

## Communion

Readings: Hebrews 7:23-28 & Luke 19:1-9

### Karl Summerfield

We've been spending a few services now on what we do in this place called Church. Picking over some of the rituals and traditions to make sure we understand why we do them. It's been an enlightening journey for me so far.

Today we're turning our magnifying glass onto one of the most beautiful things we do in the Church - the act of Communion.

The author Tom Robbins rather rudely described communion as "Swallow the leader", and it can seem a mighty strange thing for people to do if you don't understand it. But communion has history and depth to it. We could preach Sunday after Sunday about communion and still feel like we have mysteries to uncover.

When Micah and I heard that we were starting a preaching series on what we do in church we both put our hands up to preach on the Eucharist. It didn't seem fair for one of us to miss out, so we decided to BOTH preach on it. Today you get a tag-team sermon, as we bring two different perspectives and tease out some different aspects of this sacrament. We're not competing or arguing with one another, merely shining a light onto different parts of a very huge topic.

So Micah is going to start us off with a prayer.

So, I'm going to start us off with a question:

Hands up who likes going around to someone else's place for dinner?

Yeah me too, but I like even better having people around to visit our place. I really enjoy cooking, and food is one of THE best ways to connect with people, particularly people from different cultures.

What's the first thing we do as Kiwis when we want to get to get to know someone? Invite them around for a barbie right?

Our friend Fiby is from Egypt, and it was by grilling Fiby on how to cook her Egyptian food, over sizzling pans of chicken and heady semolina dessert that we really got to know Fiby and her family.

At vestry one night, we were discussing how long it takes before a parish newbie might feel like they belong here, and it turns out that Kai can list off all the places he and Evelin were invited for dinner, in order. It's a lot!

When I'm planning a sermon I like to read up on a bunch of stuff and just leave it to rattle around inside my head for a few weeks, picking up on connections and seeing the world in a new way as my reading applies itself to various aspects of my life.

So while I was thinking about communion and why we do it, the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus kept floating into my mind. It's not the normal gospel reading that we have when we're studying communion, and it's definitely not the one about the last supper. So why choose it?

Let's take a look at what's going on.

We have Jesus passing through Jericho and Z is curious. He wants to see what all the excitement is about. So he climbs a tree to get a better look at Jesus. And rather than just seeing, he is seen.

I'm sure you all know the story. Z the tax man – despised and outcast from Jewish society. As the "chief tax collector" of the area, he would take a cut for himself from the taxes he raised for the Roman invaders and occupation forces. In today's terms he was a kind of corrupt politician, very wealthy, and hated. Or maybe Kim DotCom would be a similar figure. Or someone who has grown wealthy by running a loan-shark empire.

He was also reportedly a wee fella. Not tall enough to see from the back, and not respected enough to be let through to the front. So he took the unusual step of climbing a tree.

When Tristan climbs a tree it's a thing of beauty - little kids can really race up there, pulling themselves quickly from branch to branch. But I think it's a whole different sort of thing for an older bloke to climb a tree eh?

So maybe poor old Z's muscles weren't quite as conditioned as they once were, and perhaps all the nice food that his ill-gotten riches afforded him had started to take its toll. I reckon it looked pretty funny! No doubt it caused some titters, elbow nudges and disgusted head shaking from the crowd as they noticed what was going on. "Look at what that idiot Z is doing!"

But, like him or not, Zacchaeus fully went there. He climbed the tree.

He had his vantage point, and had settled in above the crowd to see this Jesus of Nazareth. And I can imagine that he had a fairly complex range of emotions as he sees Jesus stop, look up, and start speaking to him. I'm thinking a complex mix of flattered, self-conscious and terribly embarrassed as the attention of the whole crowd was suddenly focussed on the fat, bald guy up the tree.

" Zacchaeus, come down mate, I'd like to come and stay at your place" Jesus said.

I love it that Jesus invites himself to stay at Zacchaeus's house. Jesus becomes the host & Zacchaeus a guest in his own home. Scholars are underlining more & more how important 'commensality' (sharing a table) was to Jesus & the early church.

Something in that encounter with Jesus changed the way Zacchaeus saw the world. He could now see people in need where before he only saw people he needed to fleece. It was the catalyst for change in his life.

So looking at the Eucharist, which is Greek for "thanksgiving", also called the Lord's Supper and also called Communion - from the Latin *communio*, or "sharing in common". And at its most basic level, Communion is a kind of shared meal.

It's obviously a fairly symbolic shared meal, because in terms of a tasty morsel I'm betting you could find much better down at Fresh Choice right now, at the little tasting booth thingy. So we're not up here looking for for great food. So why do we do it?

I have a good friend who is convinced that we've completely lost our way with how we do communion in the Church. It's obvious to him that Jesus was simply asking his disciples to carry on meeting together, sharing food and working harmoniously. Sam's convinced that we have taken

some practical and loving advice, and reduced it down to some kind of weird religious mumbo-jumbo, or even worse, some kind of magic spell.

And, actually, I can see his point because Communion can be a very individual act. We can drift up in our own little bubble to meet with God, politely ignoring those around us. I know this describes me sometimes.

But we miss a major chunk of the point if we take communion that way.

One way to think of Communion is as Jesus inviting himself to our place for dinner. Like Z, we effectively become guests in our own church.

Somehow, even though it seems a bonkers thing to happen, Jesus calls us down out of our respective trees and brings us together to share this sacred moment. A small reflection of how the world could be.

Jesus grabbed Z down out of that tree and brought him back into the community. By making that first move, he gave Z the space to see what he needed to do to make things right with those he had ripped off. Jesus was happy to spend time with people that others had rejected, drawing them back into the fold, sparking off positive changes in their lives.

The guys on the Liturgist Podcast describe communion as "a place where the unlikely can gather together around a table and find a place to belong"

And I So want that! I want that for everyone in this building. I want that for anyone who walks in our doors, or joins us for a meal at our homes, or attends Lunch on the Hill, or comes to a shared kai event, or comes to a Friends and Fun Easter Egg hunt. A place where anyone, whether they fit into society or not, can come to the table. A place where we're all prepared to scoot sideways a bit and make room for each other.

Hundreds of little acts of communion, shared with each other, all sparked off by our encounter with Jesus and his influence to change our mindset for the better.

So as we come up for communion today, please make a point of enjoying those around you. Smile at them, and notice their presence. We're an unlikely bunch but Jesus has called us together to share this meal, I pray we all find our place as valued members of Christ's community.

So, I've made a case for communion as a transformative shared meal, and now I'm going to move aside and let Micah continue this sermon, as he delves more into Jesus role as the host of our meal together.

### **Micah Did-Dell**

So what makes communion special? What makes Christians having a common meal different from a local sports team eating K-fry together after a game? Or a group of students going out for a meal to celebrate exams being over? While these communal meals can be very meaningful, the thing that sets communion apart from other communal meals is, as Karl said, the meal is centred on Jesus. More specifically it is a meal centred on the Gospel of Jesus.

In the early church communion took place within the wider context of a meal called a love feast. Local believers would bring their own food and eat together in a common room and at some point

they would celebrate communion with the breaking of bread and the sharing of wine. So the Eucharist always takes place within the context of community and hospitality. The Eucharist took place during a feast but they were careful not to let it become synonymous with the feast. This may sound like a confusing distinction but essentially they were preserving the distinctiveness of the Eucharist as a ritual and a proclamation of the Gospel.

Consider the elements of the Eucharist.

When Jesus instituted the Eucharist he took the bread and said "Take and eat; this is my body." He then took the cup of wine and said "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Now there has historically been a lot of debate over what the elements actually are spiritually. If you're a Protestant you likely believe the wine is a symbol, if you're a Catholic you believe that the wine turns into the blood of Christ, and if you're a Baptist you believe that the wine turns into grape juice. And for some people that is a really interesting discussion to have. I'm not one of those people.

But the debate hinges on the question of where is Christ during communion? Personally, I've found the writings of the Scottish theologian Thomas F. Torrance helpful. Those of you who were here for John Palmer's sermon might remember that he drew heavily on the writings of Thomas' younger brother James Torrance. Torrance sees communion as being the highest form of worship, but it's important to note that for Torrance worship isn't something we initiate through our own strength for God. Rather it is something we partake in through Jesus our high priest. It's important to remember that in the Bible the role of the high priest was to be a mediator representing God's people and bringing the people's worship to God on their behalf. And this is what the author of Hebrews has in mind through their repeated references to Jesus as the perfect high priest. Jesus is the perfect high priest because he is God made human who was the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of humanity.

And this understanding of Jesus as the high priest who mediates between fallen humans and God is essential to understanding the power of communion.

Consider how we celebrate communion in our church. I know all churches celebrate it differently but I really love the way we do it. First we go through the liturgy retelling the story of the first communion led by Jesus. We start with a powerful affirmation of the Gospel in which the priest re-enacts the last supper by breaking bread and filling a cup with wine in front of the congregation. And then the people come forward to the communion table with open hands to receive the bread and wine.

Thomas F Torrance writes:

*"We come to the Holy Table to worship God... and proclaim the death of Christ who through his atoning exchange has replaced our poverty with his boundless grace. And so we put out empty hands and bread and wine are put into them which we eat and drink in communion with his body and blood, for we have no other offering with which to draw near to God but that one offering which is identical with Jesus Christ himself, through whom, with whom and in whom we glorify the Father."*

Or more simply: we come to the table with open hands, unable to bring anything to God, and God places his sacrifice in our hands. And this is the beauty of the Gospel: That God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. We had nothing to bring before God and he responded by becoming human and being a sacrifice on our behalf.

So is Jesus present at communion? Yes! Torrance explains that Jesus is present at every Eucharist because he presides over communion through the celebrant. When the celebrant passes out the communion they do it not out of their own capacity but as a representative of Jesus, the one Torrance calls "the unseen celebrant". Jesus is in the midst of us ministering to us through the person who gives us communion.

In her book *Pastrix*, Lutheran minister Nadia Bolz-Weber has a chapter telling the story of how an infamous local con artist called Rick Strandlof joined her church and her struggle to welcome him. Near the end of the chapter she writes: *"Rick Strandlof is trying to be a real person for the first time in his life and he doesn't really know that person is anymore. But he sees a glimpse of it at the communion table. He sees it in the eyes of the person serving the wine and bread, saying, "Child of God, the body of Christ, given for you."*

She continues a little later on: *"In the fall of 2011, during the Occupy Denver actions, Rick organised and oversaw all of the food distribution at the hub of the local protests. "Distributing food at Occupy Denver is awesome!" Rick chirped to me over the phone. "Everyone is fed. It doesn't matter if you are a homeless guy who is scamming and doesn't even care about Occupy or a lawyer at a lunch break." He pauses. "The only place I've ever really seen that is at communion." As we hung up, I tried to pretend that I wasn't crying."*

And that is the beauty of communion. When we come up for communion we come as equals because we have nothing to give God. Whether we are excited children coming up with our parents or a senior member of the church. Whether we are new to following Jesus or if we have followed him since we were children. Whether we are strong of faith or constantly doubting. Whether we are poor or a successful business person. We all come forward as a family to be meet Christ our high priest in communion and to receive his bread and wine in our hands.

Nobody has to settle for crumbs at the Lord's Table. All are welcome. All are equal.

#### PRAYER

We remember the stories that Jesus friends tell,  
stories of bread broken and shared, feeding a multitude,  
stories of being gathered together, enemy and friend, around tables,  
stories of unlikely guests revealing the face of the sacred.

So as we gather around your table, Bless all of us in our eating and drinking that our eyes might be open,  
that we might recognize the risen Christ in our midst,  
indeed in one another.

Amen