

**Isaiah 24: 4-13**

**John 6: 1-14**

Receiving Bread and Replenishing the Earth, a sermon preached by Rev Prof Murray Rae, at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Sunday 6 March 2016

Kerry has told me that some of you are working through Rowan Williams' book 'Being Christian'. The Sunday evening services at present are following through the themes of that book. Tonight we have before us the theme of eucharist. The eucharist is of course, another name for the Lord's supper, or for the Mass as it is called in the Roman Catholic tradition. The eucharist is that commemorative meal of bread and wine through which we remember Christ's death. Or so we commonly say. That is not wrong. Jesus himself said that we should, 'Do this in remembrance of me.'

But as Williams points out in his chapter on the eucharist, there is more to it than that. The eucharistic meal speaks not only of the past, but also of the present, and especially of the future. It makes no sense, Williams contends, to celebrate the eucharist, merely in memory of Christ's death. For the sharing of the bread and the wine around the table of our Lord are also an anticipation of things yet to come. The eucharist is a sign of transformation, of new life, of hope for a future in which God's purpose of abundant life for all that he has made will be realised in its fullness. The future orientation of the eucharist is also evident in the things Jesus said at the last supper. After taking the cup and declaring that 'this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins', Jesus says, 'I tell you, I will never drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'

The forgiveness of sins has to do with the past, of course, but it has just as much to do with the future. To forgive is to declare that the future will not be constrained by an offender's past mistakes. Grudges will not be held, revenge will not be sought; we will not try to get even and contribute even more to the escalation of retaliation and ill-will. Forgiveness opens up the possibility of a future that is not constrained by the past.

The possibility of a new and different future is one of the central themes of the gospel of John. John does not report, in the same way as Matthew, Mark and Luke, a last supper with the disciples at which a Passover meal was celebrated and the words of forgiveness and hope were spoken.

Rather, John weaves the eucharistic theme through various episodes in the gospel narrative. Bread and wine feature at various points in John's gospel as signs of a new future, as signs of God's coming kingdom. Let's take a look at how that works.

We read earlier John's account of Jesus feeding the five thousand. You are familiar with the story, no doubt. A large crowd was following Jesus. The time of the Jewish Passover was near. That is no incidental detail of course. The Passover meal is a celebration of God's deliverance of his people from bondage. John means us to understand that what Jesus is about to do is yet another sign of deliverance, yet another sign of a future in which bondage and oppression will be no more.

Jesus sees the great crowd coming to him and ponders with his disciples how the people are to be fed. The disciples declare what seems obvious to all; there is no food for everyone to eat. But then a small boy is found who has five loaves and two fish. These of course seem hopelessly inadequate to feed the waiting crowd, but then the miracle happens, the miracle of transformation.

With unmistakable overtones of the eucharistic meal, Jesus took the loaves of bread, 'and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated... as much as they wanted. When all were satisfied, he told the disciples, Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost. So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, they filled twelve baskets.'

This is not the first occasion reported in the gospel in which a shortage has been overcome. In chapter two John tells of a wedding in Cana at which Jesus was present. Part way through the festivities the wine ran out. This time it is his mother that turns to Jesus and asks him to intervene. So Jesus instructs the servants at the feast to fill six stone jars with water. The jars, we are told almost in passing, were for the Jewish rites of purification.

As it turns out the passing reference is of enormous theological importance. The Jewish rites of purification were understood to bring about forgiveness and a restoration of relationship with God. There is more going on here than the avoidance of social embarrassment for the wedding host.

This is a story of replenishment and renewal that penetrates deeply into our historical reality. It is a story of new creation, an anticipation of that day when people from east and west and north and south will sit at table together at the marriage feast of the lamb. Let's see how the story continues:

The servants were obedient to Jesus' instruction and filled the six stone jars with water. When the chief steward of the feast drew from the jars, he found that the water had been turned to wine. John's gospel has eucharistic overtones running through much of the gospel story. Here we see it again.

Wine is the sign of a new covenant, a symbol of new relationship with God and with our neighbours. John means us to see in this story the sign of a new future that is beginning to unfold.

The people who were with Jesus at the wedding in Cana were Jews. They are participants in a story that goes back a long way. It goes back, for instance, to a time of loss and devastation when Jerusalem had been destroyed and the people of Israel were scattered. We read a little about that in the reading from Isaiah this evening.

The earth dries up and withers,  
world languishes and withers...  
The earth is polluted under its inhabitants,  
for they have transgressed laws and violated the statutes,  
broken the everlasting covenant...  
There is an outcry in the streets for lack of wine;  
All joy has reached its eventide;  
The gladness of the earth is banished.

These words of Isaiah paint a desperate picture of desolation and a polluted earth. The earth has dried up, the grapes have withered on the vine and there is an outcry in the streets for lack of wine.

Do you see now a new significance in Jesus turning water into wine, in his sharing bread among those who have need?

Jesus is bringing about a transformation; he is replenishing the earth; he is opening up the possibility of a new future in which past failures, notably here our failure to care for the earth, will no longer determine the future.

The eucharistic meal, the sharing of bread and wine, is not just a memorial of Jesus' death. It is that. But it is as well a sign of a new future, a future in which there will be bread for all, a future in which the fruit of the vine will flourish again and there will be enough. Jesus' work involves the overcoming of human sin to be sure, but that involves also a replenishment of the earth, the restoration of creation, the making of all things new.

That is the great Christian hope that we celebrate at the eucharist. It is a hope for the coming kingdom of God in which creation will be rightly ordered according to God's good purposes. This is a hope in which we are invited already to share.

How do we do that? Well, the boy with his five loaves and his two fish gives us a clue. He did not withhold them for himself but gave them into the hands of Christ to be shared with all who had need.

The servants at the wedding feast give us a clue. The miracle happened because they were obedient to Christ's command.

And the eucharist itself gives us a clue. Jesus took bread and broke it and gave it to his disciples saying, 'this is my body given for you.'

The eucharistic meal invites us to share in God's different ordering of things, an order in which bread is broken and shared, an order in which forgiveness is offered, an order in which the fruits of God's creation are not accumulated merely for one's own purposes, but given generously for all to share.

These are the gestures of faith; they are signs of hope for the coming kingdom of God

Do this, Jesus says; do this in memory of me.

Amen.

~~~~~

**KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN**  
*growing in courage to live the Jesus way*



**Knox Church**  
449 George Street  
Dunedin  
New Zealand  
Ph. (03) 477 0229  
[www.knoxchurch.net](http://www.knoxchurch.net)

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, [minister@knoxchurch.net](mailto:minister@knoxchurch.net)