

Matthew 26: 17-30 Exodus 13: 3-10 – *Keeping the Story alive*
Sunday 16/02/2020, 8.00 & 11.00 at CC and 9.30 at GS

‘Do this in remembrance of me,’ said Jesus at the Last Supper. ‘Was ever another command so obeyed?’ asked liturgical scholar Gregory Dix, who then went on to wax lyrical about the range of situations in which people have broken bread and drunk wine in remembrance of Jesus. ‘Men have found no better thing to do than this for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; for the proclamation of a dogma or for a good crop of wheat; for the wisdom of the parliament of a mighty nation or for a sick old woman afraid to die.’ This action of eating and drinking sums up a story – the story of Christ’s death and resurrection – and somehow connects with every other story, our own stories individual and shared, and gives these stories a degree of meaning or purpose that we struggle to express. We do this in remembrance of him, and we keep the story alive.

‘Remembering’ is not just having some memories. Someone compared it with photos and a photo album. Memories are like the individual photos which may be very attractive, but don’t mean much until you sort them out. It requires deliberation, selecting and connecting, ordering and grouping, so the photos tell a story ... whether the story is of a holiday or a lifetime. That is to re-member – to put the pieces back together: an active process of meaning making.

In the Bible, ‘remember’ is one of God’s most frequent instructions: remember the commands and ordinances I have given you. Remember what I, the Lord your God, have done for you. Remember the Covenant I have made with you and you with me. Remember events many generations ago; when you remember the Covenant is made anew; it is for you. God also remembers, meaning the time is now for God to act on his promises and bring the story alive again.

In today’s Old Testament reading that ‘today’ arrived. God remembered his people: after centuries of slavery in Egypt, ‘today’ is the day for the people to lose their chains. Act fast today and you will be free. And yet, for all the urgency, the flow of the narrative is interrupted as God gives Moses detailed instructions of how to remember this day for generations to come: the words to say; the sacrifice to make; the food to eat. Yes, a meal through which to re-enact this day – it is that important it’s not forgotten. Eat and remember. Keep the story alive as your story, for all generations.

Jesus, at the Last Supper, took hold of that ancient Passover story of liberation and the meal that enacted it, and put his own story at the heart of it. The old story spoke of suffering and of hope. So, as he spoke of his suffering, he used the symbol of unleavened bread (sometimes called the ‘bread of affliction’) broke it into pieces and handed it out to them. ‘This is my body, broken for you.’ After the meal, he hinted at future hope as he passed round the cup of wine that traditionally represented hope of the Promised Land.

‘This cup is the new Covenant in my blood.’ Drink in new hope, we might say. ‘Do this in remembrance of me.’ Was ever another command so obeyed?

‘What I received I passed on to you,’ wrote St Paul in I Corinthians 11, which is the earliest version we have. It’s like this is most precious object that the church has, passed down with infinite care from one generation to the next: a meal in which these events are enacted and retold. This is the story we tell each week in our Communion services – the story of Jesus two millennia ago, that strangely resonates with our life-stories; the story that is summed up when we eat the bread and drink the wine in remembrance of him.

In the Church of England’s *Common Worship* there are 8 Communion prayers (plus two more for use with children). They mainly derive from the earliest texts we have, coming from the 3rd or 4th centuries AD. The ‘Institution Narrative’ (of the Last Supper) is always at the heart of the prayer. But you’ll have noticed the prayers are always longer and contain much more. They take us forward to the crucifixion and resurrection, as Jesus hinted. But they also go further, both back and forwards, because this one Narrative is at the heart of a greater narrative of God’s plans for the salvation of the world – from the creation of the world to new heaven and new earth. Different prayers emphasise different elements: there’s too much to say in one go! There are also what we call Proper Prefaces: these are paragraphs inserted that remind us of the particular season we are in or theme we may be exploring.

They are called *Eucharistic* prayers, and Eucharist literally means ‘thanksgiving’ (either word can appear as a heading on the sheet). It has become the custom to stand for the Eucharistic Prayer because it is an act of praise. Whether sung or spoken, words of praise like the Sanctus (the ‘holy, holy’) or the acclamations (‘glory and honour and power’) give voice to this expression of praise. The person at the front is called the ‘celebrant’ because Holy Communion is a celebration. It incorporates all moods and emotions, including the focus on Jesus’ body on the cross – but always we remember his death and resurrection together, along with the salvation that he won. Through the telling of the story, eating bread and drinking wine, in faith we appropriate for ourselves the benefits of that salvation. We celebrate keeping the story alive.

‘Remembrance’ is shared remembering: like Remembrance Sunday it’s an act of solidarity. This story is the collective story that binds the church together – our shared identity in the Covenant made through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Eucharistic Prayer is everybody’s prayer – not just of the priest. That’s another reason we have so many responses within the liturgy, and also another reason why we’re encouraged to stand up – so we’re more aware of each other around us. (Incidentally, do feel free to lift your heads out of your booklets: it’s supposed to be a shared drama!) Another word for the person at the front is the ‘President’ – not to be a figure of power (like the President of the USA) but simply as one who presides on behalf of all. The prayer is a joint prayer for everyone. The president’s words are all our words: certainly not his or her magic.

Some might ask why only the ordained are allowed to do this? Ordination is an authorisation on behalf of the wider church saying this person is recognised by us all to carry out this task. So, we are reminded the church is not only the group gathered in this place, but is all Christian people everywhere. And this story belongs to us all.

Next Sunday we'll think much more about what we believe happens at the Eucharist – the work of the Holy Spirit bringing the life of God amongst us. For now, let's just hold on to the story, a story enacted through symbols of bread and wine, a story alive with potent meaning, a story through which we have entered the history of God's salvation on earth, a story that tells us time and again, God has remembered us.