

Kington Baptist Church

MESSAGE BOARD – 88

For a life-time I've pondered on the meaning of the Lord's Supper. As a young child, seeing and hearing the congregation at the Lord's Supper, I've asked myself what's special, what's different in this service from any other service? Do we receive different grace than at any other time; how is the Lord present differently from the way he's present whenever 'two or three gather in his name'?

(For the sake of simplicity I'll stay with the title 'the Lord's Supper', which we also known as Holy Communion and the Eucharist.)

One passage of Scripture that I've come to see as vitally important in understanding the Lord's Supper is Luke 24. We read of two disciples, walking to Emmaus and Jesus walking with them – although they didn't recognise it was Jesus. After listening to their sad story, Jesus gently rebukes them as *slow of heart to believe what is written* (v25). Their problem was that they failed to *understand* the Scriptures (v45). To remedy this *Jesus opened the Scriptures* (v27), showing them, in all the Scriptures, the things concerning himself. What he told them changed them, from a spirit of 'gloom' (v17) they found that now their *hearts burned within them* (v32). They then ask him to stay with them – those with burning hearts ask him to stay! The next thing we're told is what Jesus *does*. No longer is it what he *says*, but what he *does*. What he did was to take the bread, he *blessed* it, *broke* it and *gave* it (v30-31). Then it was that 'their eyes were opened, and they *knew* him' (v31). The threefold action our Lord performed with the bread – *blessed, broken, given* – and the consequence – *they knew him* – tells me this passage is about the Lord's Supper (compare Matthew 26.26; Mark 14.22; Luke 22.19; 1 Corinthians 11.24).

He then immediately vanished from their sight. This seems very strange. But although he was lost to their sight he hadn't left their hearts. He vanished from sight to make clear that *knowing* him isn't about seeing him. *Knowing* him is a matter of *faith*: '*we walk by faith and not by sight*'; '*whom having not seen you love*'; '*blessed are those who have not seen and have believed*'.

We have to use words to talk about something beyond words. What we receive, in the 'here and now' of the Lord's Supper, is what Paul calls the *indescribable* gift (2 Corinthians 9.15). The Lord's Supper 'says' more to us, achieves more, and gives more than words can describe or that words alone could bring us. After the words, and after we've understood as far as we can what the words can tell us, we reach the end of words. The Apostle Paul was especially aware of the limitation of words. He often attempted to go beyond what mere words can say. It was his own experience, when caught up into the 'third heaven', that he heard 'unspeakable words' (2 Corinthians 12.4).

‘Wordless words, such as words are too weak to utter’ (John Trapp). I can’t resist quoting John Calvin here:

This I gladly confess, [...] no one should judge how great the mystery of the Lord’s Supper is by my poor words, which are so weak that they quite fail. I appeal to readers not to confine their minds within such tight bounds and limits, but to strive to go higher than I can take them. And although thoughts and judgements of the mind exceed the tongue’s ability to express them, the mind too is vanquished and overpowered by such sublimity. That is why, in the last analysis, I can do nothing else than marvel at this mystery, which the intellect cannot rightly grasp nor the tongue explain. (*Institutes*, 633)

If we follow the sequence of events in Luke 24 we will be pointed to the uniqueness of the Lord’s Supper. In Luke 24 there’s a transition, from *words* to *actions*. Jesus began with words: ‘*beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained in words the things about himself in all the Scriptures*’ (Luke 24.27). Later, in the home of the two disciples, Jesus says nothing. The change is from words to actions. In the Lord’s Supper we receive from the one *living* silent Word that which words are unable to describe, explain or communicate. We receive what is *indescribable*. This is what’s unique about the Lord’s Supper. This transition, from words to actions, doesn’t touch only on words we *speak*; it’s also about words we *think*. At the Lord’s Supper we ‘remember’ Christ; and to remember him in our thoughts we use unspoken words. But this is preparation, for the mystery of what Christ *does* for us. What the Lord does, in the ‘here and now’ of the Lord’s Supper, he does nowhere else and at no other time. In an action that’s beyond description, he *himself* gives *himself* to be *known* by us!

There’s the *word* and there are the *sacraments*. Christ’s intention for the Lord’s Supper is not confined to *signs*. The bread and wine do not ‘stand for’ something else. His real presence means *real, actual* participation. This goes beyond ‘signs’, ‘symbols’ or ‘emblems’. The Lord’s Supper is more than a ‘witness’ to ‘something else’. Signs and symbols point to one who is absent. In the Lord’s Supper bread and wine don’t point to his absence, but to his *presence*. Christ is the *Giver* who gives *himself*! The Lord’s Supper isn’t ‘merely a reminder’, ‘a symbol’, ‘simply a remembrance’. Here the Lord is present, to give himself to the open, believing, receptive heart.

We’re told *faith comes by hearing, hearing by the word of God* (Romans 10.17). Faith is a God-given ability to receive gifts of grace. The Lord’s Supper is a gift given to faith. In the Lord’s Supper faith receives the *indescribable* gift, the *unsearchable riches* of Christ. It is in the ‘here and now’ of the Lord’s Supper that we receive *him*, we receive Christ: *blessed, broken and given*. This is to *know* him.

For the two disciples ‘knowing him’ included seeing him. Their ‘eyes were opened’, they *recognised* him. They saw the nail-pierced hands of the Crucified; the One who died for us: Christ crucified – now alive and with us.

But *knowing* him means more than simple recognition. The experience of the two disciples in Emmaus went deeper. Not only did they 'recognise' him, they *knew* him. In the Bible the word 'to know' has a deep meaning. It refers to *intimate personal union*: 'This is eternal life, to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent' (John 17.3); 'To know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.' (Ephesians 3.19)

The Lord gives himself to us in the Lord's Supper so that we *know* him. We participate in *intimate personal union* with him. This is the spiritual reality of the Lord's Supper. As we take bread and wine – *blessed, broken, given* – we receive Christ – we *know* him. This is a *spiritual* reality. This belongs to a realm that's not earthly, but higher and heavenly.

There are things the Lord gives us and does for us that we don't feel in our hearts nor know in our minds. For example: all he does as our heavenly High Priest; the mystery of his daily care and provision; his work in preparing 'a place for us in the Father's house'. We know about these things only in a general way. They are real, but we don't feel them emotionally or grasp them intellectually. The Apostle Paul knows of a realm he calls the *heavenlies*: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies* (Ephesians 1.3). These things are actions that are for our blessing; they involve us, they are not distant from us, but they are incomprehensible to us. This is true of the Lord's Supper. This *knowing* surpasses 'knowledge': 'to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge' (Ephesians 3.19). We use different terms to as we try to describe the mystery of the Lord's Supper, but we will never define or analyse this heavenly reality.

In the Lord's Supper we *know* Christ in *intimate personal union*: this means:

- i) being united inseparably to him
- ii) being sealed for eternal life; 'whom to *know* is life eternal' (John 17.2)
- iii) to *know* that which is beyond 'knowing'.

This *intimate personal union* takes us out of ourselves, we become united with Christ. We become one with him and, through him, with the fellowship of our sisters and brothers in him.

We are united to Christ because we *receive* him! Receiving him we receive all his fullness, all his glory and all his grace: the *indescribable* gift. In the 'here and now' of the Lord's Supper we *participate* in the body and blood of Christ. We receive *him*. I'm not sure if we feel this or have thoughts of it, but this is what happens to us and within us, whether we *feel* it or not makes no difference. Jesus *blessed, broken and given*, gives himself and faith receives him. This is beyond what minds can grasp, beyond sight, beyond feeling. Don't imagine that if you don't feel special emotions the Lord's Supper hasn't 'worked' for you. Receiving Christ in the Lord's Supper puts us in the *heavenlies*. It's more exalted, more real, more permanent, more glorious than the earthly things we feel and grasp.

This is what Christ, as our Great High Priest, does for us and gives to us. He gives *himself*. He gives us all his fullness, the fullness of what he fully achieved for us. Receiving him we're *filled with all the fullness of God* (Ephesians 3.19). *In him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And you are complete in him* (Colossians 2.9-10). *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not participation of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not participation of the body of Christ?* (1 Corinthians 10.16) The one *living* silent Word – the one Word, the only begotten, by which the Father silently speaks all he is and does, and all he can ever be or do – gives *himself* to us, gives all his grace and glory: *The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one* (John 17.22-23).