

Bread of Life: Bishops' teaching series

3 - Remembering: *anamnesis* – Bishop Rod Thomas

Welcome to the third of our 'Bread of Life' series. Today we're going to explore the way in which Holy Communion helps us to remember Christ's death.

Memories are powerful things, aren't they? They can on the one hand inspire us to live better and on the other they can restart old animosities. They can give pleasure or pain. What you remember plays an important part in your outlook on life. As Shakespeare put it 'purpose is a slave to memory'.

It's no surprise therefore that the Bible urges us time and again to remember certain things - because as we remember we remind ourselves of the character of God, of his actions in history, of the promises he has made, and of our place in his plans – our purpose.

In this session of our 'Bread of Life' series we're going to look at the command to 'remember' that our Lord Jesus gave at the Last Supper. In 1 Corinthians 11, the Apostle Paul narrates the command in this way:

"For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when 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." In the same way also he took the Cup, 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 this Cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

These words are repeated in the prayer of consecration at our Holy Communion services. In the Book of Common Prayer, the remembering aspect is held to be so important that the words "memory" and "remembrance" are mentioned four times in the prayer of consecration.

So how does this great act of remembering change our own outlook on life with God today?

1. Remembering God's Redemption

The first time these words were said was at a Passover meal that has come to be known as the Last Supper.

The Passover itself was a great act of remembrance. Deuteronomy 16 tells the ancient people of God to keep the Passover "that all the days of your life you may remember the day when you came out of the land of Egypt."

Time and again that same Old Testament book of the Bible tells the people to remember and not forget - and this is for a number of reasons. Chapter 8 of Deuteronomy says that they are to remember the way God led them for 40 years in the wilderness "that he might humble you." Chapter 9 tells them to remember how they provoked the Lord their God during their desert wanderings. And the point of all this is to stop God's people thinking that they have achieved their salvation by their own efforts and to remember that it's all down to God's mercy in taking the initiative to deliver them.

So now, when we come back to our modern day communion service we can see part of the reason for our own remembering. We take the bread and the wine not in order to offer anything to God but rather, in part at least, to be reminded of what God has done for us. We have been freed from slavery - but in the New Testament this is described as having different forms. In Paul's epistle to the Romans, it's slavery to sin and death; in his letter to the Galatians it's to the basic principles of this world; and in Hebrews it's slavery to the fear of death. And when you think about it, unless you know you've been freed by Christ for eternal life with him, we are in a form of slavery aren't we? We are enslaved to acting as though this world is all there is - so that if we don't pack everything into our present lives then we will have missed out when death eventually comes to us. And that fear forces us to press on in the desperate search for fulfilment. It's wonderful to know that Christ has freed us; that all our significance comes from being linked with him not through the various things we have managed to achieve. And such is the pressure of everyday life that we need to keep being reminded of this.

I remember meeting a 17 or 18 year old girl who described, prior to her confirmation, her joy at discovering the freedom which Christ brings. She had been known as a 'party girl' and all her social media posts were designed to bolster this image, but when she met Christ and was united to him, she said that she discovered that her identity was no longer that of trying to live up to an image but instead was in Christ. She said how wonderfully freeing this was for her.

So we come to communion to remember afresh our liberation and to receive grace.

2. Remembering Christ's Sacrifice

Now secondly, Holy Communion helps us to remember Christ's sacrifice.

As each element of communion is taken - the bread and then the wine - we are told to take each in remembrance of Christ's broken body and his outpoured blood. It's a very graphic way of remembering. So graphic in fact that the early Christians were accused by their Roman prosecutors of being cannibals.

The graphic nature of this act of eating and drinking springs from the fact that Christ's death is consistently presented in the Bible as a sacrifice. Hebrews 9, for example, compares Jesus' death with Old Testament sacrifices:

“for if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.”

And in Revelation, Jesus is described as “the lamb who was slain.”

In Old Testament times, God’s people knew that sacrifices were necessary if they were to continue in relationship with their God, but at the same time they also knew that the sacrificing of animals was insufficient.

Hebrews 10 describes Christ going back to the Old Testament Psalm 40 in saying “you have neither desired nor taking pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), then he added, “Behold, I have come to do your will.” He does away with the first in order to establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” (10: 8 – 10)

In other words, the Old Testament sacrifices were necessary but they only pointed to the “once for all” sacrifice of Jesus Christ - the sacrifice that would truly be effective for all.

When we eat the bread and drink the wine we are actively remembering that “once for all” sacrifice – we’re personally appropriating it. At the time of the Reformation there was much controversy over how this personal appropriation occurred. While all the reformers agreed that it would be wrong to imagine that Christ’s sacrifice was being freshly presented to God, there was controversy over whether the bread and wine actually became the body and blood of Christ. While Luther argued for the real presence of Jesus Christ in some way on the grounds that there was a sacramental union between Christ’s body and blood and the bread and wine, the Swiss reformer Zwingli said that the Lord’s Supper was solely a memorial meal - a representational way of remembering Christ’s sacrifice. Calvin took a different line. He said that although the bread and wine were indeed just signs, separate from and pointing to Christ’s body and blood, nevertheless believers partook of Christ’s body and blood in a spiritual sense - and this latter position was adopted in our own Church of England Book of Common Prayer.

Article 28 of the 39 articles says:

“the body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten in the supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner. And the mean whereby the body of Christ is received and eaten in the supper is faith.”

So we eat and drink in remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice, but in that action we are not just remembering; we are also expressing our own personal connection with Christ’s death.

Holy Communion helps us to remember first, God’s redemption, secondly Christ’s sacrifice; and now thirdly:

3. Remembering God's Promises

Holy Communion is a powerful reminder of the promises of the gospel. Sharing in bread and wine is a tangible reminder of all the blessings that flow from the cross; forgiveness of our sins, union with Christ, membership of God's family and a share in Christ's resurrection life. But more than that. It's a reminder of the basis on which all God's promises apply to us. We are forgiven and adopted into God's family not because we deserve it, or because we've worked hard to make ourselves acceptable but because of all that Christ has done for us. We are relying on his death alone.

When I was a vicar, I used to hear people occasionally say that they didn't think that they were in a fit state to take communion. In one way, it's quite right for Christians to examine themselves before taking communion. The Book of Common Prayer explicitly urges people to do this. Indeed advance notice of the advent of Holy Communion is to be given by the priest specifically to enable people to prepare - perhaps by making up a quarrel with a neighbour - before coming to communion. And the reason such examination is necessary is because Christ's death itself reminds us of the serious consequences of sin: it meets with God's judgement. Unforgiven sin is something that keeps us from a relationship with God both now and in eternity.

But in another way, however conscious we are of our own failings, we shouldn't let that awareness keep us away from communion because through it we remind ourselves that all of our sins were taken by Christ when he died, and all the benefits of his righteous obedience were applied to us. We come humbly because we are contributing nothing to our salvation. But we also come joyfully, because that "once for all" sacrifice which we are remembering, means that all God's promises apply to us.

*+Rod Thomas
Bishop of Maidstone*