

## **Article reprinted from *CrossWay* Issue Winter 1998 No. 71**

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

### **WHAT DO WE DO AT THE LORD'S SUPPER?**

Revd David Phillips

In the face of much confusion today surrounding the Lord's Supper it is important to consider what Scripture teaches about this most important act of Christian devotion.

#### **EXAMINE YOURSELVES**

Scripture contains stern warnings about the Lord's Supper. Paul says 'whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord' (1 Cor 11: 27). He adds that in so doing a person 'eats and drinks judgement to himself' and that 'for this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep'.

Behind these hard sayings lies the fact that the Corinthians were treating the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. Firstly, they were treating it as any other meal, simply to fill themselves, which was dishonouring the special significance given to the meal by Christ. Secondly, some were disregarding the needs of others, thinking only of themselves, and therefore denying the fellowship they had together in Christ. Further, in chapter 5, Paul instructed them not to eat with those guilty of certain sins.

Therefore, it is plain that as we come to the Lord's supper we should examine ourselves. Paul uses a dramatic and vivid expression - if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. We are not to look at the sins of others but our own, sitting in judgement, honestly weighing our own lives. If we will not do this, then we actually bring judgement on ourselves. Of course we should be ready and eager to repent, which is why formal exhortation and confession are essential in the service. We must use public confession wisely, not just mouthing the words but saying them from the heart, being truly sorry and determined to amend our lives.

#### **'DO THIS, IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME' (Luke 22: 19)**

Remembering is important for all people, whether it be Remembrance Day, Anniversaries or Birthdays. But Christians are called to remember something much more important, we are to remember Christ. He instituted the Lord's Supper for this special purpose.

For all the simplicity of the command, there is considerable disagreement about how it should be understood. Arguments rage about what precisely we are to do and how often. The danger is that we focus so much on the details that we forget the heart of it. We are given no clear guidance in Scripture as to what we should do, therefore we have certain freedom. But the reason for our doing is quite clear, it is an act of remembrance.

Although remembering often involves action (such as laying flowers at a grave side) it is at root about mind and emotions. We call to mind and reflect on the significance of something. If we programmed robots to lay wreaths at the Cenotaph and play the last post and for 2 minutes let their circuits be quiescent, that would be no act of remembrance. Robots cannot remember in any meaningful sense.

As we come to the Lord's Table, we should beware of being automata who hear the words, which we have heard so often, and go through the motions, but without so much as a thought. Remembering is active, not passive, we are to call to mind what Christ has done for us and be consumed by wonder and awe at the depth of his love. This should move us to thanksgiving and action.

## **GIVE THANKS**

'Above all things ye must give most humble and hearty thanks to God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, for the redemption of the world by the death and passion of our Saviour Christ...' (From the 3rd Exhortation in the Book of Common Prayer).

At the Last Supper, as at other meals, Jesus gave thanks before breaking the bread. Curiously, apart from this normal custom, the Bible does not link the Lord's Supper with thanksgiving. Yet it is natural that Christians, remembering the death and suffering of Christ on our behalf, should want to give thanks to God. Indeed thanksgiving is so important that by the second century some Christians were calling the Lord's Supper the 'Eucharist' meaning 'the thanksgiving'.

In the Book of Common Prayer the exhortation quoted above makes it plain that thanksgiving is vitally important and it is expressed several times later in the service. The post-communion prayers in particular pick up on the biblical teaching that our lives should be 'a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving' - part of our response to God's goodness in giving his Son Jesus.

Whichever service we use, the note should be the same, as we remember the death of Christ for us we should be stirred to thank God for his great goodness and love.

## **PROCLAIM HIS DEATH**

People often complain that the Book of Common Prayer is too narrowly focussed on the death of Christ. In newer services there are attempts to include themes such as creation and incarnation. Yet the Apostle Paul gives us a very clear statement of what should be the heart of our celebration of the Lord's Supper: '...whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Corinthians 11: 26). The words of Jesus in giving the bread and wine drive this home, we are not reminded simply of the body and blood of Christ but that they were broken and shed for us.

Moreover, we are not simply 'remembering' but rather 'proclaiming' the Lord's death. This word means to broadcast publicly and is why the sacrament can be called a visible word. It is not a proclamation to outsiders, there would not have been outsiders in the gatherings at Corinth. Rather the proclamation is to us, those who gather at the Lord's table to receive the bread and wine. To us is declared again in the bread and wine the death of Christ for us. We should remember and give thanks because without Christ's death we cannot find peace and forgiveness with God. It is a reminder that the sole basis of our hope for the future is that Christ died for us, taking upon himself the penalty for our sins.

Notice further that we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. This could mean that we will not need to do this after Christ's return but surely it also reminds us that Christ now sits at the right hand of glory and will return as judge. If we trust in him we have

nothing to fear from that judgement because he has died for us. We can look forward to the return of Christ with eager longing.

## **LOOKING FOR HEAVEN**

Jesus ate many times with his disciples and they recall many remarkable meals in the gospels. As they ate together on the eve of the crucifixion he spoke of an even greater meal to come. As he handed around the cup he said to them 'I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink new with you in My Father's kingdom' (Mtt 26: 29). Notice those words 'with you'.

In our age of TV dinners the meal means far less to us than it did in generations past. Eating together was important in Hebrew culture and still is today in parts of the world. The meal is an act of close fellowship. But the meals of Jesus were astonishing, for man and God at table sat down - 'God with us'. These meals speak to us of the wonderful grace and condescension of God.

Though we have the Holy Spirit, Christ is now in heaven and we are separated from Him but we look eagerly for His coming again. The disciples who ate the last supper with Jesus faced uncertain futures, and so may we. We may go through trials like Peter, or martyrdom like James, or through a long life of service like John, but if we are truly trusting in Christ then the glorious promise of Christ's words is ours too. Whenever we gather at the Lord's table we look forward to the heavenly banquet of which Jesus often spoke. We look to the time when we will be with Him in His Father's kingdom.