

28/03/2024 Maundy Thursday 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

When St Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians
He was writing to a group of baptised people
Who had a lot of spiritual growing up to do.
Read through the letter, and you'll quickly realise
That the Corinthian Christians needed a lot of instruction
When it came to understanding even the basics of the faith
Including the sort of thing that we learn in confirmation –
Like, what the Lord's Supper is, and how to receive it worthily.

Now, although most of us here have been confirmed in the faith
We are not beyond the need of a refresher on the basics.
So tonight, as we prepare to receive the Lord's Supper,
Let's receive again the teaching that St Paul received from the Lord,
And let's let the word of the Lord grow us further in Christian maturity.

The teaching that we heard from St Paul tonight
Actually came in response to conflict in the church
And conflict in the *worship life* of the Corinthian congregation.
Let's listen to the direct context of the reading: St Paul writes: **Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse.**

This is a pretty strong negative evaluation of their worship life:
St Paul says that their church gatherings are worse than useless:
They are so bad, that it would be better if they didn't meet at all.
Well, what's the problem? What makes things so bad?

St Paul says: **For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine.**

OK: they come together divided, not united.
It's like a dreaded Christmas lunch of a dysfunctional family:
Yes, they are together in one sense
But their togetherness is marked by factions and fighting.

In fact, St Paul says this: **When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!**

In other words: they might say that they are coming together

To celebrate the Lord's Supper

But they are in fact treating this gift from the Lord

As if it is a normal meal; and worse than this

Those who have plenty are eating and drinking,

Without concern for the needs of their fellow Christians:

That is, there were evidently well-off people

Eating and drinking to excess, while they were together in church,

With evidently poor Christians who could only look on in their need.

This was not Christian love at work;

It was an abuse the supper of the Lord,

And it gets the strong disapproval of the one sent by Jesus

By the Apostle Paul.

Now, St Paul knows that because he is an Apostle

His authority is not his own, it comes from Jesus.

So, he deals with the issue pastorally

That is, he uses God's word to remedy this situation,

And to bring God's love into play.

Listen to how he starts: **For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you,**

What St Paul is about to hand on is not his own teaching,

But the teaching of his Lord and theirs,

The teaching of Jesus.

A number of times in 1 Corinthians St Paul talks about

Handing on Jesus' teaching:

When it comes to the resurrection (chapter 15) or marriage (chapter 7)

Or orderly worship in the church (chapter 14).

This is important because human words

Do not have power bring lasting peace,

But Jesus' word brings healing and wholeness,

And St Paul hands on *Jesus'* word to the Corinthian Christians;

He hands on words that we know very well: **For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'** In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, **'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.

The meal that Jesus started, St Paul is saying,

Is not an ordinary meal,

And the food that is served is not ordinary food.

The bread, Jesus says, is his body

And the wine, he says, is his blood

And in eating and drinking this bread and wine

His body and blood

We have a new way of dealing with God

One that comes from the forgiveness of sins

That Jesus won for us on the cross,

So that every time we eat and drink at this meal

We proclaim Jesus' death.

We proclaim Jesus' death: That is:

Our remembrance of Jesus is not simply a mental act,

It is an action: taking bread and wine, giving thanks,

Eating and drinking.

That is, we show in our words and actions

That we are sharing in the benefits of his sacrifice

With our brothers and sisters in Christ,

That with them, in eating Jesus' body and drinking his blood,

We receive the gift of the forgiveness of sins,
And so grow together in the love of God.

That's why St Paul can go on to say these words: **Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord.**

Now we know from the context at least part
Of what it means to eat in an *unworthy* manner:
It means to treat the Lord's Supper as normal food;
It means to treat one's fellow Christians
As wealthier or poorer patrons at a restaurant
Rather than brothers and sisters at the meal of a family
Who come together in mutual love.

To put it another way:
If we fail to see that the bread and wine of communion
Are the body and blood of the Lord
We will also fail to see that our brother and sister Christians
Are the body of Christ gathered together by him.
If we think that the Lord's Supper is a normal meal
We will not come in reverence
And we will not come in repentance,
Ready to receive the forgiveness of our sins,
Rather, we will treat the Lord's Supper as something
That we create from our own resources
Or that we feel we cannot enjoy because of our lack.

This is way St Paul can go on to say: **Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup.**

In our tradition we examine ourselves in light of God's law:
As we think about our lives in relation to the Ten Commandments
And Jesus' command that we love one another as he has loved us,
So, we come confessing our need for forgiveness;
We come confessing the unity we have
With all the baptised people of God;
And we come confessing that the bread of communion

Is the body of Christ
And that the wine of communion is his blood,
And that by eating and drinking we receive
Exactly what Jesus says we will receive: the forgiveness of sins.

St Paul also gives this warning to us: **For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. *But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged.***

That is, if we confess our own sins, rather than the sins of others
If, like the penitent tax collector, we come to God
Asking for the atoning sacrifice that only he can provide,
If we come, as we come trusting Jesus' word
Then we can be assured that God will not condemn us
But receive us in his mercy and love.

In all this St Paul concludes that the Lord deals with his people
Not as a harsh judge, but as a loving father
Who disciplines his children for their own growth in life.
This is what St Paul writes: **But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.**

This is the teaching that we receive from St Paul,
Teaching on the gift of the Lord's Supper,
A gift that Jesus instituted on the night when he was betrayed
A gift in which we will soon participate.
So let us receive this teaching as children of the Father,
As brothers and sisters in the one family,
As people who have the common need for forgiveness
And who, in receiving forgiveness in Jesus' name
Grow, by the power of the Spirit, in love for one another
To the glory of God the Father. Amen!