



## Our Baptism Renewed In Bread And Wine

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When Jesus launched his disciples into the world to continue his mission, he did not give them a handbook of instructions. He did not write a book. He gathered a company 'to be with him and to be sent out.' (Mark 3:14)

The essential thing was to be with him, to hear his words, watch his deeds, learn from him to pray. They would have to interpret him as best they could in the different situations they would meet.

That is why we have four Gospels and not one. That is why we have differing versions of what he said and did. If we regret this, we have not understood the intention of Jesus. The Church is not constituted by adherence to a written act.

At the end, the disciples had not understood the intention of Jesus. They deserted him. Before they did so, Jesus did something which would carry them through the crisis and become the centre of their new life. He took bread and wine, gave it to them, and said: 'This is my body; eat it. This is my blood; drink it'.

In doing what he had told them, even when they did not yet understand, they would learn after his death that they were to be partners both in his dying and in his risen life. That very simple act, with those words to interpret it, became the core of their life together.

### **This held them together**

They might differ in their understanding. They might have disputes among themselves. But this held them together. To share in this act was to be pledged absolutely to Jesus in his dying and in his risen life, to go the way of the cross with all those called to go the same way.

So to profane the supper was a terrible thing. When Paul hears that the Corinthians are breaking fellowship at this point, turning the Lord's supper into a self-service cafeteria (1 Cor 11:20f), he tells them that they are under the judgment of God. That is why it became very important to ensure that the person presiding at the supper was someone authorised not just by a

small group but also by the wider fellowship. A private party is not the Lord's supper, because this act belongs to the universal fellowship.

Who should share in the supper? Plainly, those who are committed to Christ. How should that commitment be certified? Jesus had entered his ministry through the baptism of John. John's baptism was a prophetic sign to Israel that a wholly new start was needed.

When Jesus, the sinless one, came with a crowd of sin-burdened people to be baptised, he entered that ministry which was to culminate in the cross. He was taking as his own the sin of the world. In his baptism he was committed to the cross.

Those whom Jesus calls to follow him are invited to go the same way. Baptism is the act through which we are committed to follow Jesus on the way of the cross. The supper is the act in which that same commitment is continually renewed. Each time we share in the Lord's Supper we reaffirm our baptism.

These two acts, baptism and the supper have been at the heart of the Christian story for 20 centuries. To be a Christian is to be part of a visible human community marked by these two visible acts. As God's word had to be spoken in the flesh and blood of a human being, so our incorporation into his life involves these visible acts.

'What I think' and 'What I feel' are important but secondary. This incorporation is primary. When we share communion, even if the heart is cold and the mind wavering, we are given Christ himself to feed our souls. We can trust his pledge to us, even when we cannot trust our pledge to him.

We are always beginners in the life of faith, from the smallest child to the person who comes to faith in later life. Feelings come and go. Understanding is a small candle in a vast universe. Often we are deeply perplexed. But God has given us in Christ the pledge of his faithfulness, and this pledge is conveyed to us in these simple acts which we can do as he commands us, even when our faith is feeble.

It is wrong to separate these sacraments from a living faith, as though the acts were all that mattered. But it is also wrong to make religion a matter of doctrines and 'experiences'. God came to us in Jesus so that, as an old woman said, 'we could get a grip on him'. The Church, like its Lord, is a down-to-earth affair.

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