

Communion: Celebration of Freedom

We do this monthly but how often do we think about what it means? I'm talking about Holy Communion. What does the Bible and our Christian tradition say about this ritual we participate in every month? After a church service a little boy came to his mother and complained to her that the adults had all been given a snack, but none had been given to the little children. At first, she couldn't understand what he was talking about. But as she asked him about it, she discovered that he had seen the adults taking bread and wine, and he simply assumed it was a snack.

St. Paul, in his first letter to the Christians at Corinth, gave instructions on how to share the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:23-34). He wrote about communion because the Corinthian Christians had allowed the other activities of the day to crowd out the meaning and purpose of the Lord's Supper.

They forgot the point of this simple meal - which is not about eating and drinking, but primarily remembering and re-experiencing! Paul talks of examining ourselves before we partake in communion. Let's do that first by remembering.

One Simple Meal

Our Holy Communion has roots that reach back to the very beginning of time. It goes back to one simple meal - if you will. First God created man and woman in His own image - that includes freedom, the freedom to choose. They were given everything they needed for a fulfilling and fruitful life in harmony with their Creator. *The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die"* Gen. 2:15-17. They had it all! But with their freedom they disobeyed God; made a meal of that forbidden fruit and by doing so the first man brought sin into our lives. His disobedience - choosing to live as though he knew better than God - broke the relationship with the Source of life, the Light of life. In place came death and darkness ... darkness of the soul and all that it spawns in human life and so the sad tale of human history tells of wars and murders, treachery, lies, debauchery, and all the sins that arise from sinful hearts, including a most pernicious, evil practice known as slavery. This great evil - which in itself is a *prima facie* denial of freedom to people created in the image of God - has been with humanity for millennia and unfortunately is still with us. Call it what you will, human trafficking (that continues to occur right across the US southern border) is nothing short of the enslavement of innocent people. That simple meal of a forbidden fruit brought much misery into human life.

A Second Meal

God did not give up on humans, despite the chasm they had placed between themselves and their Creator. God set about to redeem humans from their wrong choice; the choice to stray from Him. He called a man named Abraham and made a

covenant with him, saying: ***I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you, Gen. 17:7.*** Abraham's descendants were to be God's people to **witness** to all peoples God's presence in this world, working to redeem humans from their destructive path. God also promised to him the land of Canaan.

And yet the world's ways have a way of insinuating themselves even into holy people and plans. Several generations later the descendants of Abraham, now people of the covenant with God called "Israel" in the Bible, found themselves in Egypt seeking relief from a famine in the land (Gen. 47). They settled in the land of the Pharaohs and prospered. ***...the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them, Exodus 1:7.*** But after a time a new Pharaoh came to power who feared and resented the Israelites. ***...and the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigor: and they made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field, all their service, wherein they made them serve with rigor, Exodus 1:13-14.*** They became **slaves** in Egypt.

God called Moses to lead the Israelite people from Egypt, to return to the land He intended for them and to be His witnesses in this world. Tending his flock **Moses encountered a burning bush ... burning but not consumed and from that bush came the voice of God calling on Moses to free His people.** Think of it: a burning bush on the slopes of Mt. Sinai. Here Moses came face to face with a Presence that meant permanence and ultimate reality. We humans tire, grow old, and die. Civilizations decline and fall. Entropy touches the whole of nature. What burns, burns up. But here, in this desert bush, was something burning that did not burn up, something as dynamic and destructive as fire that did not run down and did not destroy.¹ The Voice said, ***...I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt, Exodus 3:10.*** Moses asked, "who are you?" and the response was, ***"I AM, WHO I AM" Exodus 3:14.*** There is no other. This is the Creator standing before His creation. This is the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and then Jesus. Many translate the Hebrew for God's name as ***"I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE"*** emphasizing God's complete freedom. **The freedom of God underwrites human freedom.**

Moses confronted Pharaoh saying, "Let my people go!" Pharaoh would not, so God sent plagues upon Egypt, yet Pharaoh would not relent. Finally, God told Moses that ***...all the first-born in the land of Egypt shall die, from the first-born of Pharaoh that sits upon his throne, even unto the first-born of the maid-servant that is behind the mill; and all the first-born of cattle, Exodus 11:5.*** On that night the Israelites were instructed to have a meal: lamb and bread. The blood of the lamb must be smeared over the doorposts and lintels of all the Israelite homes, as a sign to the Lord, and the plague will pass over those houses. The bread will be unleavened for there will be no time for it to rise before baking. They must eat the meal in haste and then flee from Egypt. Thus, it was so. This is the **Passover meal** eaten and celebrated by Jews for 3,000 years, **the blood of the lamb and the unleavened bread are forever entwined with their freedom.** It is a remembrance and re-experience of liberation from bondage. Rabbi (Lord) Jonathan Sacks² says of their exodus from Egypt "... is both the master story of

human freedom and the opening of history's greatest and most sustained critique of the abuse of power." The reality is that **life without God results in life without freedom.**

A Final Meal

The Passover meal, and all that it meant, was foundational, integral, and all-encompassing to His mission to bring people into freedom through communion with God. It was His last meal before His sacrifice on the cross **...the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover, Matt. 26:19**

In that meal the bread that celebrated the people's deliverance from Egyptian bondage took on a new and fulfilled meaning. It became Jesus' broken body that took on all the hate and pain of sinful human life and even death on a cross. Jesus was the Passover lamb, sacrificed to free us from sin and from the consequence of death. At the Last Supper, **While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body," Matt. 26:26.** Here is God's counterpoint to that first meal in which Adam ate that which was forbidden. **Adam's meal brought bondage to sin and death. This meal of Jesus brings us release from sin ...** bondage to sin which is the source and cause of all the evils of human life, including physical bondage, slavery, human trafficking, addictions, and the like.

In the same manner the wine of the Passover meal became the symbol of His blood shed for our deliverance from death. **Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins, Matt. 26:27.** The Israelites smeared the blood of the lamb on their doorposts, and the angel of death passed over their homes. In like manner **the blood of Christ – the Lamb of God - causes the curse of death to pass over us.** This is God's covenant with His people. Let us eat and drink today and renew our commitment to His covenant.

In our communion liturgy we sing: "Christ will come again." Thus, we confess our faith in the One who is the measure and the truth of the universe and all reality. **We confess our faith in the One who made us to be free,** and who will One day return to restore all, including us, to the order that God created. There we will enjoy full freedom from sin and live the ordered life God has provided. Each time we celebrate Holy Communion we proclaim His death and resurrection, His future return, and our freedom. Jesus says to us, **I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom," Matt. 26:29.**

¹ Os Guinness, *The Magna Carta of Humanity*, Intervarsity Press, 2021; 40.

² Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, March 8, 1948–November 7, 2020; Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the [British] Commonwealth from 1991 to 2013.