**What is Holy Communion all about?**

**1 Corinthians 11:23-28 and John 6:47-59**

It was in 1208 when Juliana of Liege received her first vision. The church appeared to her under a full moon - but the moon had one dark spot on it. The same vision recurred again and again: the full moon with a dark spot over the church. Juliana prayed long and hard about the vision she was receiving and, finally, Christ interpreted it to her. The full moon was the Calendar Year of the Church, full of brightness and light with the celebration of the Festivals. But one part of the moon remained dark – one festival was missing: there was no Festival to remember the institution of the Lord’s Supper.

 Juliana approached her Bishop about these visions and, as fortune would have it, he soon became Pope Urban IV and, at her continued request, instituted the Festival of Corpus Christi in 1264.

 Personally, I think it’s a really important Festival for the church to celebrate, because it is important for us to remember the Institution of Holy Communion. And alongside Corpus Christi, we also have Maundy Thursday, which gives us the same opportunity: to look back to the Last Supper and remember Jesus’ Institution of the holy meal that over the years has transformed from Passover to Holy Communion in the Christian church.

 Tonight, I want us to take a bit of time to think about Holy Communion and exactly what it is we are doing when we take part in this sacrament.

 There are many differing views as to what it exactly is we do when we take Communion. There are many different theological approaches to Communion and the exact nature of the bread and wine on the Lord’s Table. It is a deep sadness to me that Holy Communion is the point of deepest division in the church: I would go so far as to say that I think there is something quite demonic about it. Jesus only ever once said, “Do this in remembrance of me”: just one command of corporate activity for his believers worldwide. And yet that one command has been used by the Devil to create the deepest divisions…

 Orthodox Churches don’t recognise Roman Catholic Communion. Roman Catholicism doesn’t recognise Anglican Communion. Anglicanism doesn’t recognise Independent Church Communion. Independent Churches don’t recognise the Communions of one another. Children are too young to receive Communion. The unbaptised can’t receive Communion. The unconfirmed shouldn’t receive Communion. The uncatechised shouldn’t receive Communion. People are too sinful to receive Communion. The proud and haughty are too proud and haughty to receive Communion. Communion should only be undertaken with wafers and wine. Communion should only be undertaken with bread and wine. Communion should only be undertaken with bread and grape juice. We should share one chalice. We should have individual cups. We should receive Communion daily. We should receive Communion weekly. We should receive Communion only twice a year. We should all receive bread and wine. We should receive bread only and the priest consumes the wine. We can dispose of bread and wine in a bin and a sink. The priest should consume all consecrated bread and wine.

 The debate – and divisions and anger and rejection – run very deep, dividing Christian against Christian. And if that isn’t demonic, I don’t know what is…

 It seems to me that we need a new vision for the sacrament of Holy Communion. It seems to me that the dark spot in the full moon of Juliana’s vision has become the dark spot of division amongst Christians that dishonours Christ at the very point where we are called to honour him most…

 There is a dark spot of division in the full moon.

 And there is a dark spot, too, in the way in which we take Holy Communion so lightly. This is not a matter of churchmanship or tradition: this is about how we respond to an ordinance of Christ. Familiarity doesn’t breed contempt, so much as complacency and indifference. And I think that is true for us all to some extent that we receive Communion so often that we become complacent about it: perhaps all too easily we cease to recognise its true value and meaning and what it means for us to participate at Communion.

 In his first letter to the Corinthians which we heard read, Paul says something very familiar to us, but very nuanced: “On the night Jesus was betrayed…” But Paul does not write this as a past action, as if there was one moment of betrayal. The Greek tense he used for the word ‘betrayed’ is an ongoing action: Judas was betraying him in an ongoing way, not just in his action in the Garden of Gethsemane.

 Betrayal of Jesus is an ongoing action in which we all participate every time we deny him, or fall in to sin, or choose not to follow his will, or refuse to show love and compassion towards others. Betrayal of Jesus is an ongoing activity in which we continue to participate with Judas.

 And what is the antidote to betrayal that Jesus offers? Participation in the bread and wine.

 We all need to participate in Communion because we all betray Christ. To the sickness of sin, Christ administers the healing medicine of Holy Communion; the bread and the wine is our prescription for forgiveness and salvation, the bread and the wine is our medicine towards life in all its fullness.

 So Paul goes on to warn us in verse 27 with these words: “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord.”

 Some people have taken this verse to mean that there should be a qualification for receiving Communion: whether that be Confirmation or regular church attendance or whatever. Others have taken it as a reason to reflect on their own sinfulness and think that they are ‘not worthy’ to receive the bread and wine because they are too far removed from God.

 Neither of these views reflect the true meaning of the verse, which should properly read: “It follows that whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord not in accordance with their value is guilty of violating the body and blood of the Lord.”

 We cannot violate Communion because we are not confirmed. We cannot violate Communion because we are too sinful. We violate Communion when we do not eat and drink in accordance with the value of the sacrament, which is to say, when we participate with complacency.

 It is not sinfulness we are warned against here by Paul. It is not the fact that we may or may not have jumped through the right institutional hoops. Paul warns us against complacency and infers that if we are complacent about the gift of Holy Communion, we continue to participate in the betrayal of Christ.

 So we follow Paul’s next instruction in verse 28: “Continuously examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the wine…”

 This passage calls us to a lifestyle of self-examination so that we are never receiving Communion unworthily. So let me just say two things about our participation in Holy Communion and how that might relate to a lifestyle of self-examination.

 First, participation at Holy Communion is a profound symbol of our participation in community life. Note what I say here: Communion is not participation in community life itself but is a symbol of our participation in community life. And turning to our Gospel reading from John 6, there’s three very short points I want to make from this passage that give us an indication of that.

 The first thing to notice is verse 56 where Jesus says “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” We are united with Christ in his life and in his death: our community life is first and foremost with God. Christ dwells in us and we dwell in Christ and therefore we dwell with God. We need to be sure, and be mindful, of our community life in and with God and that everything else flows from that.

 Secondly, Jesus says that we must eat his flesh four times in this passage and each time he uses a very interesting word for ‘to eat’. It is not the usual Greek word that we would expect - but a word that denotes munching loudly; the same word that is used for animals gnawing away together at their food. And I think this is an interesting picture that takes us far away from the privatised, polite reception of a wafer and a sip of wine. Jesus is encouraging us to something far more communal, far more tangible than a quiet, private act of devotion. When we receive Communion, we are coming together, almost as a pack of animals, to munch on our food, which is the life-giving body and blood of Christ. Now, you may find that an objectionable image - but it is the image that Christ himself gives us. It would not be going too far to say that taking Communion is a ‘pack-activity’: something we do to accentuate our community life together, not our individual approach to faith.

 Thirdly, I draw your attention to a seemingly innocuous sentence that concludes the reading from John. “He said these things whilst teaching in synagogue in Capernaum”. In the original Greek, it doesn’t actually say, “in the synagogue” but “in synagogue” - and ‘synagogue’ literally means ‘bringing together’. So I think this is an important nuance here: that we are not to think of John locating this act in a specific place; the synagogue in Capernaum. Rather, I think it is important for us to grasp that the very act of Communion is ‘synagogue’: the bringing together of God’s people.

 And this brings me on to my second and final point:

 …that we are brought together to find our community life together and to find our place in the people of worship. But, crucially, we are brought together in order to be sent out. As synagogue, we munch together on the body and blood of Christ but we are left hungry. And as we reflect deeply on our hunger, we realise that it is because of our interconnectedness with others. There are others who are still hungry – and so we feel their hunger too. We are brought to an awareness that, actually, Holy Communion is not our right - but a deepening awareness of our responsibility to the world.

 How can we leave here tonight feeling satisfied – self-satisfied, even – and full, when we know that there are others who remain hungry both in a physical and spiritual sense?

 Holy Communion, in some traditions, is known as Mass, which derives its meaning from the word, ‘Mission’: God’s sending out of his people into the world. Holy Communion calls us, ultimately, to be a mission-shaped people, a mission-shaped church.

 We began by reflecting on what it might mean to eat and drink unworthily. Unworthiness has nothing to do with how sinful you are. We eat and drink unworthily if we complacently receive without a deep sense of Communion being a profound symbol of our mission responsibility to a broken world. Belonging to a Eucharistic community carries deep and profound responsibilities. We leave here hungry because we are supposed to! Hungry with dissatisfaction at the oppression of the marginalised. Hungry to share the Good News with those who have no hope. Hungry to sit alongside the grieving and the dying in their time of need.

 Eucharist isn’t something we do just on a Sunday. Eucharist is a way of living, a way of being Christian, a way of being church…

 On Maundy Thursday, we give thanks for the institution of Holy Communion. But more importantly, we pledge ourselves to be Eucharist for the world.

 I conclude with the words of Bishop Frank Weston of Zanzibar, who was speaking at the Anglo-Catholic Congress in 1923. Bishop Frank said this:

“…I say to you, and I say it with all the earnestness that I have, if you are prepared to fight for the right of adoring Jesus in His Blessed Sacrament, then, when you come out from before your tabernacles, you must walk with Christ, mystically present in you, through the streets of this country, and find the same Christ in the peoples of your cities and villages. You cannot claim to worship Jesus in the tabernacle if you do not pity Jesus in the slum…It is folly, it is madness, to suppose that you can worship Jesus in the Sacrament and Jesus on the throne of glory, when you are sweating Him in the bodies and souls of His children…You have your Mass, you have your altars, you have begun to get your tabernacles. Now go out into the highways and hedges, and look for Jesus in the ragged and the naked, in the oppressed and the sweated, in those who have lost hope, and in those who are struggling to make good. Look for Jesus in them, and, when you have found Him, gird yourself with His towel of fellowship and wash His feet in the person of his brethren’.