

**Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> September 2022**  
**Exodus 12:1-3, 21-27; Luke 22:7-8, 13-20**  
**Rev.Scott Burton**  
**Brightons Parish Church**

Sermon keypoints:

- Communion: proclaiming the death of Jesus
- Communion: more than a mere memorial
- Communion: for our children

Let us take a moment to pray before we think about God's Word:

Come Holy Spirit and soften our hearts to the Word of God.

Come Holy Spirit among us and deepen our understanding of Your Word.

Come Holy Spirit with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus' name.  
Amen.

So, we conclude our series today on Covenants and Sacraments and we've been exploring the Biblical foundation for our tradition, that sees children are sharing in the covenants and so, that baptism is then fitting for both children and adults because we understand it to speak more of God's promise than our response and I must say I've had more interaction and comments on this series than probably any series in the last three and a half years. More comments on the door, more emails, more messages which has been lovely. Both those who have resonated with it and those who found it a real challenge and sometimes even disagreed with it. And so, I wonder if you might turn to your neighbor for 30 seconds in a moment and share with them one word to summarize your response so far. Has it been challenging? Hard? Boring? Unhelpful? Hopefully not those two but encouraging. What, however it might be 30 seconds. Over to you just now.

Well, sounds like there's a lot of interesting words probably out there. Do pick up those conversations and maybe afterwards over a tea and coffee or here in the sanctuary if you're able to linger for a little bit.

I'll say at the start, as I've said each of the weeks we've looked at this, the aim of this series is not necessarily to convince you to change your mind but at least to raise questions. Questions to explore. Maybe to bring a word of challenge, that we might follow through the logic of our theology which I'm not sure we've always done. But, at least, to create, maybe create space for a range of practice particularly around Communion, because it was Communion and the idea of children sharing in Communion that really kick-started all this. Our Kirk Session reaffirmed the desire to allow children to share in Communion and to be much more proactive about that than we have been since we took a vote on it some 20 odd years ago or such like, but how the Kirk Session also wanted teaching on Communion before we embark on that and, as I've said in preparation, it seemed that we needed a much wider understanding so that we could eventually get to this week to understand well, not only what is Communion, but why would we allow children to be involved.

So, what is Communion about? What is its symbolism meant to convey to us? Well, our reading today from Luke's gospel took us back to that moment when Jesus instituted Communion for the first time with His disciples. That original moment of institution and

we read earlier 'Then came the day of unleavened bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. Jesus sent Peter and John saying 'Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover,' And we know from our reading that they do so and they go together to share in the Passover meal as part of the wider Passover festival that was a week long and, within that context, Jesus institutes Communion. And so, the context is Passover. That meal that was both a looking back and a looking forward. A looking back to what God had done that He had delivered Israel from captivity, that a life had been given, blood had been spilled, the Passover lamb, so that the judgment of God might pass over the Israelites and without that they would have been just as much in danger. But it was also all looking forward, a looking forward to when God would deliver His people more widely through the Messiah and that was a great hope and expectation of God's people. And so, it's into this context that Jesus institutes Communion. A new memorial meal. And so, the symbolism of Passover carries then into Communion as well. Jesus said a little later in the same passage 'This is my body given for you. This cup is a new covenant in my blood which is poured out for you.' Just as the life of the Passover lamb was given, so Jesus' life is given for us, to save us, that the judgment of God might pass over us. After all, in the New Testament we read in Romans 6 that 'The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our lord.' Paul will go on to say in first Corinthians 5 that Jesus is our Passover lamb. He makes that very clear using those exact words and it leads them a little later on in the same passage same letter to say 'Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.' And so, when we gather to share in Communion, we gather to proclaim His death and what He has done, that He has saved us, that He is the means by which this new covenant is established, this new covenant that replaces the old Mosaic covenant, but which does not undo but rather builds upon that covenant made with Abraham, that we saw in week one, that promise that He made, that God would have a people of His own. I wonder, as we celebrated last week The Lord's Supper, did we bear that in mind? Did we bear in mind that, in some ways, it's not all about us, maybe in many ways it's not all about us? Actually, it's about Jesus. It's about proclaiming that good news. It's about making that known and marveling afresh, that in grace, we would receive a Saviour and that we would be included in His covenant, undeserving as we are, He includes us, He dies for us.

I wonder if we know that and own that, when we share in the sacrament? Yet, is Communion more than just a remembering, is it more than a mere memorial? Is it just about remembering or proclaiming? Well, Paul will say in first Corinthians as well, he writes quite a lot in there about the Passover and Communion he says that because there's one bread, we are one body and so, it reminds us of our unity, Also, we saw in our passage from Jesus saying that He won't share in this meal until the fulfillment of the kingdom. And that's picked up in the Revelation 19 where we see that future banquet, that God's people will share in. And so, Communion points us forward, just like Passover did as well. So, it is more than mere memorial, bringing these parts in and yet we can say more even still.

And this is where we're going to maybe diverge a little, depending on your background and tradition, because within what Jesus said is understood to be a promise. Jesus said

'This is my body.; This is my body. And, as we heard last week, thinking about sacraments within our reformed tradition, a sacrament was understood to be an outward sign of a promise from God. And the promise for Communion is this promise, 'this is my body.' There is a lot of room for misunderstanding this and some of our denominations go down very different tracks from where we go, in the wider reformed tradition, not just of the Church of Scotland. Many congregations would see themselves as holding to how we interpret this, for we do not interpret this literally, and so, when we share Communion, it's not the literal body and blood of Jesus, nor is Jesus behind the elements somehow, as some traditions would have it, but that, as we share in these visible signs, they're signs pointing us to Jesus, pointing us to this fulfillment that, as we share in Communion, He is here by the Spirit, He's in our midst. And so, as bread and wine nurture the body, Jesus, by His Spirit, nurtures our soul. And so, those signs point us to Him so that, in faith, we receive from Him and are nourished.

Now, I wonder whether that's where some of our practice around Communion might come. Sometimes, we seem to be very overly serious at times and maybe it's because of this promise, this understanding, but let's remember too that Jesus is also present when we pray, Jesus is present in worship, that He's amongst us when two or three gather, He's amongst us as He inhabits the praises of His people, He's amongst us as we read His Word. So, He's amongst us in all these ways, to sustain our faith and to build us up and maybe, maybe it's part of this that leads us in a reluctance to change. I'm not sure, but we can at least say that Communion is more than a memorial, it's more than just a looking back and I think many of us could testify to a benefit when we share in Communion that, not only do we remember, but we also feel that benefit because upon our consciences, within our souls, is affirmed that Jesus died for us and so God loves me. Jesus died for us and so we are united. Jesus died for the redemption of all things and so that the kingdom will be all, in all one day, Communion is a very rich and meaningful gift from God not just to look back but to bless us, sustain us, as we rightfully proclaim His death.

So, what about children? And all of this and the benefits that we receive and what we mark and what we proclaim? What about children? Should they share in it? If so, is there a certain age? Do they need to have a measure of understanding around Communion? Let me be clear, that any change of practice, whatever we do in church, whatever we do should not be because of sentimentality or because something just seems like a nice idea, and particularly with something that means so much to us, we should do it because of the Scriptures, of following through the logic of our theology, of it contributing to the purposes of God amongst us.

And so, what then might be the grounds for including children and sharing Communion? Well, Jesus said 'This is my body given for you.' Was the body of Jesus given for our children? We've been saying over the last two weeks, that children share in the new covenant and so Jesus gave His body for them as well. That would be one reason to include our children in Communion. Communion, as we saw, also replaced Passover and Passover, as we read, was a meal that the family would share in and children would be present and so, carrying over that should mean then that children might share

in Communion, that God wouldn't necessarily change His practice with the change from one to the other. Now, some might say 'Well, I don't read in the New Testament anywhere of children sharing in Communion.' and that's a fair point, however, I'd respond to you and say 'Well, there's no mention of women sharing in Communion either, so we're going to follow through that logic.' Probably not. No, unless any of you are up for a real fight. Now, we might then reach a point where we say 'Okay, okay, maybe children should be involved for those reasons but what age? What age, Scott? Do they need a level of understanding, a level of cognition about this because, after all, it's a serious matter, it's an important thing we do?' And it is an important thing. Jesus says 'Do this in remembrance of me.' Paul says in first Corinthians that we have to examine ourselves and discern the body of Christ. We might ask 'Well, can children do those things? Can they?' Well, let's think about these lines a little bit more. Jesus does say 'Do this in remembrance of me' and those words are quoted in and all the Gospels in one way or another, and by Paul in first Corinthians chapter 11. It's interesting though, that when Paul writing in first Corinthians 11 quotes that he then concludes his writing of it in that little portion by equaling remembrance with proclamation. I wonder if we misread into remembrance that it's all about memory? Remembrance can also mean proclaiming. Proclaiming this rather than it being sidelined, rather than it being neglected that, actually, it's to be central to our life, it's to be central to our message that is what's to be core to us as a church. And there's another point; we read this line very individualistically even, because that is our culture but, in the day of the early church, in the day of Israel with Passover or Communion, they were a much more communal society and so, maybe, they understood these words in a much more collective manner that, together, we share in Communion, that together we proclaim the Lord's death, not necessarily just at the individual level and so, as long as we're doing that together, we would be doing justice to the words of Jesus because, let's remember too, that Passover was a remembrance and a proclamation and yet children were involved, involved from such a young age that the passage suggests they'll come eventually to ask you 'Why? What does this ceremony mean to you?' They're involved before they even understand but able to see that something is meant by this and so, they ask the question. So, I think there are grounds for children still being allowed to share in Communion without necessarily setting a benchmark because of this particular verse. And, if we are going to set a benchmark that remembrance means we must understand and we must have a level of cognition, then what are we going to do with those amongst us who suffer from dementia? Are you going to go and ask them, well, what does Communion mean to you and, if they can't give you a certain answer, are you going to bar them, are you going to cut them out? Why is it one rule for the adults and one rule for the children? And now, you might say to them well, you might say to me 'Well, Scott, they've shown a life of faith so why would you just turn them away now?' Well, what is faith? Faith is a sign that you share in the new covenant and haven't we been saying that our children, the children of believers, share in the new covenant? Or what about Paul's words in first Corinthians 11 about examining and discerning? Well, if you read around that passage, you'll see that Paul gives that to correct sinful behavior. He doesn't give it so as to exclude individuals or exclude children. It's to discern, not the meaning of the sacrament, but that we are family, we are part of the body together and we have to examine the sin that exists between one another because of that sinfulness.

That's what we have to examine. And so, I don't think, either in the words of Jesus or the words of Paul, that we shouldn't preclude children from sharing in Communion. I don't think we should set a bar for their entry necessarily, because, otherwise, entrance then becomes based on our understanding rather than upon grace, and wouldn't we be potentially also stunting their faith, their growth of faith. We've remarked about the Queen's life of faith, of faith that she came to have and own for herself in her early years so that, the moment that she became Queen, she could see it as a calling from God,

and then she followed through that faith all her days until the very end. And don't we want that for our kids? Don't we want to remove every hindrance to them and give them every opportunity to grow in that faith? It's been said through various bits of research that everyone, adults and children alike, have different ways of meeting with God. Some of us are very word orientated and that if we're not that doesn't mean you should neglect the Bible but it means you might resonate with it a little bit less. Some of us are very service oriented or emotion orientated but others of us are very symbol orientated. It's partly why we started lighting a candle during lockdown, to give that symbolic meaning of God amongst us. But children can be very symbolic in their learning of faith. In the practice of doing, they learn by doing. And, as a church, as a reformed church, we don't really do symbolism much, do we? How much symbolism do we talk about or point our children to, really. The one symbol, beyond lighting a candle, is Communion and yet we bar them from it. And so, are we stunting their growth somehow, because we won't allow them to come, for whatever reason. I worry that we're stunting their growth.

So, where does this leave us? Well, I think we're still on a journey. I don't assume or conclude that I've necessarily convinced you and, as I say, I'm not seeking to convince you but, at least, to give you a measure of reassurance, hopefully, that there's good grounds of this, Biblical grounds for allowing this change, I do think that we should be force feeding our children. So, just in case you're wondering what does this lead to? I'm not advocating that we force feed our children and not to force feed an infant but I would, following the logic of our theology, I would say, as soon as a child seeks to share in the sacrament why not? Why not? They're part of the new covenant and so let them share. But this will be a very personal and family-based decision. And that's good, and right. And, okay, we're not advocating that we have a uniform approach. Actually, maturity is not necessarily about uniformity. But I'm saying, you know, there is variance of understanding around baptism, about Communion, and can we hold that variance and tension, in unity, and so, allow space for a bit of both-and rather than either-or?

Now, I say, we're still on a journey. I think there'll be many questions because I'm sure I could have been clearer or more helpful. Looking forward to those questions. I had already put in a diary a meeting with the Sunday School leaders for the 27th of September but I think it might be of benefit to open that out. And so, if you would like to come and ask questions, wrestle through this a bit more, then come, come to that meeting. We'll put it in the notices from next week. Ahead of December Communion, if we're still aiming for then as an all-age Communion, I'd like to produce some materials to help families, to explain this to their children because understanding is not

unimportant. Understanding is not unimportant. It's just not the benchmark. The benchmark should be Jesus and what He has done and whether we share, and what He has done and, as I say, I think our children do and so, if we do go ahead with an all-age Communion in December, some materials for families might be helpful. But I think also, during that Communion, I recognize that there might be families that think well. I don't want our children yet to share in it, but maybe we could offer a blessing, a prayer of blessing for the children, as adults, taking part in Communion so that no one is left out, that they still receive from God.

We're still on our journey and I've tried to help us understand the tradition we share in and why, then, it might, following through that logic through, say that children should share in both sacraments. Hopefully we've seen its biblical basis. Hopefully we've seen how it still promotes grace alone, salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, and Christ alone, to the glory of God alone. But whether you're convinced or not, I hope that we all grow in our confidence of God's saving purposes and provision through Jesus, and maintain that bond of unity and peace for, as Paul says, because there is one loaf, we who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called one lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all, and to Him be the glory, now and forever, Amen.