

Introduction

If you have been coming regularly to BCF you will know that our sermons have been taken from the book of the Acts of the Apostles. If this is your first time here, we welcome you as our guest, and are happy that you have chosen to spend part of your Sunday morning with us. You will notice that there is something different in the front of the auditorium today; a table covered with a white cloth. What is this all about? It is there because we are going to celebrate the Lord's Supper today. What is this, and why do we do it?

So today we are going to leave the Acts of the Apostles and look at the Lord's Supper. If you are a visitor you may know this by another name; perhaps the Breaking of Bread, or Communion, or Holy Communion, or Mass; all different names for what is in essence a service of remembrance of the greatest event in the history of the universe; the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Memory is a hugely important part of our lives. Without memory we could not survive long; where did I put the car keys? How do I make breakfast? What are these funny shaped strips of cloth hanging in my closet? And yet we so easily forget. Last week I forgot to go to a breakfast meeting I had planned to go to, and many years ago I forgot to show up to teach a class I was scheduled to teach. Fortunately the students did not seem to mind!

But other memories are an important part of our history, and we need ways to remember them. Today that is often done through images. Though few of us were even alive at the time, the memory of Pearl Harbor:

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Or D-day

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Or 9/11

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Will live in our memory because of images like these.

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But what about ways to remember significant spiritual events? God in His wisdom and knowledge of the human heart knew that we forget so easily, and so He established two significant events; one just for the Jews, and the other one for all His followers. The one for us was established with the words of our Lord

"do this in remembrance of me."

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Let us look at these two events; we call them the Passover and the Lord's Supper.

1. The Passover

To understand all this we need to look back at the story of the first big remembrance event, in the book of Exodus. The story is probably familiar to most of you, but let me summarize what briefly happened so we are all on the same page. The Israelites had settled in Egypt some 400 years before this time, and had been made slaves. They cried out to God, and He sent Moses to be the one who would lead them out of captivity. God brought a series of plagues on the Egyptians through Moses, but Pharaoh the king refused to let the Israelites go, so God brought a final and devastating plague. The first born child in every home, Egyptian or Israelite, would be killed in one night. But God also provided a way for the Israelites to avoid this fate. Each household was to kill a lamb and sprinkle its blood on the doorposts of their house, and then eat the lamb in a special meal, ready to leave the country. And they were commanded to repeat this ritual every year so as to remember the amazing event.

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As Tim Keller writes “So in every house in Egypt there was either a dead child or a dead lamb. When justice came down, either it fell on your family or you took shelter under the substitute, under the blood of the lamb. If you did accept this shelter, then death passed over you and you were saved; that’s why it was called Passover. You were saved only on the basis of faith in a substitutionary sacrifice. ...But why in the world would the sacrifice of a woolly little quadruped exempt you from justice?”

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2. The Lord’s supper

The first Passover was probably in 1446 BC. About 1475 years later a group of 13 men prepared to celebrate it in Jerusalem. Jesus and his disciples had arrived in Jerusalem less than a week ago. This is how Mark records the event:

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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?"

So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there."

The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

Mark 14:12-16 NIV

When Jews celebrated the Passover in Jesus time, they followed a set pattern. The presider of the meal, holding a cup of wine, would get up four times during the meal to explain its meaning, using God’s fourfold promise in Exodus 6:6-7

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"Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the LORD, and

1. I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.
2. I will free you from being slaves to them, and
3. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.
4. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God.

Ex 6:6-7a NIV

The presider would explain the symbolism of the various elements of the feast; the bread, the herbs, and the wine. At this Passover meal with His disciples, however, Jesus departed from the normal script. At the third cup, instead of holding up a piece of bread and saying “This is the bread of our affliction, which our fathers ate in the wilderness” Jesus did something different:

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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. "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 14:22-25 NIV

The disciples must have been flabbergasted. What was Jesus doing? What did He mean by departing from a 1000-year old script? And what did He mean by saying “This bread is my body”? What He was saying, in

effect, was (as Tim Keller points out) “This is the bread of *my* affliction, the bread of *my* suffering, because I am going to lead the ultimate exodus and bring you the ultimate deliverance from bondage.”

Jesus then took the cup and said "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many." The Passover meal looked back to the original Passover in Exodus, where a lamb was killed so that the firstborn son would not be killed. The lamb died so that the son would not die. But now Jesus, God’s only Son, was going to die so that those who believe on Him will not die the death of separation from God. He himself was the Lamb of God, and He was going to die so that we might live. As Isaiah puts it

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But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

Isa 53:5-6 NIV

Luke records one other thing that Jesus said

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

Luke 22:19 NIV

So Jesus was saying “this is something really important; so important that I want you to do this on a regular basis to remember what I am about to do for you. I do not want you to forget my death that is just about to happen, because it is the reason I came to earth and it is the only way that you are going to be forgiven. So remember me and remember my death on the cross for you.”

The English preacher Leslie Weatherhead tells of a little boy who was admitted to an orphanage after his parents were killed, probably during WWII. One of the first items on the agenda was to find him a new set of clothes. He was given a new pair of pants, a new shirt, and a pair of shoes that shined as he saw his face in its glow.

Lastly, he was offered a new hat. But he refused to take it. He hung on to his worse- for the-wear—hat. Finally the Sister was able to coax him into trying on the new cap. He tried it on, liked it, but then did something very funny. He reached inside his old cap and tore the lining out and placed it in his pocket.

Noticing the Sister had a puzzled look on her face, he said, "The lining is a part of my mother’s dress; it’s all I’ve got left of her and somehow it seems to bring her back."

If a piece of cloth could mean that much to this boy, how much more should this memorial sharing together in memory of the one who died for us mean to us!

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3. Who can receive the Lord’s Supper?

Before we talk about what the Lord’s supper means to us, I need to talk briefly about who should receive it. There are just two things to say:

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- a. The Lord’s Supper is for *all* believers. all who love our Lord Jesus and have trusted Him for your salvation. If you are new to BCF and are a believer in Jesus, then you are just as welcome to share with us as any other member. You can come from a Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic, or any

other church background, and you are a welcome brother or sister in our Lord Jesus Christ. The ground is level at the foot of the cross.

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- b. The Lord's Supper is *only* for believers. The Bible makes it clear that this is a remembrance meal for Christians only. So if you are here this morning and you have never committed your life to our Lord Jesus, then please do not take the bread and the cup as they are served. You are welcome to stay and observe, but the Bible has some hard things to say about those who take part in an unworthy way:

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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. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.

1 Cor 11:27-29 NIV

But please also know that God loves you, and that you do not have to stay in rebellion against Him. You can commit your life to Him if you are willing to do so as we pray before we serve the elements, and then join us in celebration as a new brother or sister in Christ.

4. How should we receive the Lord's Supper?

So the Lord's Supper is something that is really important to our Christian lives. And we see it set before us this morning; how should we take it? What does it teach us? When I was a student in the UK I attended a conference where Alan Stibbs, vice principal of Oak Hill College in North London, gave a message on the meaning of the Lord's Supper, and gave us five ways to look as we receive the bread and the wine. I found them helpful, so let me share them with you as we prepare our hearts to remember our Lord. So we look in five ways:

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- a. We look back to Christ's death. We look back in gratitude and thankfulness to the cross and what it means to us. This is the primary focus of our celebration; I am remembering that Jesus died on the cross for me and for my salvation. Sometimes I find it helpful to make a mental image of Jesus on the cross, and to think of what He suffered for me.

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- b. We look within in confession of sin. We examine our hearts to make sure there is no unconfessed sin in our lives. As we have just read "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup." Jesus said

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"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift." Matt 5:23-24, NIV

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- c. We look up in praise to God. We give grateful praise and thanksgiving to Him for sending His only Son to be our Saviour.

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- d. We look around at our fellow believers. The Lord's Supper reminds us powerfully that we are all equal in God's sight; the ground is level at the foot of the cross. It was related that once when the Duke of Wellington (the victor over Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo) remained to take communion at his parish church, a very poor old man went up to the opposite aisle, and reaching the Communion table, knelt down close by the side of the Duke. (Immediately, tension and commotion interrupted the silence

of the church.) Someone came and touched the poor man on the shoulder, and whispered to him to move farther away, or to rise and wait until the Duke had received the bread and the wine. But the eagle eye and the quick ear of the great commander caught the meaning of that touch and that whisper. He clasped the old man's hand and held him to prevent his rising; and in a reverential but distinct undertone, the Duke said, "Do not move; we are equal here."

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- e. We look ahead to Christ's return. Jesus said "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many....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." Jesus death and resurrection are our assurance that He has conquered death, and that He will welcome us with open arms into His presence.

Harold L. Myra, former editor of Christianity Today, wrote "I remember being touched by the popular song "Tie a Yellow Ribbon." It tells of a man who's been sent to prison. He's served his time and is now coming home on the bus. But he admits that she who once loved him has every right to reject him. He's to blame. So he's written to tell her that if she forgives him, she should "tie a yellow ribbon 'round the old oak tree." If there's no yellow ribbon, he'll just go riding by on the bus.

As the miles roll by, all the man thinks about is that oak tree. When he gets home, will there be a yellow ribbon on it?

The song ends in triumph with the entire busload of people cheering as the man sees not one but a hundred yellow ribbons on that old oak tree! His lover not only forgives him, but she exuberantly welcomes him home.

Like the man on the bus, we're fearful of death and what's ahead. We know our own hearts, and we wonder if God will really forgive us, let alone celebrate our coming. But the Lord's Supper reminds us of Christ's sacrifice and of God's forgiveness, and assures us of God's welcome. The yellow ribbons will be there, and we can look ahead with joy and anticipation to being with the Lord.

Please join me in this service of remembrance and celebration and anticipation.