

HOLY COMMUNION TRAINING AT *RIVERGATE*

Theories about Holy Communion vary in the wider church. Roman Catholics believe in "transubstantiation" where the bread and wine literally becomes the body of Jesus (but still looks, tastes and smells like bread and wine). Lutherans believe in "cosubstantiation" which is that the bread and wine can become the body of Jesus yet also remain as bread and wine.

The understanding of Holy Communion that we have at *Rivergate* reflects the thinking of the 16th Century reformers Calvin and Zwingli. Zwingli believed that Holy Communion was a symbol or badge of faith and was a memorial of Jesus. Calvin, on the other hand, tended to focus on the ability of Holy Communion to strengthen faith.

WHAT WE BELIEVE AT *RIVERGATE*

At *Rivergate*, we believe that the bread and wine is symbolic of Christ's self sacrifice. When we share it, it helps us tell the story of Christ's death on our behalf. *Rivergate* therefore treats Holy Communion as a memorial of Christ's sacrifice which we choose to celebrate in obedience to Christ's command to remember him (Lk 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24-25). We believe Holy Communion proclaims the ministry of Christ, our unity in Christ, and our need to engage in the mission of Christ. We also believe that by remembering Christ as he commanded, we can expect Christ to reveal himself to our hearts - as he promised in John 14:21.

Rivergate takes seriously the Apostle Paul's injunction on us to celebrate Holy Communion reverently having first prepared ourselves by forgiving anyone who has hurt us (Mt 5:23-24; 1 Cor 11:23-29). Anyone can conduct Holy Communion at *Rivergate* provided they have been given permission to do so by the Senior Pastor of the Board of Leaders of the *Rivergate Christian Community*. For example, it would normally be quite in order for a leader of any of our discipleship groups to conduct Holy Communion.

We would normally expect to celebrate Holy Communion once a fortnight in each congregation at *Rivergate*.

FIVE WAYS OF INTRODUCING HOLY COMMUNION TO A GROUP OF BELIEVERS (FOR YOU TO ADAPT FOR YOUR OWN USE).

Option 1)

"Jesus asked us to remember him in the simple act of sharing in bread and wine. As such, Holy Communion looks back with gratitude for the sacrifice Jesus made in taking the blame for all the bad things we think and do that would otherwise make us ineligible for life with God.

*On the night Jesus was betrayed, he took bread, broke it,
(pick up the bread, hold it aloft, and break it in two. Hold out the two pieces.)
and said, 'This is my body broken for you'.*

*Likewise, after supper, Jesus took the cup of wine and said,
(Pick up the wine goblet and hold it aloft)
'This cup of wine is my blood which is poured out for you to take away your sins. Drink this,' said Jesus, 'all of you.'*

It was also at this supper that Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, so Holy Communion not only looks back, but it commissions us to serve one another today. The act of Communion binds us together as the body of Christ, a people committed to Christ's mission of service and sacrificial love.

Finally, Holy Communion is also a foretaste of the Heavenly banquet Christians look forward to when God restores us fully to himself and makes all things new. Christians are a people of hope.

As such, this meal celebrates the past, the present and the future."

(Say a prayer of thanks for the bread and the wine which represent the body and blood of Jesus sacrificed in order to rescue us back to God. Then share the bread and wine together.)

Option 2)

Luke 22:15 records Jesus saying that he had eagerly looked forward to sharing the last supper with his disciples. According to Luke, the meal that they shared was the Passover meal which meant that during the meal they would have sung some of the Hallel Psalms (Psalms of praise) including Psalm 118 which has the words: "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." The fact that Jesus could look forward to this meal and sing this song knowing he was about to die points to the level of commitment he had to doing his Father's will and his joy at his Father rescuing humanity back to himself.

Jesus wanted no one to miss out. In Matthew 26:27, Jesus says "Drink this, all of you". At the last supper recorded by John, Jesus linked it with washing the disciples feet. When he did this, Peter objected but Jesus insisted strongly

that unless Peter let Jesus wash him, he could not be with Jesus. By saying this, Jesus was not only teaching us to be servants to each other but was also making it plain that all of us have to allow Jesus to wash us clean of sin. No one should miss out. Jesus was pointing to the fact that he was about to shed his blood on the cross to pay for the sins of all people so that they are made right with God. He wanted everyone to share in this act of rescue.

(Say a prayer of thanks for the bread and the wine which represent the body and blood of Jesus sacrificed in order to rescue us back to God. Then share the bread and wine together.)

Option 3)

John the Baptist called Jesus “the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (Jn 1:29). What does this mean? Its significance stems from events that happened many centuries earlier. When the Hebrew people were enslaved and brutalised in Egypt, God sent ten plagues of judgement on the land of Egypt. The last plague was the death of all first born animals and humans in the land. God told his people, through Moses, to take the blood of a lamb and smear it on the door posts of their huts. This would prevent the angel of death bringing God's judgement on those inside and the judgement of God would “pass over” them. Ever since that day, the Jews have celebrated this Passover every year.

Another key ceremony that the Jews celebrated each year occurred when the Jewish High Priest would sprinkle the the blood of a lamb in the Holy of Holies, the most sacred place in the temple. The death of a lamb and its sacrifice of blood was to symbolically atone for the sins of all Gods' people. This too, was a foreshadowing of what God would do later through Jesus.

When Jesus lifted the cup and said, “this is my blood ...which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt 26:28) Jesus was saying that he was the true lamb of God who was shedding his blood to atone for the sins of all people in order to make them worthy of life with God. His blood would cause the judgement of God to pass over them ...and us.

(Say a prayer of thanks for the bread and the wine which represent the body and blood of Jesus sacrificed in order to rescue us back to God. Then share the bread and wine together.)

Option 4)

During the Bronze Age in the Middle East, the strongest bond that could exist between two people occurred when they agreed to enter into a blood covenant with each other. The ceremony associated with this covenant involved both people cutting their wrists and letting their blood mingle together. The end of the ceremony typically concluded with a covenant meal.

When Jesus ate his last supper with his disciples, he deliberately turned the meal into a covenant meal, a meal that represented the strongest bond

possible between two people. However, in this case, it was a covenant between God and humankind. Jesus took a cup of wine and asked them all to drink it. He said, "This is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28).

God chooses to commit himself to us in covenant. This covenant commitment is so strong that God was prepared to sacrifice himself as Jesus to die to take the blame for our sins so we could be made worthy of life with God. On the cross, Jesus exchanged our sinfulness for his holiness so we could be made right with God.

(Say a prayer of thanks for the bread and the wine which represent the body and blood of Jesus sacrificed in order to rescue us back to God. Then share the bread and wine together.)

Option 5)

Luke's gospel records the last supper Jesus had with his disciples as being a Passover meal. This meal celebrated the time when God's judgement "passed over" the Hebrew people.

Centuries earlier, God's people had been enslaved and cruelly abused in Egypt. As a result of this, God sent ten plagues of judgement on the land of Egypt. The last plague was the death of all first born animals and humans in the land. God told his people, through Moses, to take the blood of a lamb and smear it on the door posts of their huts. This would prevent the angel of death bringing God's judgement on those inside and the judgement of God would "pass over" them. Ever since that day, the Jews have celebrated the Passover day each year.

By making the last supper the Passover meal, Jesus was making it plain that the shedding of his blood on our behalf would cause God's judgement to "pass over" us. Our sins would be paid for by Jesus' blood.

Intriguingly, the ceremony of the Passover typically involved hiding half a loaf of bread. This was to symbolise the fact that the Messiah was still hidden and was yet to be revealed. It is therefore significant that Jesus takes the bread and instead of hiding it and eating the other half after a prayer of thanks to God, he says that the bread represents his body which would be broken and given in payment for the sins of all people (1 Cor 11:24). It was a dreadful prophecy about himself. It is significant, however, that there was no emphasis on hiding half the bread. This represents the truth that the Messiah is revealed and has given all of himself to us.

(Say a prayer of thanks for the bread and the wine which represent the body and blood of Jesus sacrificed in order to rescue us back to God. Then share the bread and wine together.)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE ORIGIN AND MEANING OF HOLY COMMUNION

Holy Communion is probably the one act that has been associated with Christians more than any other. But, what is Holy Communion? Is it a ceremony; a memorial; a time when we are empowered by the Holy Spirit; a 'club' ritual; a mystery; a retelling of the Christian story; a reminder of our roots; a communal activity designed to build community and a sense of belonging; or is it a joyful anticipation of renewed fellowship with Jesus in the coming Kingdom of God?

Holy Communion is also known as the Eucharist (from the Greek = *eucharistia*, meaning "thanksgiving"). It derives from the ceremony Jesus instituted during the last supper which he ate with his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion. The different gospels record slight variations between the accounts of the 'last supper'. These reflect:

- the different theologies each gospel writer wanted to emphasise;
- the different traditions and ways this event was celebrated in the early church. (Jesus quite often blessed food and ate it in company with his disciples. This tradition, coupled with the annual Passover celebration probably meant that early Christians both had informal *agapé* meals (love feasts) and a more formal annual Passover celebration which commemorated Jesus' death.)

Matthew, Mark and Luke record the 'last supper' as the actual Passover meal eaten the day before his arrest and crucifixion. Their emphasis was on this supper being a memorial of Jesus' earthly life and sacrifice (looking back), and an anticipation of renewed fellowship with Jesus in the coming Kingdom of God (looking forward).

The ritual that Jesus followed with the bread and wine has much in common with a normal Jewish family meal. The Jews were never allowed to forget their utter dependency on God. At meal-times, the head of the house (or honoured guest) would say the *berakah*. He broke off a piece of bread, ate it and passed the rest of the bread to the others saying: "*Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the world, who bringest forth bread from the earth.*" (Note: It was certainly Jesus' practice to give thanks at meal-times (Mk 6:41: 8:6; 14:22).

After the meal, the chief guest or head of the house said the concluding *berakah*: "*Let us give thanks*", after which he would sip from a cup of wine before handing the cup to the others. (This was the basis Jesus took when he instructed us to remember him with thanksgiving in Holy Communion).

The specific ritual of the Passover feast included:

- 1) Drinking the first cup of wine, then telling the Passover story and singing Psalms 113 and 114.
- 2) The second cup was drunk and the main meal eaten.
- 3) The third cup (cup of blessing) was drunk and the *Hallel* was sung (Ps 115-118).
- 4) A fourth cup of wine was taken to celebrate God's coming kingdom (Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words* pp.84ff).

It was therefore a time of looking back and looking forward, both of which served to reinforce the identity and cohesion of the current faith community. These aspects

help us understand the function of our 'eucharist' today.

John, however speaks of the 'last supper' as a normal meal eaten shortly BEFORE the Passover feast (Jn 13:1-30). This allows John to say that Jesus was actually crucified on Passover day. (In fact, it is unlikely that Jewish law would allow anyone to be executed on a religious feast day.) John perhaps alters his chronology for theological purposes. Because he wanted to equate Jesus with the paschal lamb traditionally sacrificed at the Passover feast, he recorded Jesus as dying at same time the lamb was traditionally killed.

The Passover was a feast in which the Jews anticipated the coming of a Messiah and which commemorated the time when the Jews were spared from death when they were enslaved in Egypt many centuries earlier (Ex 12). At that time, the firstborn of every family in Egypt was to die in order to persuade Pharaoh to let the Jews he had enslaved go free. The only households that would be spared any death would be those Jewish households in which a lamb had been sacrificed and its blood sprinkled on the door-frame of each house. The blood of the lamb therefore signified salvation from death. John may have wanted to make the parallel that Jesus' sacrifice also signified salvation from death, - eternal death.

In each of the accounts of the 'last supper' recorded in Mt 26:26-29; Mk 14:22-25; Lk 22:14-20 and 1 Cor 11:23-25, Jesus identifies himself with the food that is broken and spilled out to feed his followers. Certainly, the close proximity of Jesus' death to the Jewish Passover feast helped Christians understand that Jesus was sacrificed so that others could be saved.

John, however, makes no mention of the bread and the wine but rather uses the occasion to speak about Jesus washing the disciple's feet. This washing with water was not only a practical humble service (normally carried out by the most lowly slave) but also symbolised the forgiveness of sins. In this way, John records the requirement of the disciples to be servants of each other in the same way:

"If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (Jn 13:14).

As such, a commitment to discipleship and service is part of the eucharistic tradition we see in the gospels.

HISTORY

The first century church

The tradition of the eucharist began very early amongst Christians. It was already a tradition by the time Paul wrote to the Corinthians c. 54 AD.

A variety of forms probably existed:

- 1) Probably most common was the informal *agapé* meal (love feast). By the time Paul wrote 1 Cor 11:17-34 however, Paul was wanting to make it clear that it was not primarily an occasion to satisfy hunger, but a time to:
 - remember Jesus;
 - acknowledge the new covenant Jesus made with us by the shedding of his

- blood;
 - look forward to Christ returning.
- (The parallels with the Jewish Passover meal are obvious here.)

2) An annual Passover ritual

The second century church

The ritual moved more from an *agapé* meal to a more specialised eucharistic liturgy.

This ritual was sometimes misunderstood by non-Christians who accused Christians of cannibalism. Athanasius defended it against this charge in his "Supplication for the Christians" which he sent to Marcus Aurelius in about 177 AD.

The third century church

The eucharist was taken very seriously, particularly by the active North African church. Bishop Cyprian of Carthage would not allow a lapsed Christian to share in the eucharist until a lengthy period of penitence.

The fourth century church

Christianity was adopted as the official religion of the Roman Empire by Emperor Constantine. This allowed the eucharist to develop into an extravagant elaborate ritual.

St Augustine said that the goodness of the presiding official at the eucharist didn't effect the value of the eucharist provided it was carried out properly. He taught that God acted in love towards those participating in the eucharist. This had the effect of:

- reducing the requirement for 'goodness' when attending or presiding over eucharist
- making the eucharist a means of receiving God's grace rather than it being a memorial of Jesus' life and an anticipation of future glory.

The Middle Ages

The elaborate liturgy was shortened into a more simple 'mass' which could be performed by a priest, even without assistants. This was recited in Latin, which most people didn't understand. The role of the people was reduced to that of silent spectator.

The church also discussed whether the bread and the wine were 'symbols' or whether they really became the flesh and blood of Christ. Aquinas taught that the elements were transformed at the time of consecration into the substance of Christ's body and blood, even though they remained looking the same on the outside. This was called 'transubstantiation'.

The 16th century Reformation

Martin Luther suggested that the elements remained the same by touch, taste but that by faith, Christ himself could be known through the experience. As the two realities were present together, this was called 'consubstantiation'.

There were, however, a variety of understandings held by the great religious reformers of the time:

- Luther - believed that God gave faith through the sacraments
- Calvin - believed that God strengthened faith through the sacraments
- Zwingli - believed that the sacraments were irrelevant to faith and were only 'badges' of faith.

Today

There are many understandings of the meaning of eucharist

1) It is a memorial of Jesus sharing himself with his disciples.

"...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.'"

(1 Cor 11:24)

It is a time when Christians retell their story and remind themselves of the basis of their hope. The Christian story is retold in a powerful way in that the eucharist re-enacts the gospel each time it is celebrated.

"...bread is the result of crushing and baking corn, just as wine is the result of fermentation of crushed grapes. Bread and wine alike are therefore intrinsic embodiments of that pattern of dying and living in Christ to which God is drawing us, inevitably, whenever we do this in remembrance of Him."

(Stevenson, K. *Eucharist and Offering* Pueblo Publishing Company, 1986 p.236)

2) The eucharist celebrates the inauguration of a new covenant (agreement or oath) between God and humankind.

From the 6-7th century BC the most prominent understanding of covenant was the agreement between God and Israel (instituted through Moses) whereby the relationship between God and the people was spelt out, as were the obligations of that relationship).

In Jewish history, the ritual of making of a covenant between two people often included the shedding of blood (Gen 15:7-10,17-18).

The new covenant that Jesus instituted at the last supper therefore celebrates the new relationship we can ALL have with God, made possible through the shedding of Jesus' blood.

"This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:25)

The link with the Jewish Passover feast is very strong. Just as the blood of the sacrificed lamb made life possible, the blood of Jesus enables the new covenant to come into effect by which all who come to Christ will have eternal life.

"Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Mt 26:28)

- 3) The eucharist reminds us of the lordship of Jesus. It calls us to live as Jesus lived. Jesus said at the last supper:

"If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet". (Jn 13:14)

Jesus identifies himself with the broken bread and wine on the table. This is symbolic of Jesus being the sacrificial lamb on the altar. His example challenges us to sacrifice our lives to God as well.

- 4) The eucharist is an opportunity to experience the presence of Christ in our lives as the risen Lord. This highlights the sense of mystery inherent in the eucharist. God and his people come together at this time. Jn 14:21 teaches that Jesus reveals himself to us in our acts of obedience to him. Celebrating the eucharist can be considered as an act of obedience. We do it in response to Jesus' command. As such, it is reasonable to expect that Jesus will reveal more of himself through it.

"God himself acts in the sphere of the actively believing, doing and celebrating Church ..."

(Schillebeeckx E. *The Eucharist* Sheed and Ward, 1968 p.151)

It has been the experience of Christians throughout the ages that Jesus is somehow made known to them as the risen Lord through the eucharist.

- 5) The eucharist celebrates catholicity and unity. It is probably the most definitive act that links Christians in all places and throughout all periods of history. It is a symbol of Christians being in community as the body of Christ working together under Christ's direction to the glory of the Father.

The eucharist celebrates the unity we have in Christ. The act of sharing the bread and wine together highlights this.

"Holy Communion is surely always falling short of its true purpose if it fails to produce some sense of solidarity with our fellow worshippers."

(Phillips, J.B. *Appointment with God* Wyvern Books, 1962 p.40)

- 6) It unites Christians in the joyful hope of renewed fellowship with Jesus in the future Kingdom of God. Like the Passover, it looks forward to the coming Kingdom. It picks up the Jewish theme of anticipating the future messianic banquet.

"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (1 Cor 11:26)

"And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, 'Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes" (Lk 22:17-18).

"...as my Father appointed a kingdom for me, so do I appoint

*for you that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom,
and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel."*
(Lk 22:29-30)

7) It allows us to give grateful thanks to God.

*"To offer glory and honour to God ...is to set ourselves the task of seeing all of
history - our own tiny bits of it included - under the gaze of eternity."*

(Stevenson, K. *Accept This Offering: The Eucharist as Sacrifice Today*
S.P.C.K. 1989 p.57)

The eucharist:

- celebrates God's salvific action through Jesus in the **past**;
- gives identity, direction and empowering for the **present**;
- joyfully anticipates the **future**.

Celebrate it well.

Dr. Nick Hawkes (August, 2005)