



1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Traditional Sunday lunch – the Oxo Family. It's a really civilised occasion, but have you ever been to a children's party at MacDonaldis! But adults aren't much better. In a survey carried out by Keep Britain Tidy, examining waste strewn on the street from fast-food outlets carried out in a high street recently – I can't remember where – the worst offender was Subway the trendy sandwich chain much loved of office workers rather than more obvious offenders. All pretty uncivilised.

Actually, mealtimes are so often a focus of social occasions, family occasions, community occasions. What did President Obama do after his Inauguration last week? He went and had lunch with all the great and good (well hopefully good) in Washington. Meals done together somehow define human beings, who after all are social animals. In the 21st Century we are slowly losing the sense of community that there once was. Church is one of the expressions of what God created human beings to be – a community - and it's through community that we grow as people and as God's people; not by our individual efforts but by our ability to learn from one another and grow together in our faith as we seek God together.

This is what our current series is all about – looking at the nature of fellowship and of church, and nothing typifies it more than the Lord's Supper.

Take a look at this picture of a group of hyenas all battling to eat a kill. They live as a community: as a pack. They all participate in the kill but once the victim is killed, it's every hyena for himself as they battle to get their bit in a feeding frenzy. It rather reminds me of a children's party, but I'm sure that for us, that's not the way we eat – we would prefer the Oxo Family for sure. Actually, we're having a shared lunch next week. It's about sharing – we bring and share our lunch and sit down and enjoy lunch together – it's what we expect and it's why it's usually well attended.

Knowing that fact, we can see how pathetic the Corinthians' attempt at what they called the Lord's Supper. It seems that communion was part of their house church meetings. Great we think – the first example of a bring and share meal. Not so it would seem. It was a bring your own meal situation – people weren't going there to share it with others. Why on earth not – wasn't Roman society well known for its gentility?

Yes. In formal meals, people reclined in their dining room, the triclinium. Here's a picture of one from Pompeii. By that I mean the rich Romans ate like this – the servants and the poor did not do things so grandly and did not eat so richly. And that's where the problem was in Corinth. The early church was a mix of people – old and young, rich and poor. Paul taught them the God was no respecter of persons so at each meeting of the local church, people came from all strata of society.

So the rich brought their ostentatious meals on communion evening, the poor brought what they could, maybe nothing. And did the ones with more share? Of course not. If you were rich, you didn't eat with servants and slaves and people from the low-life. Snobbery? You bet it was!

And for those who brought a feast with them, it was a bit of a feeding frenzy. Let's read in 1 Corinthians 11: *20 When you meet together as a group, it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat. 21 For as you eat, you each go ahead with your own meal, so that some are hungry while others get drunk. 22 Haven't you got your own homes in which to eat and drink? Or would you rather despise the church of God and put to shame the people who are in need? What do you expect me to say to you about this? Shall I praise you? Of course I don't!*

The implication of verse 20 is that the rich Christians thought they were celebrating the Lord's

Supper but actually it was all a big binge – an opportunity to have fun and get drunk! And at the same time the poorer people - the slaves and servants and ordinary working people were left out of the process whilst the wealthier classes lived it up! What a farce! The Lord's Supper wasn't meant to be a feast of self-indulgence!

They were actually there for Communion – the Lord's Supper. Paul has to write to them to let them know what they should be doing and what it meant – as if he hadn't already taught that to them anyway – they knew what it was for but did their own thing anyway.

And the way Jesus instituted it was as part of a meal. Jesus' use of bread and wine was not mystical as it is for many Christians. For Him and for the people in Corinth, bread and wine was the basic snack food of the day. It's what came out in meals and when you had folks in; like tea and biscuits or burger and chips (depending on which age group you are!) It was clear and practical, when God's people sat down to eat, they remembered Jesus as they ate ordinary food that everybody ate and drunk the ordinary drink. And as the church came together, they were to share in that meal and remember Jesus.

In Corinth, they met for this worship meal, but the whole thing was a joke – it had descended into excess for some and humiliation for others. The church was already split in other ways and this was just another. And to us it seems petty – some shunning others in the church because they were too common. Snobbery, pure and simple!

Before you think of how bad these people were, this state of affairs is something that could easily happen and does happen in probably most churches – divisions between people that are about personalities and nothing to do with matters of faith, but which can wreck the church spiritually. In fact, of all the church splits I've ever witnessed, only a handful have been over matters of theological or spiritual significance. It's inevitably more been about personalities and ultimately selfish motives.

When we became believers, God called us to be part of His church and He also calls us to be part of a local church. In the coming weeks we'll see that this is the norm for Christians. Being part of a local church allows us to grow and flourish – but here's nothing Satan likes best than to see a church divided and Christians going nowhere.

In this case, the division involved the Lord's Supper. And what started as pure snobbery ended as we find at the end of the reading, the church facing God's wrath. Why? After all, for God to bring punishment into a church that result in people dying is actually rare. Reference to people dying didn't come with any of the other examples of their dodgy behaviour: just the Lord's Supper.

These people were only being snobby weren't they? Not quite; these people brought their snobbery into the Lord's Supper and God was not prepared to tolerate it. In exploring why, I hope we are going to discover just how important this command of Jesus is in the life of a church. So what was the problem with these people's behaviour?

It was divisive

18 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. 19 (No doubt there must be divisions among you so that the ones who are in the right may be clearly seen.)

They were divided, that's clear. And most of the divisions at Corinth seem to have been caused by those who considered themselves spiritually or morally superior to other people. It's true in whatever church you go to, of whatever denomination. Some churches make what they see a virtue of it. It's called exclusivity because in the end it usually results in them separating from other believers and usually behind that there's some kind of abuse of people both inside and outside their group. Their words may be that they are separate because of some special revelation, understanding they have or they have – but often their actions and their words tell you something else about them. Or there are those who just like to point the finger, forgetting that when you point the finger, three point back at you!

Remember this and understand who we are, it is by grace that we've been saved, through faith – it's the gift of God, not by works so that no-one can boast. It's by grace we are who and what we are, and no-one gets to be morally or spiritually superior – we are all one in Christ. Remember that if you feel tempted to stand in judgement over others - and we are all prone to it. So when we see faults and failings in others we express the same, love grace and mercy to them that God has extended to

us. Unfortunately this was not Corinth.

Paul makes an interesting observation here. In one sense, divisions can ultimately have a benefit, because it makes God-fearing people seek what is right in these situations. What gave away those in the wrong on this occasion was, that they were acting directly in opposition to the Word of God and the worst thing was that they were the most influential people in the worldly sense in the church – the rich and socially influential and it required the rebuke of Paul to bring them to earth.

We are called as a people not to be divisive but to *make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*, as Paul puts it in Eph 4:3. That's what we're called to do.

But in this instance there was a particular destructiveness. Let's get to the next point.

■ **It was disrespectful to people in the fellowship**

20 When you meet together as a group, it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat. 21 For as you eat, you each go ahead with your own meal, so that some are hungry while others get drunk. 22 Haven't you got your own homes in which to eat and drink? Or would you rather despise the church of God and put to shame the people who are in need? What do you expect me to say to you about this? Shall I praise you? Of course I don't!

What was clear in Corinth was that their lack of regard or love for one another showed in the way that some were prepared to humiliate other members of the fellowship. The evidence is that this letter was only written a few years after Paul had left them and he had spent some time with them initially which means that they had been correctly taught.

One of the most radical parts of the Christian faith in the early church was the way in which it smashed society's boundaries. Whoever we are, if we're believers, we're one in Christ. We are loved and valued equally by God and we are called to love one another too. Love one another as He loved us. That plainly wasn't so in Corinth in many areas of their life as a fellowship

Very often disputes in a church expose a lack of respect, love, care, integrity between some or sometimes all of the various parties. This was the case here. It was clear and obvious.

■ **It was disrespectful to Christ**

The most disastrous part of what was happening at Corinth was that people chose to express their snobbery in the Lord's Supper. Last time I suggested that baptism should be an essential part of the life of a believer, not just because it demonstrated in our lives and to the world what Jesus has done in our lives, but that Jesus commands us to do it. And it's through our willingness to follow Him; to be His disciples that God does business with us. It's true that by His Spirit He's with every believer every minute of every day, but we find in Scripture two designated places where Jesus wants us to be. Jesus commanded only two religious rites as such – baptism and the Lord's Supper – Communion. He called us to two places – the baptismal pool and the table. It's not suggested, it's not an advisory, they're not optional extras, they are commands. Commands.

23 For I received from the Lord the teaching that I passed on to you: that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took a piece of bread, 24 gave thanks to God, broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in memory of me." 25 In the same way, after the supper he took the cup and said, "This cup is God's new covenant, sealed with my blood. Whenever you drink it, do so in memory of me." 26 This means that every time you eat this bread and drink from this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

The table is a serious place. It's a commanded place. It's Jesus' table. What's so important that we're there? Because the Lord's Supper establishes why we're here. Why we're believers. Not our human status, not our wealth, not our race, not our works, not our education, not our class, not our gender – just Jesus: it's because of His broken body and His shed blood that we're here. Baptism does that as a once for all personal act, but the Table does it for us as a corporate regular act. And Jesus instituted this so that we proclaim His death through it until He comes.

That's why the behaviour of these feeding frenzy people in Corinth was so wrong. Their emphasis on their stomachs, on having a binge and a ball was a massive slap in the face to Jesus because it totally reversed the truth of why they were there. They were disregarding the command of God in behaving in the way that they were. And what was the consequence? *27 Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the*

body and blood of the Lord. 28 A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgement on himself. 30 That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.

The horror of it is that God was actually judging them - some had even died because of their disobedience. Wow! They were plenty bad in other ways; so what was so different about the Lord's Supper?

Some people suggest that that the Lord's Supper is so deeply profound, that to take the body and blood of Christ lightly is something we should be careful about. Therefore many people live in fear that somehow if they have sinned they should not take communion just in case they get struck down. Or maybe if they are going through personal or spiritual problems they don't take communion - just in case God is upset with them.

But look at the context of the passage - that's not what it's about. These people were profaning the body and blood of Christ because they had knowingly and wantonly perverted something that had been directly given to the apostles and to Paul by the Lord Jesus Christ. In terms of open religious acts the Lord only specifically commanded two acts. He actually didn't ask much - but what He asked was profound because it openly enacts our relationship with God and therefore again reminds us of the fact that our being as Christians is by grace through faith - not of works so that no-one can boast. It was only that death that had made them part of His church and the only thing that bound them together as a fellowship.

What they were doing was the exact reverse. They used the Lord's Supper to affirm their division, for those who felt superior to affirm their fellowship together because of their social standing or because of their "special knowledge" and exclude the rest. It was based on their works and their supposed privilege, not on God's grace.

They knowingly stumbled and humiliated other Christians and created resentment and division by perverting the Lord's Supper.

Now can you see how God's wrath was on them as a Church. They weren't asked to do much but that little has huge meaning and to do what they did was not just an insult to Jesus, but it was an insult to the other believers whom they spurned and for whom they cared so little and whom they stumbled.

Take a look at Matthew 18 where we see of what God thinks of people who cause others to sin

3 And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 "And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. 6 But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

Add that to the significance of the Lord's Table and oh dear, they were in trouble! That was the sin of Corinth and why they were sick and dying.

And that's the message of these verses in 1 Corinthians 11. It's not just about my personal belief and the need to proclaim the Lord's death to myself or any non-Christians present (now that's an interesting one - communion services are evangelistic? Yes they are!). We proclaim the Lord's death to one another. In that death we have our life together.

For years we have followed the philosophy of the world in interpreting the Christian faith as being a personal thing, but the two ordinances the Jesus gives us are not just reminders of our personal faith, but are communal acts by the fellowship of God's people.

To mark our integration by the Spirit into the Church - the body of Christ, we have been given these two outward acts to perform. Baptism marks that entry, the Lord's Supper marks that continuation, until the Lord comes. You can't have one without the other. If we are Christians we don't argue with Jesus - we do both. And if we don't - how can we expect God's blessing. After all, look what happened to the Corinthians!

So what challenge does this bring us this morning? The challenge that we are one in Christ but so often we have been more than a little like the Corinthians. Let's come before Him and ask His forgiveness for the times when we've thought ourselves better and covenant afresh towards one another to walk in humility as God's people.

Prayer

- **thanks for the grace of God – so clearly revealed each time we come around the table**
- **forgiveness – judging others thinking we were superior – doing our own thing because it suited.**
- **commitment to build one another up in humility – to listen to the voice of God and walk with the Spirit.**

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MRBC Felixstowe, 26/1/09
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