

When we gather

1 Corinthians 11: 17-34

"In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have been differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. When you come together it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus on the night He was betrayed, took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, " This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way after supper He took the cup saying, " This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

Therefore, whoever eats the bread and drinks of the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord, eats and drinks judgement on himself.

That is why many among you are weak and sick and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves we would not come under judgement. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned by the world.

So then my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. If anyone is hungry he should eat at home so that when you meet together it may not result in judgement.

And when I come I will give you further directions."

1 Corinthians as we have heard in the past few weeks is a letter written by Paul under his God given authority as an Apostle to the church at Corinth in response to concerns he has over reports that are reaching him about what is happening there in this new fledgling church in his absence. He reminds them of the centrality of Christ who was crucified to redeem them from their sin. He has challenged them on their tolerance of sexual immorality and idol worship.

At the start of Chapter 11 he begins to address the issues that have been reported to him concerning what happens when they gather together as a church. He starts with praise, commending them for remembering to faithfully gather as a church for prayer, praise and preaching. There were good things happening, vibrant participation in the services by all including women but there were also several things that were a cause for concern to Paul and he addresses some of them here in the second part of Chapter 11.

Whilst Paul has commended them for the good aspects of their gathering he has seen and offers advice and guidance on how they can increase their faithfulness. He saves one of his most intense and direct rebukes that he gives to any church in any of his letters for how they have corrupted Communion, the Lord's supper. They have corrupted this aspect of their gathering so much that it overshadows any good they have accomplished in prayer, praise, prophecy or preaching. He rebukes them, reminds them of the Gospel they have received and instructs them to reflect on their hearts and actions in the hope they will repent and return to Godly ways.

Paul here shows the importance that he places on the Communion and how integral a part of our worship it should be.

The Corinth church had a lot of divisions to deal with. They were divided over specific personalities or pastors they lined up behind. Some groups are weak in knowledge and some are spiritually and intellectually proud. They have differing views on how to deal with the pagan culture around them and how to look after their Christian liberty. They are also divided on socio/economic lines; the rich and poor. This is all exacerbated by the structure they have for meeting together. Generally speaking they meet together in small groups in individuals houses spread around the city. This lead to cliques and diverse teaching as each pastor or group leader highlighted their particular emphasis.

These divisions became more apparent when they did gather together as one body, probably at the large house of a man called Gaius. The gathering included a full meal where all contributed and all shared. The few rich whose time was pretty much their own would show up first and immediately start into the buffet and bar. The majority, poor and slaves, would have to wait to be released by their bosses and masters. When they arrived the rich were full and some drunk on communion wine with little food left over to fill the poor and slaves who invariably went hungry. There was no sense of one united family brought together by Jesus but rather a collection of individuals and cliques. The emphasis was rather on what divided them rather than what united them. A gathering that should have been a celebration of their oneness in Christ and an opportunity to show the city around them their unity and holiness as God's children, instead was defined by selfishness, drunkenness and disunity. Sadly this church looks no different from the world around it. The inference of Paul's words are that the witness of the Gospel to the world around them would have been better served if they had all stayed at home rather than this debauched gathering!

The problem with the church in Corinth wasn't that there wasn't a majority of faithful and active members sacrificially contributing to the life and purposes of the church. It was the few who were not only failing to contribute but were selfishly focussed on their own desires and consumption who were destroying the unity of the church.

We should be more concerned with the quality and depth of our faith as individuals and a church family rather than mere numbers of people on seats, some of whom still act and live as if they are of the world around them rather than God's family.

By God's grace here in NCF we have an awesome group of committed members who serve, give and live for the church community and to serve the community around us as well.

In Corinth many were living comfortably at home bringing nothing to the table. They wanted to enjoy the benefits and love of the church community without investing or contributing to it in any way. They were willing to consume so much, even from those who had contributed from what little they had, that they got drunk. When you are drunk on your own consumerism your actions show you despise and wish to humiliate those who are steadfastly giving to and serving the church.

Paul is righteously angry with the consumers in Corinth. They had lost sight of why they gathered. He could not even call the communion table at Corinth "The Lord's Table" because it had become so tainted by human selfishness it was no longer under God's authority. They were more pre-occupied with satisfying their own needs and desires than remembering who they believe in and why.

He doesn't just tell them to step up to the mark or leave rather he points them back to Jesus and reminds them of the gospel they have received. He reminds them of how communion is given to us by Jesus to regularly show us the truth and beauty of the Gospel : v 23-26

"For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you The Lord Jesus on the night He was betrayed took bread and when He had given thanks He broke it and said. " This is my body which is for you; do this in remembrance of me ." In the same way after supper He took the cup saying, " This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this whenever you drink it in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes."

There is good news for sinners in the world and consumers in the church. WHILE Jesus was being betrayed He was giving communion showing His people how to remember His sacrifice on the cross that was to come shortly. We are ALL betrayers of God, from Adam and Eve who ate of the forbidden fruit we are all consumers of the resources of God's earth. Left to our own devices we would selfishly consume what we want and declare ourselves kings of our own kingdoms. But God did not leave us alone He sent Jesus to sacrifice His perfect life for our sinful life of consumption and on the night that the world was preparing to reject Jesus He was preparing to save the world.

On the night when Jews celebrated the Passover meal to remember how God took them out of slavery in Egypt (Jeremiah 31: 31-34) Jesus gives His people a new remembrance meal for a new covenant.

The elements, the symbols of communion, the bread, the cup of wine or juice are not significant on their own; they are not magical or mystical, although there are some who try to make them so. Communion is only as significant as the person who gave it to us, Jesus. HE took the bread, HE gave thanks, HE broke it and HE said, this is MY body which is for you. Remember ME.

The significance of the death of Jesus should be at the centre of what we do, dominating every service we have.

If you are looking for something more significant or newer, or better than the cross you will NOT find it. The sacrifice can never be re-given, only remembered. Jesus Christ, the Lord, established this meal of communion, provided for it by His death, and HE invites people to it. The only thing we contribute to it is our sin, selfishness and betrayal that HE consumes and takes with Him to the cross.

Jesus commands it, Paul reminds us. HE, Jesus, has made a promise to us as individuals and as a church that we will not be defined by what we take, but by what HE gave. Every time we celebrate the Lord's death we are also anticipating His return. It's a death with a promise, a promise of forgiveness of sins, a promise of a new life in this life and the life to come, a promise of Jesus' return ushering in a new heaven and a new earth with no sin, selfishness or death. Because of this new covenant all the things that divided us previously (geography, social status, worldly wealth, gender, personal preferences and so on) do so no longer as we are all united IN Christ, BY Christ.

We all share equally in the benefits of His body and blood; none are hungry for mercy while others are drunk on grace. Those who enter into this personal covenant with the Lord naturally enter at the same time into a covenant relationship with His people, the church

In the final verses of this chapter or paragraph of Paul's letter, for as Judith reminded us a couple of weeks ago this would originally have been one letter with the chapters added much later to break it down into digestible part, we are called to reflect on why we take communion, even why we gather with other Christians in a service as one body. We do not take communion as individual Christians each with our own meal, but as a united church body. We don't, or at least shouldn't minimise this by letting it become routine we mindlessly carry out, but glorify it by remembering him every time we gather to celebrate it. Jesus sacrifice on the cross is infinitely important, so is the fact that HE is to return. We are to remain vigilant waiting for that day.

The Corinthian church was undermining the significance of communion and the gathering of the church by their hearts and their actions. The death of Christ was not central, the return of Christ was not dominant; the love of Christ was not in control. It was NOT the Lord's Supper because they were taking it in an unworthy manner, thinking it was about them when it's all about Him. For those who take communion and yet their outward lives show a continuous pattern of greed, selfishness and insensitivity as some in Corinth did is to be guilty of the body and blood of Christ. It was these attitudes that brought about the death of Christ. So we need to examine our motives and actions in relation to the church and each other seriously before we come to the Table of the Lord.

Many people hold back because they feel unworthy. The truth is you are, we all are, we are never perfectly worthy, Jesus makes us worthy. Taking communion is a declaration of our unworthiness and HIS worthiness in our place. Each of us, if we are a Christian, is obligated, not to reach some moral high ground or spiritual standard of perfection (real or imagined) but pursue some rigorous and honest self- reflection.

After we reflect we are to repent and turn away from our wrong attitudes and actions. Resolved that we are a new creation in Christ we don't need to be slaves to sin but to worship the God who gave us everything even His one and only Son, by using our time, talent and treasure to contribute to His body the church in order to lift up the Gospel truths and live our lives for Him submitting ourselves to His discipline and correction so that we can more faithfully communicate with His body the church because of His body on the cross.

As has been said many times from this pulpit the church is faulty but that is no excuse for you not joining it if you are the Lord's. Nor need your own faults, and we all have them, ask Lynne, keep you back. The church is not an institution for perfect people, it is a sanctuary for sinners saved by

grace who though they are saved are still sinners and need all the help they can get from the sympathy and guidance of their fellow believers. The church is the nursery for God's weak children where they can be nourished and grow stronger

Spurgeon described the church as:

"The fold for Christ's sheep - the home for Christ's family."

As we come to the Lord's table today reflect and repent to remember the gospel of Jesus Christ you have received. Give your tithes and offerings not as a consumer but joyfully as a contributor to the body of believers. And as we worship Him in song sing loudly praises to our King who was slain for the sins of His people BUT who will return again in Victory! AMEN

And finally in Romans 8:1-4 Paul reminds us again who we are in Christ because of His sacrificial love offering of His own life for our sins:

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."