

And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.”

(Luke 22:19)

I don't think I would be alone in saying that I had a very bad introduction to the service of Holy Communion

- there were Sunday evenings when my Mother announced in suitably solemn tones
- my parents were ‘staying on for Sacrament’ which was short for ‘Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper’
- though I am not sure that I knew that at the time – sacrament comes from a Latin word (*sacramentum*)
- which has come to mean, ‘an outward and visible sign, ordained by Christ,
- setting forth and pledging an inward and spiritual blessing’
- Christians observe these believing that they are instituted by Christ, who commanded we continue them
- And that these are symbols of God’s work in our lives and essential part of proclaiming the gospel
- The Protestant Churches recognise two sacraments Baptism and the Lord’s Supper (Matt. 28:19-20)
- There being no scriptural warrant for a further five recognised by the Roman Catholic Church

‘Sacrament’ at our church (and many other Methodist Churches) ran a bit like this

- At the end of the main service was a break, during which *Books of Offices* would be given out
- a hymn that no one seemed to know would be sung, during which there would be another collection
- received in special little purple bags with gold appliqué crosses and brass handles
- the men who took these were poor stewards which I thought it meant that they weren’t very good
- But apparently it meant that the collection would go to the poor
- I had seen what people put in and I was not surprised that they were still poor
- But in a sense it was alright because we didn’t have poor people at my church

After the dismal hymn, the minister, in a black gown like my school-masters (I never knew why he wore this)

- would be at the communion table, rather than in the pulpit, not facing the congregation but side-ways on
- what someone has unkindly called the ‘ping-pong position’ proceeded with a service in 16th C English
- ‘vouchsafe unto us’, ‘by the one oblation of himself once offered’ and so on
- which did not seem so shocking in the days when the Bible was in that language too
- then row by row about twelve adults would go forward and kneel at the rail
- to receive a small cube from a white sliced loaf, and a thimble full of unfermented wine
- as they were going forward the organist played the dreariest music imaginable
- being a child I was cut a drift in the twelfth row, with only the *Book of Offices* provided entertainment
- I used to read Order of Service for the Funeral of a Child, which was quite suitable
- for at that moment, transition from life to death would have been scarcely noticeable
- The big question then is how far in doing what we do we are being faithful
- to that witness that we find in the Bible, and to the gospel narratives (e.g. Luke 22:7-38)

From Luke 9: 31 onwards we see Jesus heading towards Jerusalem for the last time

- His journey to Jerusalem is linked with his being taken up to heaven (Luke 9: 51)
- Jesus has already used the Greek word *exodos* (NIV, "departure") to describe his approaching death
- As the full moon of Passover rose over Jerusalem, the last day of Jesus’ earthly ministry began
- Passover celebrated an earthly deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt
- the Last Supper was something with a present significance for them
- but a constant theme was also looking to the future
- as we read the passage from Luke, and in fairness parallel passages, we read about the Last Supper
- a pattern for what we do now in our *Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper*

I A PAST DIMENSION: REMEMBERING

The Passover celebrated a great earthly deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt

- after the death of Joseph the people fell into slavery, an unjust oppression by the Egyptians
- the people cried out to God, who raised up a great leader from among them, Moses
- God commanded Moses to institute the Passover sacrifice, God's chosen way to redeem his people
- The blood of the Passover on their doorposts was the sign that they were people of God's promise
- Their response needed to be one of faith and obedience but it was God, in his grace, who set them free
- The Passover meal was highly symbolic, bitter herbs would be eaten to symbolise their suffering in Egypt
- the lamb or kid would recall the Passover, the Unleavened bread their hasty departure from Egypt

Jesus tells his disciples that he has 'eagerly desired' to eat this Passover with them, it was immensely important

- Jesus links eating the Passover with his suffering, as if the two are somehow connected
- in this Last Supper, Jesus shows how by dying on the cross he, himself, will be the Passover
- not now for Israel's deliverance from Egypt, but a far greater deliverance of people from sin and death
- celebrating this fact the Apostle Paul wrote, 'for even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us' (1 Cor. 5:7)
- Coming therefore to the Lord's Supper is something that we do to strengthen our faith
- Because of drunkenness and gluttony at Corinth, Paul reminds us that we must come in a worth manner
- The person who comes to the table of the Lord must come in the right manner, not because we are worthy
- But reverently, humbly, a sinner seeking salvation by God's grace, a time for remembering Jesus
- The ornamental meal is a time when we are small on eating but big on remembering
- his body is given for us, his blood is shed for us, 'is' means no more than 'signifies' or 'conveys'
- in a wedding, the ring is clearly more than just metal because it 'signifies' or 'conveys' love

II A PRESENT DIMENSION: COMMUNING

The primary purpose of the Lord's Supper is remembering Jesus, 'do this in remembrance of me'

- the word remembrance is in our vocabulary - inextricably linked with death
- and in the Lord's Supper we remember Jesus and his death for us upon the cross
- Luke records that Jesus said the cup is the 'blood of the covenant' (the everyday word is 'promise')
- in the Old Testament (Ex. 24:8) blood was used ceremonially to confirm a covenant
- This promise of Jesus carried with it assurance of being redeemed, being forgiven, being set free
- through his blood shed on the cross and the inner work of the Holy Spirit
- linking this with Passover indicates an understanding of Jesus dying as our substitute
- By faith, in the Lord's Supper, I meet Jesus in a special way, in the company of believing friends
- if the celebration at Corinth was too much of a party, we have overcompensated the other way
- communion is not supposed to be a booze-up, but it was certainly never supposed to be a wake
- we don't do the blend of solemnity and joy very well – but it is, at least in theory, possible
- a modern communion hymn expresses it well

*I come with joy to meet my Lord,/Forgiven, loved, and free,
In awe and wonder to recall/His life laid down for me.*

A Christian certainly would not want to miss out on that; I cannot understand those who do

- the words of drawn from the *Book of Common Prayer*, capture well what I think is going on
- Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for you
- and feed on him in your heart by faith, with thanksgiving

III A FUTURE DIMENSION: ANTICIPATING

It is difficult to know whether the disciples knew that what we call the ‘Last Supper’

- was, in a very real sense, a farewell scene between Jesus and the disciples
- for although the resurrection narratives do speak of Jesus and the disciples eating together
- there is no description of them sharing a meal like this
- it is certainly a last Passover – and, in that sense, it is a turning point
- for Jesus not only speaks of remembering but also of anticipating a future celebration
- when the longed-for Kingdom of God finally comes

Jesus said that he would not eat of the Passover again until the fulfilment in the Kingdom of God

- He will not drink of the fruit of the vine, until the Kingdom of God comes
- If receiving the bread and wine are ways of remembering
- And if receiving the bread and wine are also ways of communing with Christ
- Allowing his presence to touch our hearts and lives
- They are also an anticipation of the coming of the Kingdom of God in all its fulness
- meeting around his table is a special way to affirm our trust in and relationship with Jesus
- The meal affirms an intimate oneness between Jesus and those who identify with his death
- And a commitment to watching and waiting for the coming kingdom
- In the age of the television, watching is considered something passive – but for Christians it is active
- Seeking the presence of God together and looking forward to the future coming of Jesus in glory
- For believers in the present age, share in the Lord’s Supper ‘until he comes’
- With a sense of solemn yet joyful anticipation

I began with something of a caricature of communion in the church where I grew up

- You probably sensed it was a caricature and yet, at the same time, recognised it
- While I concede that considerable responsibility for the service rests with ‘the person at the front’
- I think we should realise that the responsibility really rests with us all

The closest thing I have ever had to a big birthday party was when I was 50

- As my fiftieth birthday fell on a Sunday, my church stewards asked what I would like
- I asked for a tea-time celebration, with really nice sandwiches, jelly and ice cream and chocolate cake
- It was a really great occasion and loads of people turned up – but what about if not many had come?
- So, firstly, I want to say, that some responsibility for our services
- Rests with the people who are members but who do not come, or who pick and choose when they come
- They need to be encouraged to attend, and the responsibility for that rests with us all, not just the minister
- Secondly, it is always easy to complain about the hymns/songs/preacher/sermon
- And not take any responsibility for our own preparation and participation in the service
- In other words becoming the church equivalent of the ‘party-pooper’ who just has the wrong attitude
- Over the years so many people have come to communion looking bored to bit
- Desperate to fill any space that might otherwise be used for communing with Jesus
- Or agitated about the time, for fear an extra 10 minutes in the presence of God might change the world
- But perhaps an extra 10 minutes in the presence of God might change the world, starting with us
- As we meet with that special blend of solemnity and joy – remembering Jesus and his sacrifice
- Communing with Jesus now, in prayer and seeking his holy and life-giving presence
- Proclaiming his death and anticipating his coming again in glory when we share with him in heaven