

**Downing Place United Reformed Church**  
**Sermon – Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> March 2020.**  
**The Revd. Dr. John P. Bradbury**  
**John 6:41-59; Mark 14: 10-25.**  
**Christ's Presence in Holy Communion**

“I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life”. It is no wonder, if Jesus uttered words like this that the Jews who were listening to him disputed among themselves, saying ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’ What on earth sense is one to make of them? The image of Jesus as the Bread from Heaven and the Bread of life lends itself to allegorical reading. Just as Jesus is not a vine, when he says ‘I am the true vine’, we do not think that he is literally bread. And yet – here he starts talking about eating his flesh and drinking his blood.

Placed next to the accounts from the other gospels of the institution of the Lord's Supper, and Paul's account in Corinthians, which is probably the earliest of the lot, one does indeed have a few things to dispute about. And the Christian tradition has disputed it to the point of death. The arguments at moments get simultaneously highly technical, and highly heated.

Some of those debates come to us in the form of setting our tradition up against others. “We don't believe in transubstantiation”, I have heard many a Westminster student say as a first stab at saying what might be going on in Communion or not. But that does not tell us a lot, and we might want to ask what the Roman Catholic traditions believes by that which might not be what we think. For example, it does not have to be believed in that tradition, it is spoken of, rather, as the best way of speaking of Christ's presence in the Eucharist, not a technical definition one must sign up to be a good Catholic. Ultimately the mystery is respected. Eastern Christianity has never really worried about the how's, why's and wherefores and never attempted a definition in the way that the Roman Catholic tradition has. At the time of the Reformation, when our tradition was born, debates raged on all sides about how Jesus words of institution were to be understood: “This is my body” – what is his body? How? Why? We cannot with those words of Jesus ringing in our ears, both from the Institution of the Lord's Supper and from the John's gospel, simply dismiss the matter all-told.

At the time of the Reformation, Luther, the first Reformer, takes strong objection to many of the then practices of the Roman Catholic Church. He will not see the wine withheld from the lay people, he objects to the idea that the Mass somehow repeats Christ's sacrifice on the cross which he saw as once for all, and he objects strongly to transubstantiation. Not because he is wanting to object to the idea that the bread and the wine become the body and blood of Christ quite literally for him, but he feels he's being asked to accept a whole philosophical worldview born of Aristotle on board to accept transubstantiation whereas he wants simply to live with the plain words of Christ, ‘This is my body’. Scripture is enough for Luther.

The strand of the reformation that we are more directly descended from begins in Zurich with the reformer Zwingli. He and Luther agree on much, but never do manage to agree on what is going on in Communion. Their failure to agree led those two traditions in much of Europe to remain officially divided until 1972 when the Leuenberg Church Declaration was signed, superseding the condemnations of one another's traditions at the time of the Reformation. Zwingli is concerned that salvation comes from the Spirit, not from material things. ‘God is Spirit, and those who worship him must do so in Spirit and in trust’ are words from John's gospel that shaped his thinking. If God is Spirit, and God comes to us in Holy Communion, then it must be some kind of Spiritual event first and foremost, he reasoned. Like Luther, he was very opposed to the notion that Holy Communion might be a sacrifice – Christ was sacrificed once for all on the cross, not time and time again on the altars of the world, they argued. We must again be careful here that we do the Roman Catholic tradition justice here, at least in it's present confession of faith. It actually understands Christ's sacrifice on the cross to be made present through that very thick form of memory that is so vivid, as it were, that it makes the past present. *Anamnesis*. I preached on that a few weeks ago so won't go back there. For Zwingli, the memory we are called to in Communion is of Christ's saving work for us, his life, death, resurrection and ascension. And it was not a sacrifice, but an act of our thanksgiving for that. Thanksgiving – which gives us the word Eucharist, which is now a word universally accepted as the ecumenical way of talking about Holy Communion. So, through the work of the Holy Spirit there is a Spiritual union with Christ, as we remember Christ's work for us, and give thanks for that. Some who follow Zwingli's line of thinking today won't even go as far as Zwingli as to speak of a Spiritual presence at communion. When people speak of ‘Zwinglians’, they often mean that Communion is only a memorial and a thanksgiving, with no sense of presence at all.

If Luther stands at one side of the Reformer's with his understanding of the bread and wine being both bread and wine and body and blood, because that is how he read scripture, and Zwingli stands at the other end, saying this is only something spiritual, a memorial and an act of Thanksgiving, Calvin stands somewhere slightly different again. Calvin is not willing to spiritualise away what is going on quite so much. And there is good reason for that. Can one, with Zwingli, say that salvation comes only from spiritual things, when at the heart of our faith lies the conviction that God became human – flesh and blood like you and I? Calvin wishes to hold onto some sense of being united with the body of Christ when we receive communion.

But here, he has a problem. And this is where we get even more technical for a moment. If we believe that Christ is fully human and fully divine, then Christ's body is fully human. If he saves humans like us by becoming human like us, he really does have to be like us. This means that his body can only be in one place at one time. Here, Calvin and Zwingli agree, and disagree with Luther. For Luther, Christ's body is, as it were, a human-divine body and can be in many places at once, and hence literally on the communion tables of the world and in heaven. Calvin wishes to preserve the full humanity of Christ, with his ascended body in heaven, as well as say that when we take the bread and wine we are in some sense feeding on Christ's body as Christ's very gift of himself to us. For Calvin this is the work of the Holy Spirit, it is the Holy Spirit who unites us to Christ, drawing us up to Christ in heaven, as it were, rather than drawing Christ down from heaven into the bread and wine. So whilst Calvin will have no truck with transubstantiation, and will not really say that the bread and wine become the body and blood in a simple way, nonetheless, as we gather around the table, as we feast on bread and wine, the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ and, somehow, which ultimately always remains mystery, we are fed with Christ's body and blood himself and united to him, strengthened for our journeys of discipleship. The way the United Reformed Church confesses this in its Basis of Union is like this: "When in obedience to the Lord's command his people show forth his sacrifice on the cross by the bread broken and the wine poured for them to eat and drink, he himself, risen and ascended, is present and gives himself to them for their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace." There is no literal account of eating flesh and drinking blood by a long way, but nonetheless, no shyness at all about the fact that Christ is indeed present with us as we take communion, and giving us the gift of himself.

So why does any of this matter? Does, indeed, any of it matter? In one sense, no – these reformation debates and technical theological discussions are not the stuff by which our life in the gospel stands or falls. But I think we lose something very significant if all we ever do is define our understanding of Christ's presence in Holy Communion in the negative – "we don't believe that". For part of what is going on in Holy Communion is gift and promise. Christ promises to meet us at the table, as we gather, as we feed on bread and wine, he promises to unite us with himself. And there is very little more prominent in terms of the Spirituality of the New Testament, particularly in the writings of Paul, than the fact that union with Christ is at the heart of our faith. We are baptised into Christ, we find our identity in Christ, Christ's identity as one who has died and risen becomes our identity, we become engrafted into Christ's body along with the whole of the rest of the Church, and are caught up in God's ways with the world, and God's saving love for us in all of that. Baptism is the gift of union with Christ, and Holy Communion is the gift through which God promises that we are sustained in that union with Christ, through which we grow in union with Christ, through which we become more authentically the Body of Christ the Church. All of which is the work of God the Holy Spirit who reaches out for us as we gather around the table and take bread and wine, and who pulls us into the heart of God, bringing us into ever closer union with Christ, feeding us for the journey of following the way of Christ in the midst of the world.

When we grasp something of the magnitude of the gift that we are being offered in Communion, other things, perhaps, pale into insignificance. As we've had some of our conversations about Communion some of the words of Calvin have echoed in my head: "But as for the outward ceremony of the action – whether or not the believers take it in their hands, or divide it among themselves, or severally eat what has been given to each; whether they hand the cup back to the deacon or give it to the next person; whether the bread is leavened or unleavened; the wine red or white – it makes no difference. These things are indifferent, and left at the churches' discretion".

None of those things matter, they become irrelevant, if we understand that what is going on at this table is gift – God's good gift to us, drawing us to Godself, uniting us to Christ in the power of the Spirit, feeding us for the journey of faith, assuring us of the reality of the Kingdom, a Kingdom we begin to experience around this table, and Kingdom we witness to at this table that will draw all things into itself. So, come – let us feast, meet with Christ, be renewed in body, mind and soul, responding with a joyous gift to God's 'yes' to us in Christ, made present and real for us around this table, in bread and wine. Amen.