

SERMON 22 January 2017: Rev Dr Brenda Robson

I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE

(John 6: 25 – 40)

Joshua aged 5, drew a picture for me a couple of weeks ago. He called it “Grannie in her church.” It shows the church building with crosses on the top and people sitting in rows. I am standing at the front and what fascinated me was that he drew the communion table. The church Joshua attends has a communion table sitting well behind where the minister stands and it is not used on most Sundays. He is unlikely to have seen the minister stand behind it. He hasn’t been to this church to see the Communion table in a more prominent position yet he drew it in.

We don’t break bread every Sunday as in some church traditions. Some Christians take communion every day. When I worked regularly in Northern Ireland I had a friend who was an advocate and later became a judge. She went into her church and took communion every morning before work.

We don’t break bread every Sunday but we do gather round the table every Sunday, it is always present, always central, as are the font and the pulpit traditionally present. The Word and the two sacraments - communion and baptism.

There are only these two sacraments in the reformed church. A sacrament is a rite in which the grace of God is visibly seen, the Holy Spirit is actively present. A sacrament has been directly ordered by Jesus himself as something that the church must do. We believe that Jesus instructed us to go into the world and baptise, he also instructed us to break bread and share wine to remember him and these are our two sacraments.

The Catholic Church has seven sacraments – as well as baptism and communion they celebrate the sacraments of confirmation, confession, anointing the sick, marriage and holy orders which is the ordination of priests and bishops and so on.

It’s a question I’m often asked about – how many sacraments do we have in the Church of Scotland - and there is some confusion about the answer. It’s a question I was asked when interviewed by the Church of Scotland to become a minister. So now you know the answer if you didn’t already know it!

To get back to communion, the early Christians met in Synagogues and in each other’s homes – they sat around ordinary tables and shared bread and wine just as Jesus had done.

As the centuries past, huge churches were built and corporate worship moved from the home to the church building. Communion or the eucharist took place around the altar. It was often held on a tomb, perhaps a large stone or marble chamber containing the remains or relics of passed saints and martyrs. The focus was on death and sacrifice and martyrdom. Looking back, it seemed, and it was, a long way from what Jesus instituted, an act of remembrance and fellowship and grace and personal relationship with him through the holy spirit.

Reformation saw a return to a simpler sharing of the meal. In the early reformed churches, there was no permanent communion table. The minister's wife would bring her kitchen table from the manse into the church and the women would scrub it clean and prepare it for communion.

The permanent communion table only appeared in Glasgow in the 1830s and it caused some consternation at the time. Some felt that the table itself would become too precious in an idolatrous sense. Others felt that the table would be in some way holy and consecrated and might be abused if treated casually or used for other purposes.

But communion tables have remained and are a feature of most churches.

Various traditions grew around communion, many stemming for the Victorian age. Thankfully we have moved on from some of these traditions. Some of us still remember elders (all male) dressed in black suits, sometimes even tails, black ties. A very sombre affair.

The dress at communion might now be more casual but our attitudes cannot be casual. At one level, we cannot come to the table casually and unprepared, we cannot attend with our minds elsewhere and our attention wandering. The sense of reverence and awe and thanksgiving and wonder must be present.

As a young immature Christian I did not appreciate this. I remember challenging an elder over why she and the other elders looked so sombre and dour during the communion. She patiently tried to explain why but it was a few years before I really understood.

We are remembering the pain and suffering and death of our Lord, we go in our mind's eye to the upper room and we feel the sorrow and distress of a betrayed and rejected saviour. We are acknowledging our own sinfulness and unworthiness that he did this for us. We are so accustomed to hearing what the bread and wine symbolise that we can overlook the enormity of what Christ did for us in that upper room and on the cross.

The same Jesus Christ is here with us right now, in this place, through his Holy Spirit. We are filled with that same spirit as we share bread and wine, as Jesus told us to do.

And then we receive the peace, then we can go out with rejoicing, then we can claim the victory, victory over sin and death.

Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Whoever comes and whoever believes.

I said that at one level we cannot come to the table casually and unprepared. But at another level, we say all are welcome. We might add "All are welcome who love the Lord."

We sing "Just as I am, thine own to be." Jesus said "Come to me."

Jesus meets with each individual person in the breaking of the bread and we as a church would never deny the bread and wine to anyone who wants to receive it.

In many early Presbyterian churches there was a wooden fence around the communion table. Its purpose was to keep out those who were deemed unfit or not ready to share in the sacrament. The worthies could step inside the fence to be served and the unworthies had to stand outside and watch.

I remember a friend who didn't participate in communion one Sunday. This was about 30 years ago but I still think about it. She had exchanged angry words with someone on the way in to church. She then felt unable to receive the bread and wine. She felt that she had sinned and was unworthy to sit at the table. Some people will recognise that concept, that teaching which was prevalent in the past. This woman put herself outside the fence that morning.

In a church in Edinburgh where I spent six months as a student minister, there was a man who attended church every Sunday but never came to Communion services. He felt that he was unworthy to come to the table.

Surely he was missing the point and avoiding the very place where he could enter into a deeper relationship with Christ, receive from Jesus the bread of life to relieve his hunger and to lift him up.

The anxiety about taking communion when is not appropriate to do so and even to be condemned comes from 1st Corinthians 11. We always read 1st Corinthians 11 : 23 - 26 during our communion. But verses 27 to 29 go on to say -

27 Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of sinning against the body and the 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 recognising the body of the Lord, eats and drinks judgment to himself.

There is much discussion about what it means to take the bread and cup "in an unworthy manner." There are different interpretations.

- It could be that those taking the communion elements needed to be fully aware that they represent the sacrifice of Christ by which we are redeemed from sin. Therefore, to participate in communion while not understanding this would be to take it in an unworthy manner.
- Another possibility is that taking the supper with willful, unconfessed sin would be in an unworthy manner.
- The earlier context of 1 Cor. 11 seems to suggest that taking communion in an unworthy manner means to do so while you have a problem with another Christian with whom you are not reconciled. That was my friend's problem when she argued with someone just before the communion service.
- Another view is that some Corinthians were using the communion supper as an opportunity for self-indulgence, which is why Paul mentioned about how some actually got drunk in verse 21.
- A further view is that the person taking communion must be worthy in order to take it. But this view, however, is dangerous because no one is worthy to take communion. Our worthiness comes from Christ, not ourselves.

Christians should realize that communion is for sinners, for Christians who are sinners. It is not that communion makes sinning okay. The Christian should always war against his or her sin, but Christians should not withhold themselves from the table if they are trying to repent of their sins and are struggling to gain victory but have not yet attained it. It is the struggle against sin that is an admission that we must depend upon Christ and his grace. In our struggle, we judge sin to be sin and we fight against it.

It is precisely this struggle that gives us a valid and worthy relationship with Christ, it is the struggle that helps us to recognise and receive grace, it is the struggle that shows us our need for communion as an act of dependence upon Christ's work and grace.

A fence seems to us unthinkable, Jesus broke down barriers and took away obstacles. "Come to me all who are heavy laden."

Here is love vast as the ocean, loving kindness as the flood.

I thought I would stop there.....but a question has been niggling in my mind all week and yesterday exactly the same issue arose in an article in the Scotsman.....and so I see that as confirmation that I should ask the question.

The question is this – “How many people will you invite to sit at your table in 2017? How many people will you invite for lunch or supper or just for coffee? I don’t mean the family and friends who visit you regularly, I mean neighbours and acquaintances and perhaps even strangers who have not been to your house before. It might be someone you only see in church on a Sunday and could get to know better.

You see, what we receive at this table is not for us to keep to ourselves. We come to the table to be filled to overflowing and we are to take that fullness of the holy spirit out into the world, into our daily lives, to reach others with the good news of Jesus and to perhaps even see them here at this table with us in the future.

The article in the newspaper yesterday was headed “Don’t wait to reach out to the lonely.” That is a word for us today. It discusses the Eden Project looking at how some people are isolated and can pass days without speaking to anyone – not just the elderly but stay at home parents who lack adult conversation, the long term unemployed and unwell, newcomers to an area. The Eden Project wants to tackle this problem through its Big Lunch project – which encourages people to have lunch with a neighbour on a specific date in June. The article concludes by saying **“While this is undoubtedly a worthy idea, we should be ashamed of ourselves that it has come to this. By all means, host a Big Lunch on 18th June.....but don’t wait until then to make contact with your neighbours. Do it now, instead.”**

And so I simply leave you with the question to pray about – **“Who will you invite to sit at your table in 2017?”**

AMEN