

**THE EUCHARIST:  
ITS MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE**

**By**

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## SECTION 1. MAUNDY THURSDAY

### The Institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper.

**1. Names, names, names.** Thank you all for coming this morning. As you know, our theme is the *Eucharist*, and we've got time to go into some depth and details. But as with any subject that people feel deeply about, and think deeply about, we certainly won't cover everything!

But before we go any further, I guess we should spell out the various names we use for this central act of Christian devotion.

**(A) *The Eucharist.*** This word is really just a Greek word written in English letters: *eucharistia* is Greek for thanksgiving. If you go on holiday to Greece, you say "*efcharisto*" for "thank-you". The New Testament tells us that Jesus *gave thanks* for the bread and wine at the Last Supper: the Greek word for *thanking* is *eucharisto*.

He gave thanks for the bread: Luke 22.19; 1 Corinthians 11.24; for the cup: Matthew 26.27; Mark 14.23. There's also another Greek word, (*eulogeo*), which is also used for the bread and the wine in the "institution narratives" (for the bread Matthew 26.26; Mark 14.22; and the cup 1 Corinthians 10.16). *Eulogeo* is more or less interchangeable with *eucharisto*, but by the second Century, Christians were using the term *eucharist* to describe the Holy Communion. It's the term we'll probably be using most often this morning.

During the Communion service we say the "Eucharistic prayer", in which we give thanks to God for his great purposes in salvation, for the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, and for the bread and wine. That's why we call it a *thanksgiving* prayer or a *Eucharistic* prayer. The word "Eucharist" had a bit of resurgence in recent decades, as it avoids some of the controversy associated with other names.

**(B) *The Mass.*** The most controversial name is "The Mass". It's a corruption of the final dismissal at the end of the Latin Eucharist: You're dismissed *missa est*. So it's a silly name for the Eucharist anyway, but for Protestants it's associated with a lot of Roman Catholic dogma surrounding the Eucharist, in particular the idea that Christ is actually sacrificed again by the priest at the altar. Anglicans are supposed to avoid the word "Mass" (we have a midnight *communion* service...) We don't have an "altar", either.

**(C) Communion / Holy Communion.** This puts the emphasis on how we “commune” with God and with one another in a special way at the Eucharist. It derives from the Latin *communicatio* for the sharing of the blood of Christ: *Calicem benedictionis cui benedicimus nonne communicatio sanguinis Christi est?* (1 Corinthians 10.16)

The idea of sharing, participating, communing is central to the Eucharist. There’s an associated term for those who receive the Eucharist: “*communicants*”.

**(D) The Lord’s Supper.** This is a phrase favoured by the Reformers, and is the main title for Communion in the 1662 Prayer Book (“...Lord Soper”). It consciously connects the service with what happened at the Last Supper. It may seem an odd name for a morning Eucharist!

**(E) The Breaking of Bread.** A reminder of that aspect of the Eucharist: there are a few examples of the phrase “breaking of bread” in the New Testament. Not all of them are definitely referring to the Eucharist, but several probably are!

**(F) The Divine Liturgy:** mainly used in the eastern Orthodox Churches. *Liturgy* originally meant serving/service...

**(G) The Sacrament.** A sacrament is “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace” (The Catechism); and the Prayer Book adds it is one which Christ told us to follow. So most Protestants think of Baptism and the Eucharist as the two Gospel sacraments. Because you get communion more often than you get baptised, some people refer to the Eucharist as “The Sacrament”.

And just to clarify another technical term we’ll be using this morning:

**“The Institution of the Eucharist”:** this means the moment and the way in which Jesus gave us this meal: how he started the whole thing off, how he *instituted* it. It’s not “*institution*” like a hospital or a university or marriage! Neither does it mean that the eucharist has become an established, *institutionalised* feature of church life: it *has*, of course, but that’s not what “*institution*” means here.

**The “Institution Narratives”** are the four passages in the New Testament which *narrate* how Jesus gave us the Eucharist (Matthew 26.26-29; Mark 14.22-25; Luke 22.15-20; 1 Corinthians 11.23-26). As we’ve noticed on the Lent Course, John’s Gospel doesn’t mention the Institution of the Eucharist: but he includes other important aspects of the Last Supper that Matthew, Mark and Luke left out.

## **2. The “Institution” of the Eucharist.**

I said a little prayer with my dad, gave him a hug and left the nursing home. I had a feeling I wouldn’t see him again, and the memory of that morning is lodged in my brain. He died a couple of days later. If you love someone and you know they’re soon going to die, you pay special attention to their last words. It’s important to take to heart the last wishes of someone you love, and to remember their dying commands.

Through Lent we’ve been taking to heart many of the things Jesus shared with his disciples at the Last Supper. There’s been lots to think about and lots we need to act upon. In John’s record of the Last Supper, we’re told about all sorts of things that you can’t find in the other three Gospels. John tells us the discourse took place at the end of the final meal Jesus shared

with his disciples. But oddly enough John *doesn't* tell us what was on the menu. From this, scholars have concluded that John *wasn't* a Frenchman.

But in John's day, everyone *knew* that Jesus instituted the Holy Communion at the Last Supper. John didn't even feel he had to mention it.

Thankfully for us, Matthew, Mark and Luke *do*.

And even before *them*, the Apostle Paul had written down the familiar facts. This was already well-known information throughout the early church, but 1 Corinthians contains the earliest records *we* have of the Holy Communion. There are two passages:

*"Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf."* (1 Corinthians 10.16-17) We'll come back to this passage later on.

The second passage comes in the midst of a rather longer section about how to receive Communion. Again we'll come back to that material later, but here's the earliest account we have of how Jesus gave us the Supper, the *Institution* of the Eucharist.

*"For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."* (1 Corinthians 11.23-26)

That's jam-packed with important things, and we'll come back to several of them during the course of the morning. For now let's notice a few key points from the Institution Narrative in 1 Corinthians 11:

\* ***Jesus took bread, and took the cup*** before he gave thanks. You may have noticed that before I say the Eucharistic prayer, I pick up the bread and the cup. The "taking" was part of what Jesus did, and we try to emulate that. We don't just ignore the physical presence of the bread and the wine, as if they were secondary to what we're doing. We consciously pick them up, and take hold of them.

What I'm *not* doing, though, is "offering" the bread to God, as if we were doing something for him, or giving something to him. Quite the opposite: in the Communion service, he's the one who made the offering, the sacrifice: we're the beneficiaries of his provision for us. The bread at a Passover meal would have been unleavened bread, probably a flat-bread baked in an oven or a pan. The Eastern Orthodox Churches think the bread would have been leavened, and they don't allow *unleavened* bread to be used! They think that would be crackers.

The New Testament mentions *the cup*, but never specifies what was *in* it. You can safely assume that it was wine. This may not have suited all his disciples, some of whom had been trained by John the Baptist, who was tee-total. Jesus could have magicked up some Ribena or Coca Cola, but in fact he didn't make any specific provision for them. *"You're all in this together, lads."*

\* **Jesus gave thanks:** The *Eucharistic* prayer is fundamentally a series of things for which we thank God: all associated, of course with his saving purposes and the death of Jesus. The Book of Common Prayer has a *Prayer of Consecration*, which isn't quite the same thing as a Eucharistic prayer. (In the Prayer Book, the *thanksgiving* part comes a page or two earlier.)

\* **Jesus broke the bread.** The bread was broken and shared. Jesus began several meals by breaking bread: can you remember any? [...] But *breaking* the bread was a key part how Jesus taught us to do the Eucharist: cutting the bread with a knife isn't exactly what he told us to do. It's not *hugely* important, but it's simpler and safer. So why not do it the way Jesus did it? Breaking bread and sharing the broken pieces is a specific aspect of the Eucharist. So at Holy Trinity we prefer to use *bread* rather than individual wafers. Wafers aren't bread, they aren't broken and they aren't shared. "*Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.*" (1 Corinthians 10.17) If there isn't one loaf ...

\* **Jesus gave them the bread and the wine.** 1 Corinthians 11 doesn't say so in so many words: but it's obvious that he shared the bread and wine. It certainly says that we Christians *eat the bread and drink "the cup"*, and anyway the Gospels say that Jesus shared it out with the Apostles. ("*Take and eat; this is my body.*" [...] "*Drink from it, all of you.*" Matthew 26.26-27) That's why we offer the cup to all the communicants: "*...all of you*".

(Technical expression: receiving *communion "in two kinds"* means getting *both* the bread *and* the wine). The Communion is a *sharing*, a participation: we all eat from the same loaf, we all drink from the same cup. There's a vulnerability about this, of course: but this sharing says we trust one another, we love one another, and we belong together.

\* **We do this in remembrance and expectation.** More on that later.

\* **Jesus used realistic language** about his body and blood. As ever, we need to remember that Jesus was always using figurative language. When he says "I am the vine", of course, he *isn't* a vine. When he holds up a cup of wine and says "*This is my blood,*" (Matthew 26.27): of course it *wasn't*, not literally. His literal body and blood were definitely there at the Last Supper: but it wasn't the bread and the wine. It was his hands which were holding the bread and wine, his head which were looking at his disciples, and saying these words; his heart which was pumping his actual blood around his human frame. When Jesus holds out the bread and says it was his body, you need to understand that he's speaking metaphorically, symbolically. Again, we'll come back to that later.

### **3. Maundy Thursday and the Passover meal.**

Tomorrow we begin to commemorate Holy Week, when we reflect on those last tumultuous days of Jesus' earthly life. Some of the days have rather curious names: Palm Sunday B why Palms? Come tomorrow and find out. What's so *good* about Good Friday? Come along as we ponder on the Cross. And what's so Maundy about Maundy Thursday?

Ah well: the last point I want to make in this section surrounds the phrase "*on the night he was betrayed*".

**Thursday. Jesus instituted the Eucharist on the night he was betrayed.** This was the night which led into the trial and crucifixion. Luke and John tell us the crucifixion took place on the Day of Preparation of the Sabbath (Luke 23.54; John 19.31): or as *we'd* say, *Friday*. So

the Last Supper was on a Thursday evening. And why do we call that day “Maundy Thursday”?

[Because that night Jesus gave the Apostles a “*novus mandatum*”, a new commandment (“*Love one another...*” John 13.34).] *Maundy* is a corruption of *Mandatum*.

**Passover.** We know from the Gospels that that particular Thursday and Friday coincided with the Jewish Passover festival. David’s going to explain more about that in a little while. But this means the Last Supper was very likely a Passover meal. Mark tells us: “*On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus’ disciples asked him, >Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?>*” (Mark 14.12)

Quite how closely the Last Supper followed the Jewish Passover ritual is open to debate: partly because most of our information about the Passover meal comes from centuries before or centuries after the time of Jesus. But there are several elements that fit what we assume first-century Passover meals were like. Luke mentions Jesus taking the cup *twice* (Luke 22.17,20), and that fits in with writings we have from later rabbis. They tell us that there were actually *four* cups of *wine* served at the Passover meal. When Paul writes about “*the cup of blessing*” in 1 Corinthians 10, he’s presumably referring to the *third* cup of wine used in the Passover meal. That’s what the rabbis called the third cup. More on that later.

But other questions remain: did Jesus use unleavened bread, or not? And the biggest question is whether or not Jesus and his disciples sacrificed a lamb before the meal! If they did, why? [...]

The key elements which the New Testament stresses are the use of bread and wine. The rabbis tell us that bread and wine featured in ancient Passover meals. David’s going to spell out other parallels in the next section. So one way or another, the Last Supper was a Passover meal, but one that Jesus gave a radically new meaning. I’ll hand over the David here.

## **SECTION 2. THE HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PASSOVER**

### **The Original Passover**

So, we’ve seen that Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper, which was a Passover meal. To understand the full significance of that we need to go back at the origins and development of the Passover itself.

When God originally made his covenant with Abraham, he warned Abraham that his descendants would be enslaved for four hundred years (Genesis 15:13). This came to pass as the descendants of Abraham, the Israelite nation to be, were enslaved in Egypt. Just as we are unable to rescue ourselves from slavery to sin, so the Israelites were unable to rescue themselves from slavery in Egypt. But, God had a redemption plan for the Israelite nation, to deliver them from slavery in Egypt and bring them into the land he had promised to Abraham. God accomplished this entirely through his almighty power. He sent a series of plagues upon Egypt culminating in a plague that was to result in the death of all the firstborn

of Egypt – except for the firstborn of the Israelites who were to be saved through the blood of a lamb, which would cause this plague to ‘pass-over’ their households.

The Passover was one of the most significant events in the history of the Jewish people, since it marked their deliverance from slavery in Egypt and the beginning of their journey to the Promised Land – the Exodus. The background was that God was to bring a tenth and last plague on the Egyptians to cause them to release the Israelites from their captivity, a plague of the death of all the firstborn of Egypt:

“So Moses said [to Pharaoh], "This is what the LORD says: ‘About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the slave girl, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well. There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt—worse than there has ever been or ever will be again. But among the Israelites not a dog will bark at any man or animal.’ Then you will know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel.” (Exodus 11:4-7 NIV)

God had made a distinction between the Egyptians and the Israelites, because the Israelites were to be protected from the effects of the plague which would “pass over” them. They were to be protected through the blood of a sacrificial lamb, the flesh of which was to be eaten as a part of the ritual that God instituted:

“Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the door-frame. Not one of you shall go out of the door of his house until morning. When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the door-frame and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down.” (Exodus 12:21-23 NIV)

Indeed the Passover was so important that it was to mark the beginning of a new year for Israel:

““This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year.” (Exodus 12:2 NIV)

From that day to this the Jewish *religious* New Year begins with *Pesach* – the Hebrew word for ‘Passover’. Although nowadays the beginning of the Jewish calendar year is reckoned to be at *Rosh Hashanah* or the ‘head of the year’. This is the day on which Jews today celebrate the New Year which falls on the first day of the month of *Tishrei* which usually occurs during our month of September or at the beginning of October.

Returning to the Passover, God gave the Israelites an instruction that this feast should be commemorated throughout the generations to come and families should explain to their children what the whole ceremony meant:

““Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.’” Then the people bowed down and worshipped.” (Exodus 12:24-27 NIV)

The celebration was to last for seven days and was known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread:

“For seven days you are to eat bread made without yeast. On the first day remove the yeast from your houses, for whoever eats anything with yeast in it from the first day until the seventh must be cut off from Israel. On the first day hold a sacred assembly, and another one on the seventh day. Do no work at all on these days, except to prepare food for everyone to eat—that is all you may do. "Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread, because it was on this very day that I brought your divisions out of Egypt. Celebrate this day as a lasting ordinance for the generations to come.” (Exodus 12:15-17 NIV)

During this Feast the Israelites were to remind themselves that their deliverance from bondage had been planned and carried out by God – purchased by blood and implemented with divine power. Being a redeemed people, the Israelites belonged to God in a special way and were therefore to be consecrated to his service to be an illustration to the world of what a redeemed people should be like.

Thus the Exodus and all the events associated with it transformed the Israelites into a people, a nation – the people of God. So, this great deliverance remained in the minds of the Jewish people, and throughout the OT there are references to it. This was important because it guaranteed the transmission of the imagery and its significance through into NT times.

So, God passed through Egypt in judgement, but he passed over the Israelites. Note, only the shedding of blood, the blood of a lamb, could be effective in saving the firstborn of the Israelites. These ideas, this imagery, are important for understanding the nature of Christ’s work for us. As we’ve already seen the institution of the Eucharist was identified with the Passover, because it was instituted by Christ at a Passover Meal – the Last Supper. Just as the Jews were delivered from slavery in Egypt through the Passover, so Christ’s sacrifice on the cross – the shedding of his blood, foreshadowed at the Last Supper, delivers men from the captivity in which their sins enslaved them. It transforms us from being slaves into being the people of God and it saves us from the destruction that God visits on sin. This is what Christ was saying when he passed the bread and the cup at the Last Supper.

Just as the Passover is a reminder for the Israelites of God’s great deliverance, which they experienced, so for us Eucharist is an important reminder to us of all that Christ has done for us. Remembrance is a central feature of both the Jewish Passover and the Christian Eucharist. We’ve seen that the commemorative act of the Passover guaranteed that the Israelites would remember God’s deliverance of them from slavery in Egypt. In the same way the commemorative act of the Eucharist guarantees our remembrance of Christ’s great deliverance of us all from slavery to sin.

### **The Last Supper as a Passover Meal**

Now I’ve been saying that the Last Supper was a Passover Meal – and I believe that’s correct. But, there is a difficulty here between John’s gospel and the synoptic gospels. The synoptic gospels clearly present the Last Supper as a Passover meal, but John’s gospel says that it took place a day earlier on the eve of the Passover. In fact there are many indications within the gospels that fit with the Last Supper having been a Passover meal.

Firstly, the disciples did not return to Bethany that night, as they had on previous days, but remained within the walled city to eat. That is consistent with this being a Passover meal – which had to be eaten within Jerusalem proper.

Secondly, we are told that Jesus and the disciples ate this meal reclining. Normally people sat for meals and it was only for festive meals such as the Passover that they would recline facing a low table with their feet radiating outwards like spokes.

Thirdly, people usually only ate two meals per day with the last of these being in the later afternoon and not the evening, but we are told that the Last Supper was eaten in the evening (Mark 14:17). This corresponds with the Passover meal which had to be eaten at night (Exodus 12:8).

Fourthly, the Last Supper ended with a hymn (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26) and we know that it was customary to end the Passover by singing the last part of the Hallel Psalms (Psalms 113-118).

Finally, the night of the Passover had to be spent within Jerusalem. At the time of the Passover, the population of Jerusalem increased from its normal 25,000 to more than 250,000. Not all of these pilgrims could be accommodated within the walled city. Accordingly, Jerusalem was redefined to include all the hills facing the city. The garden of Gethsemane lay on the western slopes of the Mount of Olives facing Jerusalem. We know that on the night of the Last Supper, Jesus and the disciples did not return to Bethany, but stayed at Gethsemane, which was part of 'greater Jerusalem'.

This all fits well with the Last Supper having been a Passover meal.

If that is indeed so, the only way to make sense of the chronology and reconcile the synoptic Gospel accounts with John's gospel is to assume either that different Jewish sects followed a different Passover chronology or that the regulations permitted Passover to be spread over two separate days because of the logistical difficulties (slaughtering lambs and preparing) involved. This latter theory seems unlikely, as it would involve a breach of the regulations governing the festival. Therefore, we need to look at the credibility of the theory of a chronological difference.

Billerbeck has theorised that there was a one-day difference in reckoning the date of the Passover between the Sadducees and the Pharisees. There is some evidence of this as regards a difference in reckoning the 50 days forward to Pentecost from the Sunday in Passover week or Nisan 16. Leviticus 23:15 states "From the day after the Sabbath ....." Billerbeck argues that the Pharisees would have interpreted the word 'Sabbath' to mean 'festival' (i.e. Passover) and would count from the day following the Passover regardless of what day of the week it was. On the other hand the Sadducees interpreted 'Sabbath' literally and would count from the Sunday after the Passover. Thus, according to this theory, in the year of Jesus' crucifixion the Pharisees reckoned that Nissan 14 commenced on Thursday evening (and Jesus celebrated the Passover according to this reckoning) whilst the Sadducees reckoned that Nissan 14 began on Friday evening.

This theory could possibly be correct, but I believe there is a better solution to the difficulty. We must take into account that there is more than one way to define the term 'day'. Firstly, there is the reckoning from sunset to sunset. The Feast of Unleavened Bread runs from evening to evening (Exodus 12:18) as does the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:32) and the weekly Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:19). Secondly, there is the reckoning from sunrise to sunrise.

There is some evidence of this usage in references to the day preceding the night (e.g. Numbers 14:14; 2 Samuel 21:10; 1 Kings 8:59; Luke 18:7 etc) and also some passages using the expressions ‘the same day’ or ‘the next day’ indicate that the night belongs to the preceding day and is not the start of a new day (e.g. 1 Samuel 19:11; Acts 4:3; Acts 20:7-11; Acts 23:32 etc). In conclusion, it appears that both reckonings were used even within the same book. Some scholars believe that the Galileans and the Pharisees used the sunrise to sunrise reckoning whilst the Judeans and the Sadducees used the sunset to sunset reckoning. Thus Jesus and the disciples (using the sunrise to sunrise reckoning) slaughtered the Paschal lamb later afternoon Thursday Nissan 14 and ate it that evening. The Judean Jews (using the sunset to sunset reckoning) would slay the lamb on Friday afternoon at the end of Nissan 14 and eat it that night (which had become Nissan 15). Thus, Jesus had eaten the Passover meal when his enemies who had not yet had the Passover arrested him.

This view satisfies both the Synoptics and John. It is also substantiated by the Mishnah which states that it was the custom of the Galileans to do no work on the day of the Passover whilst the Judeans worked until midday. The Galilean’s day began at sunrise and they did no work on the Passover by their reckoning and neither did the Judeans for whom the Passover began at sunset.

So, having harmonised the gospel accounts, I think we can say confidently, on the basis of all the evidence we’ve already looked at, that the Last Supper was indeed a Passover meal.

### **The Passover in Jesus’ Time**

By Jesus’ time, the Passover celebration had changed and evolved somewhat. We can’t be sure exactly how it was in Jesus’ time, none of the Gospel writers describe the Last Supper – a Passover Meal – in detail and the best non-scriptural records we have are a bit confusing and date from somewhat later – but we believe it followed something like the following format.

Although the original Passover was celebrated by families, by Jesus’ time the requirements had changed. The meal had to be eaten in the company of at least ten persons (not necessarily family members, but with a majority of men (rather than women and minors) known as an *haburah*. An *haburah* replaced the household or family (or a small group of neighbouring families – Exodus 12:4) as the sociological unit of the Passover festival, although it is reasonable to suppose that an *haburah* would generally be comprised of one or more families, since families would have travelled together to Jerusalem for the festival. Josephus wrote that not fewer than ten persons, but as many as twenty, gathered round at each sacrifice, although Jewish writings state any number of people could be included in an *haburah* even as many as a hundred (*m. Pesah* 8:7). Only adults could be full members of an *haburah*, but minors could be enrolled by their fathers which enabled them to participate. Jesus and the disciples together would have together formed an *haburah* and Jesus would, of course, have been the head of the *haburah*.

The Passover meal had to be eaten within Jerusalem, preferably within a house, and so there would have been an enormous shortage of suitable accommodation at the time of the Passover festival. Indeed the shortage was such that the requirement to eat the meal within a house was re-interpreted to mean that it must be eaten within an *haburah* and many ate the Passover in courtyards or on a roof (*m. Pesah* 7:13; *t. Pesah* 6:11). Thus, I think we can say

that Jesus had almost certainly pre-booked the upper room in which Jesus and the disciples ate the Last Supper, it's very unlikely that a choice upper room would have been available at short notice if he hadn't done so.

The Last Supper would, as far as scripture records, have probably been the only Passover at which Jesus presided, since at previous Passovers during his ministry he would most likely have been a guest rather than the head of an *haburah*. The Passover meal was eaten reclining around a low table. In Jesus' day this would have been a U shaped table with the most honoured guests at one of the extremities. The positioning of the guests was probably as shown on the slide. Prior to the meal the guests would assemble and wash one hand.

The meal was framed within a liturgy whose core was the Passover prayer of the family or *haburah* head and the recitation of the Hallel psalms (Psalms 113–118). When those participating had taken their places, the head of the house began the celebration by pronouncing a blessing, first of the festival and then of the wine (m. *Pesah* 10:2). Then the paschal company drank the first cup of wine, the cup of Kiddush. Given the central importance of cups of wine to the Passover meal, I think we can certainly say that the cup used at the Last Supper (a Passover meal) – see Matthew 26:27 – would have contained wine. After the cup of Kiddush the head of the *haburah* alone would wash his hands (m. *Pesah* 10:4). We can surmise that it was at this point in the ceremony that the famous foot washing ceremony recorded in John's gospel took place. We can see from the likely positioning of the guests that it would have been natural for Jesus to commence the washing with Peter.

In all, four cups of red wine mixed with water were prescribed for the Passover meal (m. *Pesah* 10:1), each a quarter log, or about an eighth of a litre. In fact, t. *Pesah* 10:4 states that it was the religious duty of a man to bring joy to his family and dependants by providing enough wine for them to be mildly intoxicated. After the first cup of wine and the hand washing by the head of the *haburah* the food was brought in, consisting of unleavened bread, bitter herbs, greens, stewed fruit and roast lamb (m. *Pesah* 10:3). The son of the family, or a minor or young adult within the *haburah* then asked why this night, with its special customs and food, was distinguished from all other nights (m. *Pesah* 10:4). The family head responded by recalling the biblical account of the redemption from Egypt in the Passover *haggadah*. This occurred after the meal had been served but before it was eaten. So the head of the household would say: "This is the bread of affliction which our fathers ate in the land of Egypt. Let everyone who hungers come and eat; let everyone who is needy come and eat the Passover meal." Each of the other elements was also introduced in the context of Israel's experience in bondage. The bitter herbs served to recall the bitterness of slavery, the stewed fruit, which possessed the consistency and colour of clay, evoked the making of bricks as slaves, while the paschal lamb provided a reminder of God's gracious "passing over" of Israel in the plague of death that came to Egypt. At this point more water would be brought and both hands would be washed by all celebrants.

The blessing of God for the gift of bread immediately preceded the meal itself. The head of the family sat up from his reclining position, took a cake of unleavened bread, and recited the blessing over it in the name of all: "Praised be Thou, O Lord, Sovereign of the world, who causes bread to come forth from the earth" (m. *Berachoth* 6:1). Those present identified themselves with the blessing by saying "Amen", although some sources imply that each participant repeated the blessing for themselves. The family-head then broke for each person present a piece of bread and gave it to him, the bread passing from hand to hand until it

reached all the guests who were at the table, who ate it with the bitter herbs and the stewed fruit. About half of the bread was put aside for the end of the meal, and it was probably this bread which had been put aside that Christ distributed to the disciples to represent his body given for them.

The distribution of the bread normally took place in silence, for the explanation of the elements belonged to the Passover devotions, not to the grace before the meal. This instruction led naturally into the praise of God for the salvation he had provided and the anticipation of future redemption: “So may the Lord, our God, and the God of our fathers, cause us to enjoy the feasts that come in peace, glad of heart at the upbuilding of your city and rejoicing in your service ... and we shall thank you with a new song for our redemption” (m. *Pesah* 10:4–6). The new song was the first part of the ancient Hallel (Psalms 113–115), after which a second cup of wine, the Cup of Explanation, was drunk. Only then did the meal really begin with the eating of the roasted lamb, and this was not to extend beyond midnight (m. *Pesah* 10:9) nor were the bones of the lamb to be broken (m. *Pesah* 7:11). Additional wine in addition to the four cups prescribed could be drunk by the celebrants between the second and third cups (m. *Pesah* 10:7), but no extra wine could be drunk after the third cup, apart of course from the fourth cup.

Following the main meal, the head of the household rose again from his reclining position and exhorted those present to “Speak praises to our God, to whom belongs what we have eaten,” to which those present replied, “Praised be our God for the food we have eaten.” With his right hand he then took the third cup of red wine mixed with water, the Cup of Thanksgiving, and with his eyes on the cup pronounced the prayer of thanksgiving on behalf of all, with the concluding words: “May the All-merciful One make us worthy of the days of the Messiah and of the life of the world to come. He brings the salvation of his king. He shows covenant-faithfulness to his Anointed, to David and to his seed forever. He makes peace in his heavenly places. May he secure peace for us and for all Israel. And say you, Amen.” Sources differ somewhat, but it seems most likely that the general practice was for a single third cup of wine to be passed around all celebrants and shared by them to enable everyone to participate in the blessing this cup represented.

There followed the singing of the second part of the Hallel (Ps. 116–118) and the drinking of the fourth cup of wine, which concluded the Passover (m. *Pesah* 10:7).

We can see that there are many similarities with this account and the gospel accounts of the Last Supper – although the gospel accounts omit a lot of detail. From its timing within the meal, it would appear that the “cup of wine” referred to in the gospel accounts was the third cup of the Passover:

“While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take it; this is my body.” Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it. “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,” he said to them.” (Mark 14:22-24 NIV)

This third cup of the Passover is known as “the cup of thanksgiving” or the “cup of redemption”. How appropriate that Jesus should make his new covenant with us for the forgiveness of our sins in the cup of redemption. Apart from the timing of this cup within the Passover meal, a further reason for assuming that this was indeed the third cup of the Passover is Paul’s reference to it as ‘the cup of thanksgiving’:

“Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?” (1 Corinthians 10:16 NIV)

If I'm right that the third cup of the Passover meal was normally shared as a common cup, it would have been perfectly normal for Jesus to have passed this around the disciples for them to share it.

Given that this was indeed the third cup of the Passover meal, it's clear that Jesus never drank the fourth cup, known as the “cup of praise or restoration” but has saved it until he meets with us again following the second coming, for immediately after the third cup he said: ““I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God.”” (Mark 14:25 NIV)

Again, how appropriate that Christ should save this cup of praise and restoration, until we join him in His Father's kingdom, to praise him for our restoration.

At the Last Supper Jesus gave new significance to the bread and the wine of the Passover meal. We can surmise that he probably took the half of the bread which was to be set aside at the first distribution of bread in a Passover meal. This bread was normally distributed after the eating of the meat of the lamb as an after-dish or *Aphikomom*. Jesus gave thanks for that bread, broke the bread into pieces and distributed them to the eleven remaining disciples. Then he said “This is my body given for you.” (Luke 22:19). So Christ attached special significance to the bread – it was broken and divided, but also shared. The disciples were to eat this bread (John 6:53, 56) which was given as a perpetual memorial, for Jesus commanded “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). Bread was a part of a Passover meal and it was also the commonest part of a meal in these times. Jesus took what was common and attached special significance to it. He wanted them whenever and wherever they ate bread (which would have been daily) to be reminded of His body soon to be given as a sacrifice for them.

Christ then took the cup of wine and he proceeded to attach special significance to this cup. He said “This is my blood of the New Covenant” (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24). His reference was to his blood because sins could only be forgiven by the shedding of blood. Christ said that this cup represented his blood, the blood of the new covenant. So, Christ meant that His blood would provide for the forgiveness of sins. His blood was shared amongst the disciples as they all drank from a common cup. We all need share in Christ's blood if it's to be effective in our lives for the forgiveness of our sins. Wine was used in these times as a symbol of the joy that would be the experience of those in the Messiah's kingdom. How appropriate that this wine – Christ's blood – should be the means whereby we are admitted to the Messiah's kingdom.

### **Christ as the Passover Lamb**

So we see from Mark's gospel chapter 14 verses 22-24:

“While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them.” (Mark 14:22-24 NIV)

that Jesus is offering himself as a sacrifice. He's offering himself as the Passover Lamb! He's saying he's God's sacrificial lamb. Although there are many references to Jesus as the

Lamb of God in Christian literature and liturgy – for example the Agnus Dei – there are only two such references in scripture and they're both statements by John the Baptist quoted in John's gospel. Let me read them both to you:

““I baptise with water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising. The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’” (John 1:26-30 NIV)

and

“Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptise with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.” The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!” When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus.” (John 1:32-37 NIV)

In the first of those references we see that Jesus is described as taking away the sins of the world. That fits well with his being the Passover Lamb which had died to save the Israelites from death at God's hand as he passed in judgement through Egypt. Christ the New Passover Lamb died to save us from the death that our sins merit under God's final judgement.

What a wonderful expression of Jesus as the Lamb of God is furnished by the chronology of the Last Supper. We've seen that Jesus and the disciples ate the Last Supper as a Passover meal and at this meal Jesus expressed himself as a sacrifice for sin – God's sacrificial lamb – as we're going to see in a moment. Yet, Jesus gave up his spirit on the cross around the ninth hour on the day after the Last Supper – the exact time when the Pharisees were, by their chronology, sacrificing lambs in the Temple to celebrate the Passover on their timescale.

I think we can see a clear progression towards Jesus the ultimate sacrificial lamb in the pages of our Bibles. First of all a lamb atoned for an individual as in the case of Isaac, then a lamb atoned for a family (you'll remember each family unit, or with small families neighbouring families, had to offer its own lamb) at the first Passover. Finally, in Christ, the ultimate Lamb of God, there is atonement for the “sin of the world”. The sin of us all, the sin of the whole world, is completely and finally atoned for in Christ's blood.

### **The New Covenant in Christ's Blood**

At the Last Supper Christ announced that he was making a New Covenant in His blood: “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.” In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” (Luke 22:19-20 NIV)

This covenant was the new covenant promised by Jeremiah:

““The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.” (Jeremiah 31:31-33 NIV)

This new covenant is referred to by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians (which we'll be looking at a bit later), again in his second letter to the Corinthians and also in the Book of Hebrews. Let's start with Paul's second letter to the Corinthians:

“Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant— not of the letter [of the law] but of the Spirit; for the letter [of the law] kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?” (2 Corinthians 3:5-8 NIV)

I've inserted the words “of the law” in verse 6, because verse 7 talks about “letters on stone” –which makes it clear that Paul is referring to the Law of Moses here. Paul is saying that the law was not able to save us from sin, but that the new covenant in Christ's blood does save us – it gives us eternal life.

The Book of Hebrews gives a similar message:

“But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises. For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said: "The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.” (Hebrews 8:6-10 NIV)

and

“How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.” (Hebrews 9:14-15 NIV)

As both Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:6 and the writer to the Hebrews in Hebrews 8:6 tell us this new covenant in Christ's blood is superior to the Sinai covenant. The forgiveness of sins under the Sinai covenant was only temporary, the sacrifices offered under the Sinai covenant had to be repeated day after day and year after year. As Hebrews tells us:

“The law [of the Sinai covenant] is only a shadow of the good things that are coming— not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshippers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” (Hebrews 10:1-4 NIV)

and

“to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” (Hebrews 12:24 NIV).

The forgiveness of sins under the law was only partially effective and temporary, but forgiveness under the New Covenant is permanent for all mankind – it’s once for all, once and for all. The OT sacrifices served as a ‘type’ or a model of Christ’s perfect sacrifice which was to come – so God did not overlook sin but rather ‘looked over’ it to the coming sacrifice of Christ. Blood is always an essential element of these sacrifices, so it was necessary for Christ’s blood to be shed in order that our sins might be forgiven. “The blood of Christ” is one of the most significant phrases in scripture. It’s not a morbid expression, rather it speaks of cleansing, forgiveness, redemption and life – new and eternal life. It’s not just by the death of Christ that we are saved, it’s through his death by the shedding of his blood, because his blood is covenant blood. It’s not merely blood poured out in affectionate self-giving. It’s the blood of a covenant sacrifice whereby God solemnly commits himself to us. A well known hymn puts it well:

His vow, his covenant and blood  
are my defence against the flood;  
when earthly hopes are swept away  
he will uphold me on that day. (Edward Mote 1797 -1874 Mission Praise 473)

One of the most important things to remember about this New Covenant is that it was made entirely by God’s grace. Generally human covenants involve two parties – I undertake to do something for you and in return you agree to do something for me. But, most of the covenants God has made with mankind are purely one sided – they just involve God agreeing to do things for mankind. The New Covenant in Christ’s blood is like that. God undertook to send his son to die on the cross to satisfy the death penalty that our sins deserve. Christ died in your place and my place to pay the penalty that we deserved to suffer – the death penalty. All we have to do is to agree to be part of the covenant and accept our free pardon.

### **The Focus of the Eucharist on the Death of Christ**

We see that everything about Jesus’ institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper focuses us on his sacrificial death on the cross. It’s clear that when he refers to the bread as his body in the words “This is my body given for you” he’s not thinking of his living breathing self reclining at the table with the disciples but of his body about to be given in death. Similarly when he spoke of his blood in the words “This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is poured out for you” he’s not thinking of the blood flowing in his veins. Rather Christ is referring to the blood which was about to be poured out in his death.

It's clear that it's not so much by his life that Jesus wants to be remembered but rather it's by his death. His life is important, but his death is much more important. It has accomplished so much for us.

Modern theologians who downplay the death of Christ and focus instead on such things as his exemplary life, his powerful words or his great miracles have got their priorities all wrong. When we look at the gospels, especially John's gospel, we see the enormous emphasis that Jesus himself placed on his death. This shows quite clearly that he regarded it as central to his coming into the world. If Christ had not died on the cross we should never have known what it means to be 'saved'.

One commentator says: "The Lord's Supper, which was instituted by Jesus, and which is the only regular commemorative act authorized by him, dramatizes neither his birth nor his life, neither his words nor his works, but only his death." It was by his death that he wished above all else to be remembered. As Christians, we must do everything in our power to proclaim the centrality of the cross. One of the ways in which we can do that is by our regular participation in Holy Communion.

Nobody has ever put it better than Augustus Toplady:

Nothing in my hand I bring,  
Simply to your cross I cling;  
Naked come to you for dress;  
Helpless look to you for grace;  
Foul, I too the fountain fly;  
Wash me saviour or I die.

(Rock of Ages Mission Praise 582)

The celebration of that first communion in the Upper Room at the Last Supper didn't just involve Jesus. It involved the disciples as well. Christ initiated it, but all the disciples other than Judas took part in it as well. It wasn't enough for the bread to be broken and the cup of wine handed to them – they had to eat and drink and appropriate Christ's forthcoming sacrifice to themselves. They were not spectators but participants.

You see we need to apply and appropriate the death of Christ to and for ourselves.  
[George Wilson story]

So' it's just like my George Wilson story. The free pardon from sin that Christ won for us on the cross is of absolutely no use to us until we appropriate it to ourselves. The death of Christ is the means of our salvation, but we will not be saved until we appropriate to ourselves the sacrifice he made for us on the cross.

This is extremely important. I'm sure there are many this Easter time who, when they are reminded of Christ's death on the cross, will think that they are automatically forgiven. That's not the case. Unless each one of us does as John Wesley said and get the "me" into the cross – know that Christ died for me and personally receive his forgiveness in a personal act of faith, then the tragic situation as regards us personally will be that it will be just as if Christ had never died. We'll be just like George Wilson who didn't accept his pardon.

That's why the only commemoration of himself that Christ introduced was the Eucharist – a celebration of his death until he comes again.

### **SECTION 3. THE EUCHARIST IN THE EARLY CHURCH**

#### **Do This in Remembrance of Me and Regularly**

We know that when he instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper Jesus was commanding a regular and frequent remembrance of his death. The earliest recording we have of Jesus' words at the Last Supper is that of Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians (which was written in around AD 55 – before the synoptic gospels):

“For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.” (1 Corinthians 11:23-26 NIV)

Jesus didn't say “I *suggest* you do this” or “*try* and do this” – he said “do this”. We are commanded to commemorate his loving sacrifice.

We can see from the Book of Acts that the early church took this seriously:

“Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” (Acts 2:41-42 NIV)

and again

“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,” (Acts 2:46 NIV)

It would appear from these verses that in the early church the actual practice of celebrating the Eucharist was as part of a fellowship meal – which of course follows the pattern of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. But later the Church came to set aside a specific time on Sunday in which they focused exclusively on remembering their Lord's sacrifice for them on Calvary:

“On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight.” (Acts 20:7 NIV)

By the time Paul wrote the first letter to the Corinthians around AD 55 it is clear at the celebration of the Eucharist was a regular practice in the Corinthian community:

“Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?” (1 Corinthians 10:16 NIV).

When we look at the Book of Acts we can see that the word “together” and its synonyms are used more than 30 times. The early church was a very ‘together’ fellowship. At the communion table we not only share bread and wine, but we share in each other. Everyone who belongs to Christ belongs to everyone else who belongs to Christ. There is no such a

thing as a solitary Christian. That's why it's so important for us to be part of the body of Christ, the Church.

What the church of the first century practiced ought to be the practice of the church of the twenty-first century too. Jesus said "Do this whenever you drink it in remembrance of me" and so until he returns to take us to be with him, we should obey his command and make this feast a regular practice. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is far too important not to be regularly brought to mind and celebrated. We should all partake of Holy Communion regularly and frequently.

### **Coming Together in Love and Thanksgiving, Christ's Deep Love for Us**

We need to remember that the word Eucharist means thanksgiving. The communion service should be a corporate celebration, a time when we open our hearts to God in joyful celebration and praise. At the communion table we not only remember Christ's redemptive sacrifice we rejoice in it too. The Lord's Supper has its origins in a meal, indeed a feast. Meals are times of fellowship and feasts are a means of expressing joy. The Lord's Supper is a spiritual feast which has its origins in a celebration of the Feast of the Passover.

At this feast we feed on Christ. When we meet together at the Lord's table we feed on him. We don't merely look at the bread, we eat it. We don't merely observe the wine, we drink it. In the Eucharist we partake of Christ and feed our souls on him. The soul can draw strength and nourishment from regular contact with Christ. It's a mystery but we shouldn't let that hinder us from experiencing it and enjoying it – because we can't partake of Christ without enjoying him anymore than we can partake of a good meal without pleasure. Christ himself expressed this truth:

"Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35 NIV)

As I said a moment ago, the Communion service is to be a time of rejoicing and worshipful celebration. After all, the Lord's Supper is a meal and throughout time meals have been the occasions of conviviality and friendship. E F Kevan says "A feast is the method of expressing joy. When you have a birthday you have a birthday party: when you get married you have a wedding meal. When you want to express gladness in any matter, you have a common meal together; and this is one of the aspects that the Lord has taken up in his ordinance of the Lord's Supper." We can no more partake of Christ without enjoying him than one can partake of a good meal and not experience a degree of pleasure.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul expresses the common sense of exhilaration and joy that we experience in Christ:

"..... For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, ....." (1Corinthians 5:7-8 NIV)

Here Paul isn't saying that we should keep the ancient Feast of the Passover. Rather, he's saying that the whole of our Christian lives should be seen as a festival in which we continually celebrate what God has done for us in Christ. But, although the Christian life is to be a continuous festival, the Lord's Supper – which is the Christian equivalent of the Passover – is a powerful means of making truth plain to us and bringing home to our hearts the need for and the reason for continuous celebration.

There are many reasons that lie behind the praise of God's people when they meet together, but the central reason must always be gratitude for our deliverance from the bondage of sin accomplished through the Saviour's atoning death on the cross. When we focus on the cross we are caught up in the worship of heaven and join with the angels and archangels to acknowledge the worth of our creator and redeemer. If we understand the cross we can't bring it to mind without bursting forth in praise. Angels sing of the cross even though they are unable to benefit from its salvation. So how much more should we sinners who have been saved by God's grace expressed through Christ's sacrifice on the cross allow it to lead us into worship and praise.

### **Table Fellowship**

In ancient times it was expected of those who sat at someone's table that they would never do anything to violate the friendship that had been shown them. We see the horror of violating that table fellowship in many OT verses:

"All your allies will force you to the border; your friends will deceive and overpower you; those who eat your bread will set a trap for you, but you will not detect it." (Obadiah 1:7 NIV)

and

"Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me." (Psalm 41:9 NIV)

What troubled the Psalmist was not so much that he had been wronged, but that he had been wronged by someone who sat at his own table. Jesus quoted this verse when speaking of Judas' betrayal:

"I am not referring to all of you; I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfil the scripture: 'He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me.'" (John 13:18 NIV)

This clearly carries through to the communion table. Jesus expects that when we eat and drink at his table, we will not be a party to anything that would injure his cause or violate his eternal principles. We must not let him down.

This takes on another aspect when we remember God's warnings to his people not to partake of heathen feasts (Exodus 34:15; Numbers 25:2-3). Paul made a similar point in his first letter to the Corinthians:

"Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's Table and the table of demons." (1 Corinthians 10:18-21 NIV)

Paul is saying here that for an Israelite to eat of a heathen sacrifice was to associate himself with all that that heathen altar signifies. The Lord's Table, at which we eat, is thus the place where our loyalty is pledged. We cannot eat at the Lord's Table if at the same time we are eating at the table of demons. So when we come to take communion we should approach with a willingness to bring our habits, our motives, our lifestyle and indeed our whole selves

under careful scrutiny and be prepared to repent and break from those things which are dishonouring to Jesus.

This self examination should end in an act of commitment – Paul says:

“A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.” (1 Corinthians 11:28 NIV)

The purpose of this self examination is to not to flagellate ourselves, but to surrender our failures to Christ, receive his forgiveness and move a little closer to him.

If we fail to examine ourselves when we come to the Lord’s Supper and surrender to the Lord those things that are wrong, then they will bring spiritual sickness to us. The Apostle Paul said to the Corinthians:

“Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 11:27 NIV)

So if we come to the Lord’s Table in an unrepented sinful state, or with unworthy motives, or with an unloving, critical or judgemental spirit. We are sinning not just against the church but against the person of Christ symbolized in the elements. On the other hand if we approach the Lord’s Table in the right spirit we will be able to approach all of life in the right spirit.

Further we need to come to the Lord’s Table in union together as the body of Christ. That’s why we say the peace before we partake of Eucharist. But we do need to have a true communion together such as the early church experienced:

“All the believers were one in heart and mind. ....” (Acts 4:32 NIV)

Without this rich fellowship, the church is just like a fraternity or club. One of the reasons why the Christians in the early church turned the world upside down was because they had a clear understanding of both their relationship with God and of their relationship with one another. They had a true sense of community. Their *koinonia* turned the world upside down – **what difference are we going to make?**

## **SECTION 4: THE EUCHARIST TODAY**

### **1. Jesus’ last request** (more or less).

We’ve all seen cartoons of the executioner asking the condemned man if he has a last request. Often it’s for a 25-course meal that will last as long as possible!

Well, the night before Jesus dies, he asks for a two-course meal that will last for centuries!

Observing the Eucharist is one of Jesus’ final commands: “Do this in remembrance of me.” (Luke 22.19) And that’s obviously reason enough for us to come to communion. If Jesus commands us to be at his Table, at his Table we shall be!

But we also remember who Jesus is, and what the Communion represents, and the benefits he wants us to draw from this meal: so the motivation to come to Communion is all the more strong. The Eucharist was so important that Jesus spent that last evening teaching his disciples how to do it.

Under the old Covenant, the people said “We will obey the LORD and do everything he’s commanded.” (Exodus 24.7) And if there’s a chance to obey one of the key commands of Jesus Christ, I want to be there and doing it. Don’t you?

## **2. How often should we obey the command?**

But how often should we come to Communion? Well, you won't find any specific instructions in the New Testament, but Jesus did say,

“This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.” (1 Corinthians 11.25-26)

Now that still doesn't tell us how often we should eat and drink, but we know it's going to be often. Anything else? Well, we live in a Mediterranean country. And we know that eating bread and drinking wine aren't exactly rare occurrences! So at every meal when you have bread and wine [...], you should probably be remembering Jesus. At least by saying grace, saying thanks, eucharisto.

But Jesus probably meant something slightly more formal than that. The Eucharist was a sign of the unity of Jesus' disciples, and it reminded them that when they were together as a “body” they were sharing in the body of Christ. So my lunch round the kitchen table ‘even with bread and wine’ doesn't constitute a Communion Service! Especially if it's just me and my best friends, to get away from those dreadful people down at the church!

The Acts of the Apostles talks about the local church gathering together on the first day of the week (Sunday) for teaching and to break bread (“On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them...” Acts 20.7) This certainly is what we would call a Eucharist. We don't know whether they did this every Sunday, but it was a Sunday event.

In passing, we should note that the sacrament is always accompanied by the word. Jesus and the Apostles spent much more time preaching and teaching in general, than they did teaching about Communion, or taking Communion.

But if we're supposed to come to the Eucharist “often” we ought to examine ourselves and our pattern of worshipping. All Christians ought to be in the Lord's house with the Lord's people on the Lord's day. That's what we do: we're Christians.

And then we ought to ask ourselves, How often do we get to Communion? If your Lord and Master tells you this is something you ought to do “often”, are you obeying? Gathering around his Table is a sign of your commitment to Christ, and your fellowship within his Body.

The Eucharist is the central and primary act of Christian devotion and worship. So in the normal course of events, there's a Communion Service every Sunday at Holy Trinity. You're most welcome.

## **3. United or untied?**

We've touched on 1 Corinthians 11 several times this morning. But the Institution Narrative is set in a wider and sadder context. The church in Corinth was divided.

Let's read the whole passage: 1 Corinthians 11.17-34 (p.1152)

[ask someone to read it...]

17 In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. 18 In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. 19 No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. 20 When you come

together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, 21 for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. 22 Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!

23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

27 Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. 28 A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30 That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. 31 But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. 32 When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.

33 So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. 34 If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment.

And when I come I will give further directions.

The Christians in Corinth were inconsiderate, they didn't much want to be together, they didn't share. They were more interested in having a good time than in taking the bread and wine seriously. The bread is called "the body of Christ" ... and that reverberates with the idea that the church is also the body of Christ. Eating the bread is something we do as the "body", the local church. But in Corinth, the posh Christians didn't want to eat from the same loaf as the servants: it would've been so degrading. They didn't want to drink from the same cup as the slaves: you never knew what you might catch!

So Paul says "I don't know what you think you're up to, but it's certainly not the Lord's Supper you're eating!" (20). They were destroying the whole symbolism of the thing. And, it seems they were in danger of destroying themselves: many were weak and sick; some had died; some faced the stern judgment of God for their divisive behaviour and attitudes (29-32). Look back to chapter 10.16-17.

"Isn't the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And isn't the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." That's why a piece of bread seems to work better than an individual wafer. Think about it. A wafer isn't bread ... and it's never been part of a loaf. If anything, a wafer symbolises individualism. But the Lord's Supper is supposed to symbolise that we belong together.

That's why we don't do our own little communion services at home, or with our own restricted bunch of friends. That's why we do The Peace, and try to clear the air if we've had a disagreement. Jesus told his Jewish hearers to make peace with their brother before worshipping at the temple (Matthew 5.23-34).

That's why we leave the safety of our pew, and shuffle the pack, and never know who we'll be kneeling down next to. Because whoever they are, we're all sharing from the same loaf. And that says we're all part of the same body. Jesus was showing us that we belong together. We need to recognise the body of the Lord, or we eat and drink judgment on ourselves (29).

It's a hostile world, isn't it? And the devil's trying to pick us off, one by one: divide and rule. But when we stick together, we're strong. The Communion service reinforces our unity in Christ. It deepens our mutual support. It's "recognising the Lord's body" (29). And if the body of Christ in Cannes can be strengthened and united by that I'll sign up to be there when it's Communion. Won't you?

#### **4. The Eucharist and the Gospel.**

I used to show school children around my old church. I'd tell them about the Holy Table. How I take a piece of bread and rip it apart with my thumbs. And I'd ask them what that might be for. Often they'd no idea.

So I'd tell them about the cross and the nails and Jesus suffering there. And then I'd tell them about the wine. And by now, they can guess what that's for. And I'd explain about our sins and about the blood Jesus shed so long ago on the cross. And I'd talk about the communion rail. And tell the children that people have to respond to the death of Christ, and come. It's good that people have to choose whether to stay where they are, or come out into the open. And I'd tell the children that the rail isn't a fence to keep people out it's there to help people get on their knees in God's presence. And as they take a morsel of bread and a sip of wine, they're saying "Yes, Lord. I need you, and I want to benefit from what you did on that cross 2000 years ago."

All I did was explain what the Table's for, and what we do in church. And hey presto! I've preached the Gospel! That's what the Eucharist does! In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul wrote whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death... (26) The sermon may be good or bad, but every Communion service is an evangelistic event! If we're proclaiming the death of Christ, I want to be in on it. Don't you?

#### **5. The Eucharist makes it real.**

When we take communion, it's supposed to bring home to us what Jesus did for us. When I'd told the children the Gospel, I'd often ask them to tell me about any experiments they'd done at school. Then I'd say "The teacher could just have told you that happens. So why didn't she?" Because it sinks in more if you actually do it.

And I'd say "I could just tell the congregation to think about Jesus dying for them. But it sinks in better, and they remember better, if they actually do something themselves. Eat some bread and drink some wine."

Of course this was Jesus' idea. This would replace the old Passover rituals.

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he'd given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the

same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Corinthians 11.23-25)  
When we come to Communion, we're not just reminding ourselves of a vital moment in ancient history. As we eat and drink, those ancient events are supposed to come alive in us again.

So use the Communion service wisely: as you wait to go forward, remember Jesus and your spiritual need for him. As you take the bread and wine, feed on him in your heart by faith and with thanksgiving. As you sit in your pew afterwards, take on board that you've been resourced and nourished to live the Christian life a little better this week. The Holy Communion is a way of bringing it home powerfully to us what Jesus did for us. And if that's on offer, I need that. Don't you?

### **6. The Eucharist helps us feed on Christ.**

Last Sunday we had a party to celebrate my mother-in-law's 90th birthday. It was a very civilised and British high tea. Finger sandwiches of cucumber or egg, or coronation chicken or smoked salmon. I enjoyed those. Then there were clotted cream scones: we had to ask the waiter to bring more clotted cream and jam to our table. And then on a silver cake-stand there sinful little treats. I was in tiers ... or at least the cakes were. We scoffed our way through some chocolate brownies and some mini lemon tarts, and caramel éclairs. And when we'd had another cup of tea it seemed a pity to leave those scones and waste that clotted cream. Chris' brother made a speech, and we sang Happy Birthday, and they brought in the chocolate cake with all the candles. Don't tell Betty, but I couldn't face it. We were there for her birthday, but I was stuffed before we got to celebrate it with the cake!

Well, confession is good for the soul, but that's not why I'm telling you this shameful tale.

The thing is, we can sometimes come to the Eucharist in no fit state to enjoy it or benefit from it. We may have stuffed our souls with all sorts of sinful indulgences the night before. We may have come with all sorts of unhealthy preoccupations weighing us down. And even though we've only come to celebrate Jesus' Supper, we've got no room for him. The unsuitable fare that's clogging up our spirits stops us from feeding on Christ.

We may well swallow a morsel of bread, and sip the wine, but if we're unprepared, we don't feed. Do you come to Communion in the right frame of mind, in the right spiritual state? Examine yourself first, says the Apostle (1 Corinthians 11.28). You have come to feast with Jesus.

In John chapter 6, Jesus said we need to eat his flesh and drink his blood. He said that he's the Bread of life, and we need to feed on him. (Rwaje ...) Now Jesus didn't say that at the Last Supper. He didn't say it to his Apostles C he said it to a hostile crowd. He wasn't obviously referring to the Holy Communion. It's a universal truth that Jesus is the Bread of life, and anyone in church or in solitary confinement, confirmed or not, coeliac or crusty can feed on him. He's always there to nourish us.

So incidentally it's perfectly OK to take only one of the elements if you need to pass on the other, for whatever reason. The old Prayer Book actually says you can eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ, profitably, to your soul's health, even though you don't receive the sacrament with your mouth. (Appendix to the Communion of the Sick).

But of course, one very obvious way of feeding on Christ's body and drinking his blood is at the Eucharist. Jesus did take a piece of bread and he did say "This is my body." (Mt 26.26; Mk 14.22; Lk 22.19; 1 Cor 11.24). He took a cup of wine and said "This is my blood of the covenant..." (Matthew 26.28)

I was once giving communion to a lady in a nursing home, and I began "The body of Christ which was ..." And she interrupted me and said "Ah, but it isn't, is it? It's bread!" Well, she was half-right

... the Sacramental Bread and Wine remain still in their very natural substances (BCP). Of course it's bread. Just like it was when Jesus was holding that original bread in the hands of his real physical body.

But Jesus didn't mind saying it was his body, because it was there to remind us of what happened to his body. But not just to remind us. It does us good.

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul puts it the other way round: if you take the Eucharist unworthily, it can also do you harm.

Jesus' body and blood are presently and actually in heaven: they're not physically located in the millions of doses of bread and wine in a million churches around the world every Sunday. But that doesn't mean we can't benefit from the Body and Blood of Christ. You'd better check with David, but as far as I know the sun is 93 million miles away. And yet, if I put myself in the right place at the right time, I can feel the sun shining on me and doing me a huge amount of good. The sun is really more remote than I can imagine, but the benefit I get from it is as real as you could wish. Jesus' body and blood are in heaven, yes. But that bit of bread can help us to feed on his body spiritually. The good it does you is as real as you could wish for.

And if it does, I want my portion of bread and wine. Don't you?

### **7. The Eucharist catches us up into the presence of Christ.**

I wonder if you remember the incident in the book of Exodus, when Moses and the elders of Israel went up the mountain? You can read about it in Exodus 24.1-11. They didn't go to offer a sacrifice. The sacrifice had already been made before they ever went up there. But then they were given a glimpse of God himself in heaven, and they ate, and they drank. And that can happen in a Communion service. The sacrifice was long ago and far away C when Jesus died on the cross. But as we eat and drink, we can be caught up into the presence of God himself.

The 39 Articles say "The Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten in the Supper only after an heavenly and spiritual manner." (Article XXVIII)

And if I can tap into the strength and the power and the presence of Christ in glory, I'm raring to go for it. Aren't you?

### **8. The Eucharist confirms our covenant relationship.**

And just as eating and drinking in God's presence confirmed the Old Covenant, this service confirms our place in God's New Covent. It's the meal of the Deal. Jesus said "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." (1 Corinthians 11.25) Actually, the cup wasn't the new

covenant that's why you're excused questing for the Holy Grail! This is another one of Jesus' figures of speech: metonymy. [... "The kettle boiled"]

The "cup" stands for the contents of the cup, the wine. And to complicate things further, the wine itself stands for the blood Jesus would shed on the cross: which stands for the sacrificial death he died. And that death was the thing that sealed the new covenant.

In Matthew's Gospel it says This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (26.28) Do your sins need forgiving? Our reading from 1 Corinthians 11 warns you of the dire consequences of approaching God unworthily. Paul says some people had taken the bread and wine unworthily and died! We're not sure quite what that's referring to, but Communion isn't something to take lightly.

The passage we've just read reminds us of a sacrifice, the blood of a covenant. The sacrifice brought in a new covenant, a new working agreement between us and God.

And each Communion service should bring it all flooding back to us. We're in a covenant relationship with God through the blood of Christ. Alleluia!

Jim Packer wrote this: We should be saying in our hearts, as sure as I see and touch and taste this bread and this wine, so sure is it that Jesus Christ is not a fancy but a fact; that he's for real, and that he offers me himself to be my Saviour, my Bread of Life, and my Guide to glory. He has left me this rite, this gesture, this token, this ritual action as a guarantee of his grace. He instituted it, and it is a sign of life-giving union with him, and I'm taking part in it, and thus I know that I am his and he is mine forever.'

If the Lord's Supper does that for me, I'm not inclined to neglect it! Are you?

To summarise what we've covered so far, I hope it's becoming clear that there are Four emphases in the Eucharist. There are 4 emphases in the Holy Communion:

- a) A backward look to Christ, remembering his death on the cross (1 Corinthians 11.24)
- b) A sideways look, as we share fellowship (or communion) with our fellow-Christians (1 Corinthians 10.16-17; 11.33)
- c) An upwards look as by faith we feed on Jesus, who is now in heaven (John 6.48-58). In this way we are also having "communion" / fellowship with him.
- d) A forward look as we wait for him to come again (1 Corinthians 11.26). One day we won't have to be content with a bit of bread and a sip of wine. Jesus is coming back in person.

More than a souvenir.

So I think you'll agree that that the Eucharist is more than a routine we go through to jog our memories. Some of the Protestant Reformers toyed with the idea that it was nothing more than a "Bare Sign".

But Luther and Calvin insisted that it was much more than that. The Anglican 39 Articles insist that

"Sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges or tokens of Christian men's profession, but rather they be certain sure witnesses and effectual signs of grace, and God's good will towards us, by the which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in Him." (Article XXV)

Well so far I've touched on a few controversial issues and made a few provocative statements. But by and large I would expect most Christians from most backgrounds would agree wholeheartedly with most of what I've said. However, we now come to more controversial matters.

## **SECTION FIVE: UNITY AND DISUNITY**

### **Why Christians have differing views**

#### **1. Welcomed at the Lord's Table?**

I was sitting in a Roman Catholic church in Dubrovnik: bless em, they'd put on a service in English for the tourists. The priest gave a stirring sermon the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, and how important it is to show hospitality and welcome. When it came to receiving the Eucharist, a woman made their way to the front, and had a word with the priest. You can imagine how that brief conversation went. [...] The priest shook his head, and sent her away without a welcome and without Communion.

There's a very sad paradox that the meal which is supposed to show our unity as Christians has so often shown up our divisions instead. The broken bread can sometimes symbolise a fragmented body.

Let me begin by saying that our policy at Holy Trinity is to welcome all Christians from whatever denomination to the Lord's Table, so long as they are in good standing and communicant status with their own church.

So it's not an entirely open invitation. You should be a Christian, and you should be baptised. We don't want to encourage people to partake of the Eucharist ignorantly and unworthily, as the New Testament warns us. And if you don't receive Communion in your own church, for whatever reason, we don't want to undermine their policy or authority. So if someone had been excommunicated at their own church for gross misbehaviour, we wouldn't be keen on them coming to Holy Trinity to dodge their own church discipline.

However, in all normal circumstances, we're delighted to welcome any Christian to the Communion. Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Eastern Orthodox, Baptist, Pentecostal, whatever.

#### **2. Passionate differences.**

But as you know, Christians do have quite strong differences and disagreements over the Eucharist. You may already feel unhappy or uncomfortable about some of what we've said this morning. If so, I'm sorry.

When something is as important as the Eucharist, it's hardly surprising if Christians care deeply about it. And if they care deeply, and think deeply about it, they may well end up with different views. If we didn't think the Eucharist were important, we wouldn't disagree!

So bear with me as I try to explain some differences over the Eucharist on the theoretical level and the practicalities. In the last century both Catholics and Protestants have done a great deal of theology, thinking about the nature of the Eucharist.

The outline we've given this morning doesn't cover everything or reflect all the developments. But they should give some broad-brush impressions of what different Christians believe and do.

You might well recognise your own beliefs or views or preferences here somewhere: I hope I won't cause unnecessary offence!

**2a: The Eucharist is best avoided.**

There are some churches where it seems that nothing can happen without a Eucharist; and many onlookers might wonder if there isn't something almost superstitious going on in those circles. Because apart from the handful of passages we've looked at, the New Testament scarcely mentions the Eucharist. And as it's something that Christians disagree about, "Surely (some Christians would say), it's best avoided altogether!" And so some Christian churches do just that. The Salvation Army and many Quakers, for instance, have neither baptism nor Eucharist. Well, it's a virtuous thing to avoid conflict over the Eucharist, but most other Christians would find that a rather curious solution to the problem.

**2b: The Eucharist is a simple act of remembrance.**

Jesus told us to do this "the Eucharist" in remembrance of him, and some Christians have always been suspicious of adding any meaning to the Eucharist beyond remembering. The bread and wine are visual aids to jog your memory, nothing more. The Swiss Reformer Zwingli is often associated with this sort of view. Most other Christians (Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox) believe there's much more to the Eucharist than a "bare sign", for the reasons we've looked at. We noted what the Thirty-Nine Articles say about that at the end of the last Section.

**2c: The Eucharist is a sacrifice.**

There's no doubt that Jesus speaks of the bread and the wine in sacrificial terms: "the blood of the covenant" and so on. So the Roman Catholic Church in particular speaks of the Eucharist, the Mass, as a sacrifice. The priest says he's offering a sacrifice for the salvation of the world. He invokes Christ's actual body and blood, and places them not on a table, but on an altar. Many Christians believe that is a serious misunderstanding of the sacrificial language around the Eucharist. They would say it refers to the one sacrifice offered by Christ himself on the cross 2000 years ago. The Eucharist reminds us of that sacrifice, makes it real for us, brings us its benefits. But it doesn't repeat it.

## **2d: Christ is present at the Eucharist.**

Since about the 13th Century, the Roman Church has taught the idea of “transubstantiation”, following the thinking of Thomas Aquinas. This teaches that in the Eucharist, God effects a change in the inner reality of the bread and the wine. You need to get into Greek philosophy to understand all that. For Aquinas, the inner reality of the bread and wine is the “substance”, and that’s what changes. The outward appearance, the “accidents” stay the same. They still look and taste like bread and wine, but their inner reality has changed into the body and blood of Christ. So Catholics since Aquinas believe that Jesus is physically there in the bread and wine: what they call the real presence. That’s partly why Roman Catholics prefer wafers: less messy crumbs which might leave bits of the Body of Christ all over the place. That’s partly why they don’t want to give you the chalice: they don’t want to risk you spilling the blood of Christ. This view obviously raises a number of questions and gives rise to some curious practices.

At the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther came up with a different theory: consubstantiation. The bread and wine, said Luther, don’t change their substance, their nature; they stay as bread and wine. But in the Eucharist a spiritual event takes place: the body and blood of Christ become present. They surround the elements spiritually, so that when you eat the bread, you’re also eating the body of Christ. Luther didn’t convince everyone of this, including many Lutherans. Some Eastern Orthodox theologians have taken a similar line.

Other Christians, including the Anglican Reformers, take a different view: it’s sometimes called receptionism. Jesus is spiritually present wherever two or three are gathered in his name (Matthew 18.20). That applies whether or not we’re in a Communion service. But by his Spirit, he is of course present at the Eucharist spiritually. But when Jesus said “This is my body”, he was using metaphorical language, not literal language. The Anglican Reformers insisted that Jesus isn’t located in the elements: his true body and blood are in heaven. What we eat at the Eucharist starts off as bread and wine, and it stays bread and wine. But if we eat them in the right spirit, we also feed on the body and blood of Christ by faith.

So Archbishop Cranmer wanted the minister to say

“Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart, by faith with thanksgiving. Drink this in remembrance that Christ’s blood was shed for thee and be thankful.” (1552 Prayer Book)

The 1662 Prayer Book expanded that:

The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith with thanksgiving.

The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. Drink this in remembrance that Christ’s Blood was shed for thee, and be thankful.

But even though the 1662 Prayer Book reintroduces the words the Body of Christ, etc, it’s careful to point us back to Calvary: “... which was given for thee, which was shed for thee.” We feed on Christ in our hearts, not with our teeth or our stomachs. We receive him as we come to the Eucharist, if we come rightly prepared, with faith, and with thanksgiving. Otherwise all you’re getting is bread and wine. Hence the word “receptionism.” That’s the position of the 1662 Prayer Book and the 39 Articles.

## **2e: The Eucharist is a mystery.**

Well, obviously these theoretical and theological positions (and more besides) have led to sharp disagreement among Christians. Even within the Church of England, many would take a different view, or place a different emphasis, from the ones I have outlined here.

But most Christians would agree on the core teaching we've given earlier during today's session. And more importantly, most Christians would agree that there's something very mysterious about the Eucharist. The moment we try to pin down exactly what is happening, we're in danger of going beyond what Scripture teaches, and puncturing something deeply important.

Not least the unity of the Body of Christ which the Eucharist is supposed to represent. Let's admit our limitations before the mystery of this sacrament, rather than use it to attack one another.

## **3. Practicalities**

Quite how Holy Communion is administered varies from one church to another, but in our church one of the sidespeople usually invites people to go forward one row at a time. You wait at the front of the aisle until there is enough room to kneel at the communion rail without bumping into someone else, then go forward and kneel down. (People with bad backs or knees may prefer to remain standing).

Following a tradition that goes back to the 4th Century and Cyril of Jerusalem, we usually place one hand on top of the other, with the palms facing upwards, to receive the piece of bread.

The minister will say "The Body of Christ keep you in eternal life" or something similar. You say "Amen", and eat the bread.

We ask you not to dip your bread into the chalice, as this is less hygienic.

Then you will be given the cup (the chalice): take it carefully, and when the minister says "The Blood of Christ keep you in eternal life" (or something similar), say "Amen". Then drink a small sip and pass the cup back.

Wait until the person next to you has finished drinking, so that you don't jog them; then get up, return to your seat, and pray. Thank Jesus for forgiving you, thank him for your fellow Christians all around you, and ask him to "feed" you (make you strong to live the Christian life).

For various reasons, some people can't eat bread; others can't drink wine. Such people can still come to the communion rail, but decline the cup or the bread. If that applies to you, it's worth mentioning this to the chaplain to avoid any embarrassment.

Some churches do the communion service differently: for example, there may be a little wafer rather than bread; or ready-cut cubes of bread, rather than a broken loaf. Some churches just have grape-juice or some other non-alcoholic drink rather than wine. In some churches they may hold on to the cup rather than give it to you; or they may give everyone a tiny cup.

Sometimes you will remain standing rather than kneeling, or the bread and the wine may be passed to you as you sit in the pew.

There are obviously advantages and disadvantages in these various alternative practices. At Holy Trinity, we are what we are, an Anglican Church within the Church of England. We strive to be elastic and accommodating to Christians from all traditions, but our practice here is essentially Anglican. If it's not what you're used to, please bear with us! Similarly, if you're in a new church, just keep an eye open to see what everyone else is doing. The "mechanics" may be different, but the meaning is essentially the same.

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## **Notes from Summer 2013**

### **1. What type of bread?**

The 1662 Book of Common Prayer states “to take away all occasion of dissension, and superstition, which any person hath or might have concerning the Bread and Wine, it shall suffice that the Bread be such as is usual to be eaten; but the best and purest Wheat Bread that conveniently may be gotten.” Canon B17 uses much the same language.

In accordance with this requirement, we use white wheat bread, choosing a loaf which will not produce lots of crusty crumbs.

The use of “wafers” was unlawful until the latter part of the 19th century, but since then the Church of England has permitted their use (see the link to the CofE document under point 6, below).

Wafers are now widely used, but remain questionable: at the Last Supper Jesus took bread, broke it and shared it among his disciples; wafers on the other hand are neither bread, nor broken, nor shared.

### **2. Leavened or unleavened bread?**

It is most probable that Jesus used unleavened bread at the Last Supper, which appears to have been a radically-adapted Passover meal (the Gospel-writers don't mention whether Jesus and his disciples had been to the Temple to offer a sacrificial Passover lamb: it would raise interesting theological questions if they did!) The Passover coincided with the start of the week-long “feast of unleavened bread”, when ordinary bread was forbidden.

However, according to St John the crucifixion took place on the “Day of Preparation for the Passover” (John 19.14); “the Jews did not enter [Pilate's] palace; they wanted to be able to eat the Passover.” (John 18.28).

So whilst it is very likely that Jesus used unleavened bread at the Last Supper, it might well have been leavened. For the Christian Holy Communion, Canon B17 provides for “bread, whether leavened or unleavened”. The Prayer Book commends bread “such as is usual to be eaten”. The Eastern Churches require leavened bread to be used.

### **3. Broken bread or individual wafers?**

In the Common Worship Communion service, we say: “We break this bread to share in the body of Christ. Though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread.” (Quoting 1 Corinthians 10.16). The symbolism of everyone eating from the same loaf is very important, and compromised by the use of individual wafers.

So if the use of wafers is perfectly in order, the suitability of unbroken, unshared, individual wafers is still questionable. Jesus broke the bread at the Last Supper, and the “fraction” is an essential part of the Holy Communion. This would be equally the case were we to use unleavened bread.

#### **4. What about those who can’t eat the bread?**

Some people are gluten-intolerant; others are allergic to yeast. In such cases, it is entirely in order to communicate “in one kind” (i.e., just the bread or just the wine). This is exactly what happens at present for those who cannot drink the wine, for whatever reason.

As the Prayer Book’s words of administration remind us, “we feed on Christ in our hearts by faith”. Jesus is our bread of life all week, and not just at the Communion rail.

#### **5. Intinction?**

The practice of “intinction” (dipping the bread or wafer into the chalice) is a fairly recent innovation. The Church of England (see the document below) says intinction is to be used in exceptional circumstances where necessity requires: you will see that “necessity” is for serious circumstances (for example, a highly infectious pandemic), and it is at the discretion of the “president” (the incumbent or officiating priest) whether such a necessity has arisen. The document also states that “in this case it should also be borne in mind that, dependent on medical advice, the contagion may also be spread by intinction itself.”

This is an important point: intinction is no less “unhygienic” than drinking from the common chalice, and may in fact be less hygienic.

The person who insists on intinction may believe she is protecting herself against everyone else’s germs, but in fact she is exposing her fellow-worshippers more seriously to her own germs (we can’t “wipe” the wine that her bread has touched). This hardly seems a Christian approach.

In fact, of course, the alcohol content of Communion wine, the antiseptic properties of noble metals used for the chalice, and the wiping of the chalice with a linen purificator combine to make cross-infection a negligible issue.

Being in any public place and shaking hands with other people carry far more potential for infection than drinking from the shared chalice.

I have requested the congregation *not* to dip the bread in the chalice.

#### **6. The shared cup?**

Some people would like to have individual cups for Communion. There are a number of reasons why I cannot offer this:

(a) if there is uncertainty about the use of unleavened bread at the Last Supper, there is no doubt that Christ and the Apostles shared the cup. “*Jesus took a cup, gave thanks to God, and said, Take this and share it among yourselves.*” (LUKE 22.17)

(b) The use of individual cups is forbidden in Church of England practice, see from the aforementioned document.

(c) Again, this detracts from the symbolism of the shared cup as a sign of our love and trust towards one another in Christ. “*The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?*” (1 CORINTHIANS 10.16) It is individualism triumphing over communion.

## **6. Anglican practice**

You may want to refer to the following Church of England document ([www.churchofengland.org/media/1336503/reception%20of%20communion.pdf](http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1336503/reception%20of%20communion.pdf)). This spells out the CofE position on many of these matters.

Some people from other Christian traditions and denominations who may dislike certain aspects of our liturgical practice. Of course we delight to welcome people from a huge variety of denominational backgrounds and Christian traditions, but if we tried to fit in with all of their expectations we would end up with confusion. I trust that we conduct our worship with considerable flexibility, sensitive to the unusual demands of a chaplaincy abroad, and to the diverse denominational origins of our worshippers. But we are unashamedly Anglican. Holy Trinity Cannes is and always has been an evangelical Anglican church, and we have to remain broadly within Anglican norms. We are sure those from other backgrounds will appreciate that this is the case: when I attend a Roman Catholic Church, I don't expect them to change their practice for my sake.

Under the authority of the bishop, and in consultation with the Church Council, the Chaplain has discretion to use liturgical forms which are authorised or permitted by Canon (Canons B1, B2, B5 etc).