



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for Maundy Thursday 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 The Rev'd William Klock

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In our Epistle today we hear Paul's description of what took place in the upper room, as the Passover meal came to a close. This little paragraph is at the core of our liturgy of the Lord's Supper. Paul tells how Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples with those familiar but often misunderstood words: "This is my body. It's for you. Do this as a memorial of me." And similarly with the cup saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me." The Christians in Corinth, hearing those words read out would remember the stories told by the disciples about that night. Just like we do, they'd mentally fill in the whole setting from Jesus washing their feet, to the Passover meal, to Jesus taking the Passover bread and one of the Passover cups and linking it with himself and what he was about to do. They'd be thinking about this new covenant. A mystery to the disciples, but the Corinthians knew the story of the cross, too. They knew that the body of Jesus, broken, and his blood poured out at the cross established something new. The Jewish Christians there new especially that when they shared in this meal that Paul described, it was like the Passover meal they'd known all their lives, but now in Jesus it meant something new and something better. Not just an exodus from Egypt, but an exodus from sin and death. Not just being led by God into a land of milk and honey, but being led by Jesus and the Spirit into God's new creation. As Passover reminded the Jews year after year after of the Lord's deliverance and how he'd established a covenant

with them, how he'd made them his people, and how he'd given them a hope for the future, so the Lord's Supper, every Sunday, reminded them how Jesus had delivered them from sin and death, how he'd marked them as his people in their baptism—not just in water this time, but by pouring his Spirit into them, and it pointed forward to God's promises of world to be conquered by his people. But not Canaan. Now it would be the whole world as this new people went out, proclaiming the gospel and living the life of the Spirit. This community shaped by the Lord's Supper, by this new Passover, was God's future right here in the present, God's new creation in the midst of the old, God's light in the middle of the darkness. Not perfectly, of course, but still God's future here and now.

We forget. That's why God gave Israel the Passover. That's why Jesus gave us his supper. So we don't forget what he's done. So we don't forget who we are. So we don't forget the task we've been given to do. And so we don't forget our future hope. But still we forget. And that's why Paul wrote this to the Corinthians. If we back up to the previous paragraph, to 11:17, he writes to them, **What I have to say now isn't a matter for praise.** That means he's about to rebuke them for something they've been doing wrong. He goes on: **When you meet together, you make things worse, not better.** Stop and think about that. I tend to think that when Christians meet together to worship, even if we don't get everything right, it's still a good thing. We're better off for it. On the whole God is pleased. And yet Paul's saying that when the Corinthian church gets together, what they're doing is so wrong, that on the whole, it's a bad thing, not a good thing.

So what are they doing? He writes, **To begin with, I hear that when you come together in the assembly there are divisions among you... So when you gather together into one meeting, it isn't the Lord's Supper that you eat. Everyone brings their**

own food to eat, and one person goes hungry while another gets drunk. Haven't you got houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise God's assembly, and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? No, in this matter I shall not!

That doesn't sound very much like the Lord's Supper, does it? Remember that in the very early church, the Lord's Supper was probably connected to a fellowship meal. It hadn't yet become the symbolic meal that it would, where we eat a little piece of bread and take a sip from the chalice. But in Corinth this had ceased to be a truly shared meal. It sounds like the rich were separating themselves from the poor. While they ate like gluttons and got drunk, the poor members of the church went hungry. The rich people probably thought they were doing well. After all, it was very gracious of them to let the poor—many of them slaves—have anything to do with their meals. If they were still pagans, knowing nothing of the grace of God, the poor wouldn't be here at all. Another case of the Corinthians getting everything horribly wrong, but patting themselves on the back for how gracious they were.

And Paul rebukes them. Back in Chapter 5 he wrote, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast!" But if this is how they're doing it, it may be a feast, but it's not *the* feast. It's not the Lord's Supper. Brothers and Sisters, if we don't come to the Lord's Table as one, we don't come at all. Again, Paul warns the Corinthians: If this is how you keep the feast, it's better if you don't—because this isn't the feast. In fact, if we jump down to verse 27, Paul writes: **It follows from this that anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. Everyone should test themselves. That's how you should eat the bread and drink the cup.** Now, we should

stop there and make sure we hear him. “Test yourself before you eat and drink. Test yourself how? He goes on: **You see, if you eat and drink without recognising the body, you eat and drink judgement on yourself.**

The flow of Paul’s logic here is so simple there really shouldn’t be any question about it. What’s the context of this rebuke? The Corinthians weren’t united when they came to the Lord’s Supper. They were letting worldly divisions and distinctions divide them up. To put it in terms of our Epistle this past Sunday from Philippians 2: They didn’t share this mind amongst themselves. They weren’t being humble as Jesus is humble. And so Paul reminds them that the Supper was instituted by Jesus to remind us of him and to remind us who and what we are in him. And now he warns them that if you eat and drink of the Supper without recognising the body, you eat and drink judgement on yourselves. What’s the body? That’s one of Paul’s ways of talking about the church—especially when he wants to stress our unity and interdependence.

So what he’s saying is that central to coming to the Lord’s Table is doing so as one people. The cross has overcome all our differences. There is no longer rich nor poor, slave nor free, Jew nor gentile, man nor woman. It doesn’t mean those markers are gone. It’s that in the pre-gospel world, those differences divided us all up, but the cross now makes us one. That’s part of how the church puts God’s future, his new creation on display here and now. It’s one of the ways we show the world the beauty of the gospel. Without this unity, the Lord’s Supper is just another meal—like any other worldly meal, where you invite the people who are like you or the people you want to score points with. Ironically, it’s become common for Christians to flip Paul’s warning on its head and to fence off the Table from other Christians who have different

views of how the Lord’s Supper works. To “recognise the body” is taken to have something to do with Jesus being present in some way with the bread and wine, and we’ll only let people come to the Table if they agree with us on how exactly that works. Which is just the sort of thing Paul is warning against. Jesus instituted the Supper to be a powerful symbol of our unity in him, but we keep it to ourselves and keep others away who disagree over what exactly that means.

I have to think that this is one reason the church in the West is in such decline. Our churches are too often divided between rich and poor, or divided along political lines or ethnic lines, and while there’s certainly a place for division over serious theological error, most of our division are over matters that should never be a source of division. Paul certainly thought that lack of unity was a problem. He goes on in verse 30: **That’s why several of you are weak and sick and some have died. But if we learned how to judge ourselves, we would not incur judgement. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are punished so that we won’t be condemned along with the world. So, my brothers [and sisters], when you come together to eat, treat one another as honoured guests by waiting for each other. If anyone is hungry, they should eat at home, so that you don’t come together and find yourselves facing judgement.**

When we think about the Lord’s Supper, we so easily get distracted and hung up on other things. The idea of “real presence” seems to dominate the discussion in Anglican circles these days. When Veronica and I were married, before the service began the priest warned the congregation that only those who believe that Jesus is “really present” in the bread and wine were allowed to come to the Table. I was livid—in part because there wasn’t really anything we could do about it at the time, but mostly because that’s not what Anglicans

believe. Or at least what we’re supposed to believe. It may all be an interesting theological discussion, but if we pay attention to Paul, that’s not how the Lord’s Supper works. It’s not about what might or might not happen to the bread and wine. Brothers and Sisters, it’s about eating and drinking in memory of what Jesus has done for us. It’s about participating in him and in his death and resurrection—this new exodus by which he has delivered us from sin and death and made us a new creation. And in light of that, it is vital that we come to the Table as one. Not rich or poor, not slave or free, not Jew or gentile, not man or woman, but as the people redeemed by Jesus, a people filled with God’s Spirit, a people who have been made a new temple where Jesus, the Spirit, and the good news of his death and resurrection—where his salvation—is mediated to a dying world.

Let’s pray: Almighty Father, whose dear Son, on the night before he suffered, instituted the Sacrament of his Body and Blood: Mercifully grant that we may receive it thankfully in remembrance of Jesus Christ our Lord, who in these holy mysteries gives us a pledge of eternal life; and who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.