

**1 CORINTHIANS 11:20-29**  
**ST JOHN'S, 24.3.16 (MAUNDY THURSDAY), 7.30 pm**

**INTRODUCTION**

On Maundy Thursday, we remember the events of the night when Jesus was betrayed. Firstly, he showed his love for his disciples by washing their feet - by taking on the role of the most menial servant. and secondly, he instituted the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion.

I'm going to concentrate tonight on the Holy Communion. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul gives the Christians in Corinth six guidelines to help them make the most of this special meal. Those guidelines still apply to us today. So, what are they?<sup>1</sup>

**1) LOOK BACK**

If we're going to make the most of Holy Communion, we need to remember that it was first celebrated in the context of the Jewish Passover. Jesus and his friends were celebrating the most important feast in the Jewish calendar. They were celebrating the fact that the Lord had delivered his people from Egypt, the land of cruel bondage, doom and death. Ever since then, the president at the Passover meal has broken the unleavened bread and said, 'This is the bread of affliction which our fathers ate in the wilderness'. Imagine the shock-waves which must have gone round that upper room, when Jesus said instead, 'This is my body, which is for you!' In other words, 'tonight, we're celebrating a much greater deliverance than our people's escape from Egypt - tonight we're celebrating the fact that the Lord's

delivering his people from the guilt and doom and bondage of sin' - its not the blood of a lamb applied to your doorposts which will save you - its the blood of the Lamb of God, which will be shed tomorrow for you all, which will set you free from the power of sin and death and hell.' To make the most of Holy Communion, we need to look back with gratitude to what Jesus achieved for us on the cross of Calvary.

**2) LOOK IN**

To make the most of Holy Communion, we need to remember that *if anyone eats the Lord's bread or drinks from his cup in a way that dishonours him, he is guilty of sin against the Lord's body and blood* (v 27). Paul continues, *So then, everyone should examine himself first, and then eat the bread and drink from the cup* (v 28). Paul's alluding to the hunt for leaven, which is part of the Passover tradition. The Lord instructed that during the Passover celebrations, *for seven days no yeast is to be found in your houses* (Exodus 12:19). A Jewish family will carefully remove all yeast, or leaven, from the house as part of the preparations for Passover, but a small bit will always be left, so that there's something to find when the hunt for leaven takes place. Leaven is often used as a symbol of evil in the Bible, because its always swelling and seething up. Before receiving Communion, we should likewise examine ourselves for evil, and clean it out - it can be useful to use the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and our own knowledge of our weaknesses, as a checklist. To make the

most of Holy Communion, we need to look inwards, to examine our own hearts, and repent of any sin we find lurking there.

### **3) LOOK UP**

To make the most of Holy Communion, we need to remember to look up to the Lord. This isn't just another meal. In verse 20, Paul calls it the Lord's Supper. We don't eat in memory of a dead hero. We eat with a living Lord. Jesus has risen from the dead and ascended into heaven: he sits at the head of the table. Somehow, Christ is both the host, who invites us to eat with him, and the bread which nourishes our souls. Some Christians believe that the Communion is the food we need to strengthen us to live the Christian life. Others believe that the Bible provides our spiritual food. They're all wrong. Christ alone is our spiritual food. He communicates himself to us through the Bible, through Holy Communion, and through prayer and the fellowship of other Christians. As we take part in all these activities, we need to look up to Christ, the bread of life, to receive the spiritual food we need to sustain our spiritual lives.

### **4) LOOK AROUND**

To make the most of Holy Communion, we need to remember to look around us to our brothers and sisters in Christ. In vv 20-22, Paul rebukes the Corinthian Christians: *as you eat, each one goes ahead with his own meal, so that some are hungry while others get drunk . . . what do you expect me to say to you about this? Shall I praise you? Of course I don't!* We're called to love one another and respect one

another. Remember that on this same night, Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment: "Love one another, as I have loved you". To make the most of Holy Communion, we need to remember that we're all equally Christ's guests at the Communion table. Nobody's earned the right to be there. We can only come because we've received a free invitation from Jesus, who loves us despite who we are. No matter what gender, race, class, or anything else we are, we come to the Lord's table with empty hands. We have nothing to offer him; we can only receive from him.

### **5) LOOK FORWARD**

To make the most of Holy Communion, we need to remember to look forwards to when the Lord comes again. Paul reminds us here that: *every time you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.* When Jesus comes again, he'll claim his bride, the church, and we'll all sit down to celebrate his marriage supper. Holy Communion looks forward to that great banquet, and in that sense, each time we celebrate Communion, we receive a 'taster' of heaven. When Jesus comes again, we'll sit down with him to eat the whole feast. Holy Communion, as we know it now, will no longer be necessary. But until Jesus comes, Holy Communion keeps us mindful of both Jesus' first and second comings.

### **6) LOOK OUTWARDS**

To make the most of Holy Communion, we need to remember to look outwards to other people, people who don't know about the Lord's

death, or if they do, don't yet understand its significance. Paul writes: *every time you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death*. Mel Gibson's film, The Passion of the Christ also proclaims the Lord's death. But, although I haven't seen the film, one criticism I've heard of it is that it doesn't put the Lord's death into context for those who don't already know the story. The Holy Communion, on the other hand, vividly sets forth both Christ's death, and its context, before people in both word and symbol. Many people have come to a living faith in the Lord Jesus through being present at a Communion service. Why? Because Holy Communion speaks clearly of Christ's death for us, and of our need to accept personally that he died for *me*.

And there's another sense in which we need to remember to look outwards if we're to make the most of Holy Communion. Its purpose is to strengthen us to serve the Lord by serving other people. That's why, at the end of most celebrations of Holy Communion, the president says: 'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord'. Michael Green puts it like this: 'The Eucharist is battle rations for Christian warriors, not cream cake for Christian layabouts'.<sup>2</sup> As we receive Communion, we also receive a challenge to go out and be Christ's broken body here on earth, for all the bleeding, needy people we meet, to look them in the face and say, with Christ, 'my body . . . for you'. To make the most of Holy Communion, we need to remember to look outwards to other people.

## CONCLUSION

So, as we celebrate the Lord's Supper in a few minutes' time, let's do as Paul challenges us, and *look back* with gratitude to what Jesus achieved for us on the cross of Calvary; let's *look inwards*, to examine our own hearts, and repent of any sin we find lurking there; let's *look up* to Christ, the bread of life, to receive the spiritual food we need to sustain our spiritual lives; let's *look around* us to our brothers and sisters in Christ; let's *look forwards* to when the Lord comes again; and let's *look outwards* to other people. Let's make the most of this Holy Communion, as we thank the Lord for this great feast which he left us as his memorial, and let's make the most of the times we celebrate Holy Communion in the future, proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes.

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<sup>1</sup> The six main points in this sermon are taken from Michael Green, To Corinth with Love, (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1982), pp 46-49

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p 49