

This term we are looking at scripture passages which have inspired or impacted individual members of our preaching team. I have chosen today's readings because they are intrinsically linked to the act of worship which defines my personal faith, namely Holy Communion or to give it its posh name, The Eucharist.

Some say I am passionate about Holy Communion, but I think a more accurate description is that my faith is Passion centred. By that I mean Christ's Passion – the final days and events of Jesus's life, death and resurrection.

It is not my passion, but Christ's Passion which forms, fuels and frees me to be the disciple of Christ I aspire to be and were I to be judged by just one statement, then it would be: I believe the Eucharist is always celebrated in the shadow of the cross.

Even before I was taught any Eucharistic theology, I always had a sense of the past and the future of Christ's Passion becoming reconciled uniquely in the present as I sensed Christ repeatedly revealing himself to me in Holy Communion, just as he had once done to that couple at the Emmaus meal.

It was as if Jesus was the older brother I never had, putting his arm around my shoulder encouraging me to go forward to receive the bread and wine. That is not to say that I do not recognize Christ at other times, just that it is during Communion that I feel closest to him. And I know I'm not alone in this respect.

A friend who lives on her own explained to me that in pre-Covid times, the peace at the commencement of the Eucharist was the only time in the week when she was hugged by someone and when she was being hugged, she felt closest to Jesus *'as if it was Jesus himself hugging me'*.

Sadly, since we have stopped hugging, Communion has not been the same for my friend. As she put it, no hug, no presence of Jesus. Another friend has said something similar about the wave of peace which we have adopted. She said *'it's as if Christ is waving goodbye to me and once again, I am on my own'*.

These comments sadden me because, despite the current restrictions, I find that Communion is first and foremost a celebration; it is joyous and feeds my faith equally through both Word and Sacrament. In this respect, I see the Eucharist as a whole meal to be enjoyed in full.

And at its best, the Eucharist unites the church family together both with Christ and with one another in ways that words alone cannot. That is why I believe the Eucharist is a participatory drama rather than a spectator event. But for a number of years, I despaired that I was only participating in the drama 3 or 4 times a month. That was, until one day when I was preparing a sermon on John 15 – our gospel reading - and afterwards at supper, I came across this bottle of wine. **[held up]** The reading and wine started me thinking.

As our gospel reading makes clear, Jesus revealed that he was and is the true vine and God the Father is the vine grower, which means that I am but a branch of the vine at best or perhaps merely a stick. But as anyone who has watched The Stickman with their grandchildren at Christmas knows, sometimes even sticks have bright ideas.

I don't know where and why the rumour first started that I knew a thing or two about wine, but as any wine buff will tell you, you can learn an awful lot about the wine even before opening the bottle. This bottle tells me quite a lot about Jesus and his instruction to drink wine in remembrance of him. **{photo}** This wine is called *Lobo e Falcoa* – the wolf and the falcon.

In mythology a wolf raised Romulus and Remus the twins who grew up and founded Rome, so that calls to mind the Roman Empire. The falcon has always been the ancient symbol of princes and of

course one of the names Jesus is known by is the prince of peace. {photo}

Then, at the cross there stood a Roman centurion. Like this label, his cloak was red. He bore witness by saying 'surely this man was the son of God'. The prince of peace died on the cross with a Roman looking up at him, just as the wolf on this label is looking up at the falcon.

On the reverse we see that the wine comes from the Tejo region, the northern part of Portugal. Ask any Portuguese wine drinker and they will tell you that it cannot be anything other than poor wine, nothing ever good comes out of the north. Sound familiar?

All that and I'm only just getting round to opening the wine. First, when I remove the foil, it reminds me of Paul's teaching that you do not need to be circumcised in order to follow Christ. {using winged corkscrew, start to open wine}

And then I pause when I see Christ on the cross {levers horizontal} I'm reminded he took on humankind's sins in a once and for all event.

My response is always to offer him my thanks and praise. {move wings to praise position}

And then I'm reminded of Christ's words in Matthew 26 **Pour wine** *He took a cup and after giving thanks he gave it to them saying 'Drink from it all of you for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'*

Then I realize what is so significant about this act. You cannot fit the old covenant of animal sacrifices into the new covenant because Jesus's perfect one-and-for-all sacrifice voids and nullifies the need for Old testament sacrifices.

Jesus shed his blood to take away the sins of the world, your sins, my sins, everyone's sins yesterday today and forever.

Jesus continues by saying 'I tell you, I will never drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom'

And when I kneel at the altar rail, I am not offered the cup of God's wrath as Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane, but Christ's own cup of salvation.

In the gospel accounts of the Last Supper, we are told to do this as often as we drink it in remembrance of Christ. In other words, every time we drink this wine, we are to remember Christ.

And so every time I open a bottle of wine, and particularly this one, I not only reminded of Christ dying on the cross, but how truly significant it is for me.

I didn't choose the true vine; he chose me. In awe and gratitude, {Sip wine} I sip the blood red wine not only in remembrance of Christ, but also in anticipation of that day when he will drink it again, with me, as he promised.

Let's be clear. I am not suggesting in any way that I partake of Holy Communion whenever I open this or a similar bottle of wine. But what I am saying is that I can and do as Jesus instructed and remember him every time, I drink wine.

Memories are important, as all who have been bereaved will confirm. Memories are the treasure trove from the past which we can grasp hold of today and carry forward with us in our daily lives. That is really all I'm doing. When I open this wine, I remember Jesus and he therefore continues to be part of

my life but now on more than just 4 occasions each month.

In a few moments as you come up to receive communion, think on what I've said. My prayer is that you will feel able to join in the drama of Christ's passion too.

Jesus said, I am the true vine. {sip wine} In vino veritas.

Rev. Terry Ward-Hall, 25 Sept 2022