

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 21 Year B 2024

As most of you know, I will shortly be heading off on some long service and study leave, and that part of this leave will include a three-week walking pilgrimage. News of this has been met variously with bemusement, confusion or horror. *Who does that sort of thing nowadays? Three weeks on your own, walking?! Won't you get sick of your own company? That's an awful long way...* And so on. Pilgrimage, of course, has had a long and venerable tradition in the Christian church. And, as noted in your pew bulletin today, in some small way I'm inviting you to be part of my own pilgrimage.

These past five weeks we have also been going on something of a pilgrimage. We have been travelling through John 6. Or at least, we have allowed John 6 – the Bread of Life Discourse – to allow for a journey through some of the important ideas about the Eucharist. We took a little rest stop last week as we celebrated Mary, Mother of God. But we come now to the last of these reflections, the last stop on our journey, if you like. Now in our tradition, we are not so used to having 'thematic sermons' or even 'sermon series'. So, it is no bad thing that we have taken time to explore something which is central - so important - to our life together. And hopefully as we have made this journey over these weeks you have been able to pick something up that you can carry as you continue your journey of faith. So, over these weeks we have considered the Eucharist as food for the journey, as the Body of Christ and as Thanksgiving. And now today, the Eucharist as the Banquet of Eternal Life.

Even as we come to the end of these reflections, it is good to remind ourselves of the earliest reflection we have to the church's celebration of the Eucharist. This, in fact, comes not from the gospels. It comes from the letters of Paul, namely his First Letter to the Corinthians. Paul writes this letter in the early to mid-50s of the first century, that is, just 20 years or so after the Last Supper itself. As such, it predates the earliest gospel texts by a couple of decades. So, from Paul we hear of the origin of the church's observance: *For I received for the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, 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. In the same way he took the cup, after supper, saying, 'this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'*¹ And this, the earliest witness we have to the institution of Eucharist.

But what follows this passage in 1 Corinthians we hear something of the church's early *discipline* about the Eucharist.² Paul gives a stern warning about eating and drinking the bread and the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner. And that those eat and drink without 'discerning' the body eat and drink judgement against themselves. In other words, our approach to the Eucharist is meant

¹ 1 Corinthians 11:23-25

² 1 Corinthians 11:27-29

to be taken seriously. And while hospitality and generosity are important, they are not absolute values.

And we also hear from Paul something of the first theological reflection on what the Lord's Supper is. Something of this theological insight is seen in the idea of eating and drinking in an unworthy manner. In other words, there is something to be discerned. That it is something special. That it is not ordinary food. But much more than that. Paul says as part of these passages, *When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again.*³

Now, in this Paul looks back. He anchors the action of the Eucharist – eating and drinking – to our Lord's command given at the Last Supper. But Paul goes beyond a mere looking back to this one event. And again, this serves as a correction to those who mistakenly think the Eucharist is best understood as a memorial. Yes, the event of the Last Supper is the historic 'anchor' of the Eucharist. But it does not exhaust its focus or its meaning. You would have heard the arguments that all *these* externals, all the ritual and ceremony, all that we incorporate here are distracting, are unnecessary and in fact unhelpful. What we really should be doing is a simple celebration 'like the Last Supper.' We need to strip all this back and sit around tables in our homes. And *that* would be an authentic witness to the Last Supper. But this is quite wrong. The Last Supper itself was never just a 'simple meal'. It occurred in the context of a *sacred meal*, the Passover. So, whatever meaning Christians seek to give to the Eucharist we do so with the background of Passover, and of ideas of sacrifice and deliverance.

Paul says, *When we eat this bread and drink this cup*, and so anchors what we do to Christ's command. But Paul goes beyond this. *We proclaim his death*. In other words, we do not simply remember Jesus having a meal – even a sacral meal - with his friends. The bread and the cup give witness to Calvary, to the mystery of Christ's saving sacrifice. The very body received in the Eucharist is the body he gave for us on the cross. The very blood is that which he poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. The Eucharist is not merely memorial or an image or symbol of Christ's sacrifice. It is Christ's sacrifice. Because, according to Christ's own word, *This is my Body, this is my Blood*.

Looking back to the Last Supper and its own context of the Passover, and to Christ's saving sacrifice on Calvary, we are directed to the last point Paul makes: *When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again*. The Eucharist is the most complete witness to Christ's saving work, a work proclaimed until Christ's return in glory. The reason why the Eucharist is proclaimed for all time, is precisely because the Cross is the one saving sacrifice for all time. In directing us forward, Paul is directing us to *the fulfilment* of Christ's redeeming work. The work of Christ's saving sacrifice is fulfilled at end of time when the life of communion with God is realised. In looking forward we naturally enough look to the end of the bible. And in

³ 1 Corinthians 11:26

Revelation this fulfilment itself expressed in terms of meal. The angel saying to John the Divine, *Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.*⁴ The life of communion with God here expressed as the marriage between Christ and his bride, the church. The marriage supper of the Lamb is the fruit of Christ's saving sacrifice, the very sacrifice, Paul says, the bread and the cup proclaims.

This is our hope. This is our destiny. And precisely for this reason the Eucharist *anticipates* this. The Eucharist looks forward to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, the banquet of eternal life. The Eucharist gives fullest expression to Christian hope, a hope made possible only by sharing in Christ's one sacrifice. That is why our worship is supposed to anticipate the very worship of heaven self. We anticipate the worship of heaven here on earth to remind us of our ultimate destiny. And so reminding us, to give us the focus and the strength to direct us toward that destiny.

Now, if you have questions about 'all this', about why we do what we do here; if your friends or family members have questions about 'all this', and wonder 'what is it all about?', what is 'all the fuss is about?', perhaps we could simply say, *because we are waiting for heaven*. The Christian life is meant to be marked – impressed – with eternity. This is why the Christian life looks different. And this is why Christian worship looks different. It is marked with the hope of heaven.

This is perhaps best expressed by the very orientation of our worship. Priest and people together facing East, the one people of God making their journey - their pilgrimage - to our eternal homeland. We face East toward the rising sun to welcome Christ, the Risen Son. In our worship we enact how the Bride looks forward to the coming Bridegroom. We make pilgrimage to receive Communion at this altar reminding us of the life of Communion that will be ours at the table of eternity.

Now, in a few moments we make another pilgrimage. We will journey together to the font as we come to baptise little Arthur Christopher Grubb. And as we come to the waters of baptism, we are reminded that today Arthur is set on that direction toward Christ. His parents bring him to baptism because they want his life to share in Christ's life. They want Arthur to know the fruits of Christ's sacrifice. They want their son to have a place at the banquet of eternity.

Today as we make our own Communion, let us all give sincere thanks to God for the sublime gift of the Eucharist, the gift opened for us by our own baptism. The gift that proclaims Christ's saving death. The gift that draws us closer to him, so that we might be one with him forever. Amen.

⁴ Revelation 19:9