conduct.

Get your attitude to other Christians right. That's what it means to examine yourselves and discern the body. This meal is a corporate meal. It's not about individualistic selfishness.

That's one reason why in this service we have the greeting of peace. When that was introduced a few decades ago around the world there were plenty who didn't like its disruption to the reverence and solemnity of the service.

[25 : 17] But it's a very appropriate thing to do at least as a token of our unity and care for and love of each other. And if we are out of fellowship with another person in the church we ought not receive the body and blood without reconciling ourselves to our brother or sister Christian.

When I lived in England I remember hearing of a woman who was when the greeting of peace came into the service objected to it. I have sat next to that person for 18 years and not said a word to them and I'm not starting now.

And in the church to which I was attached in England there was one lady who when it came time for the greeting of peace would get out of her pew on the side and stand behind a pillar away from anybody until it was time to resume her seat.

That is atrocious behavior and it completely denies what the Lord's Supper is about. We come together in love of each other, in fellowship with each other to receive the bread and the wine.

There's no place for just treating the Lord's Supper as a private communion between me and God. Walking in and taking the bread and the wine and then walking out again without any fellowship with other Christians.

[26 : 50] That's not what it's about. If we act without love and fellowship of other Christians then we actually bring God's judgment upon ourselves, Paul says at the end of verse 29.

Indeed he actually says that that judgment has already begun in verse 30. For this reason many of you are weak and ill and some have died. That seems a very strong and severe statement.

Paul perhaps speaking prophetically here is saying the warnings are amongst you. You ought to be able to see how God is responding to what's going on in your celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Get your act together. Because when you eat without love of fellow Christians then God's judgment is on you. Maybe not quite damnation as the old book of common prayer says, but rather that God's disciplining judgment is upon you in order to shake you and make you aware of your faults and sins.

That's what he says in verse 32. But when we're judged by the Lord we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. If you take medicine prescribed by your doctor to make you well then sometimes there are certain conditions.

[28 : 11] You may have to take it on a full stomach or on an empty stomach before or after a meal in a certain dose and no more or no less. If you take your medicine the wrong way it may well cause you harm not good.

Paul is saying that about the Lord's Supper here. If you take or partake of the Lord's Supper without expressing love for your fellow Christians then instead of bringing you the benefits of Jesus' death it will bring you God's judgment instead.

Now Paul is not wanting to dissuade the Corinthians from taking the Lord's Supper and nor do I want to do that either. He's wanting them and us to take the meal united as Christians confessing our sins but yet recognizing that it's by God's grace that we're invited to this meal.

To be worthy is to be repentant and in love and charity with our fellow Christians intending to lead a new life following God's laws and commandments.

Paul finishes then with a final exhortation which summarizes what is wrong with the Corinthians. So then my brothers and sisters he says in verse 33 when you come together to eat wait for one another.

[29 : 36] Not just bide your time but wait in a positive sense. The meaning has got connotations of receive and accept. That is you are in unity together.

So be together in love and charity when you eat this meal. If you're hungry eat at home. The point of the meal is not to fill your belly. So when you come together it will not be for your condemnation.

He says about the other things I'll give instructions when I come. We don't know what they were. We don't know what he said. Our minds may well be intrigued but God's given us enough here for us anyway.

Well whilst we must remember that this passage addresses the particular problem of the lack of love between the Corinthian Christians there are some key general principles that we ought to bear in mind and I'll conclude with those four.

Firstly when we come to the Lord's table we look back. We look back to Jesus' death on the cross. That's the basis for the meal and not just that he died but why he died.

[30 : 46] For us for our salvation and for our forgiveness. The Lord's Supper participates in the events of his death and the benefits of them. Look back. But secondly when we come to the Lord's table look in.

Examine yourselves. Look in. See where your life is at. See what lack of love you've been expressing to other Christians. See what sins need to be confessed.

Take seriously the greeting of peace to bring about reconciliation with other Christians. Christians. It's not a magic potion to cure all ills. Look in.

In order to receive its benefits. But thirdly look around. This is not a private affair. Personal yes but not private.

One of the great problems I think of the Victorian Christianity of last century is that it promoted a pietistic privatized Christianity.

[31 : 48] Christianity is public not private though it is of course intensely personal. It's not individualistic. We belong together. We are united as one in Jesus' death.

So when we come to this meal it's not about me and God it's about us and God. If you ignore Christian fellowship then like the Corinthians you'll be guilty also of Jesus' death.

look back, look in, look around and finally look forward. Because even though this meal is about the death of Jesus in celebrating this meal we proclaim his death we're told in verse 26 until he comes again.

That is there is an element of looking forward to heaven. For even though we just get a snippet of bread and a sip of wine it is meant to be a foretaste of the great heavenly banquet where all God's people of every age will be gathered around the heavenly throne enjoying and celebrating the banquet of heaven the feast of the lamb.

So look forward. See in this meal a foretaste of heavenly unity and joy. Feast after feast thus comes and passes by yet passing points to that glad feast above giving sweet foretaste of the festal joy the lamb's great bridal feast of bliss and love.

[33 : 31] Amen.