
A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

How Jesus Understood the Last Supper: A Parable in Action

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1. Jesus' Parables

Jesus was a brilliant story-teller. He used parables not simply to add spice to his teaching, but in order also to involve people personally in his ministry and to challenge people very directly with his message.

a. The Drama of the Good Samaritan

Take the parable of the Good Samaritan. In order to understand the force of any of the parables, we need to see them in their historical, geographical and social context. In the case of the parable of the Good Samaritan the most important thing to realize is how badly Jews and Samaritans normally related to each other in Jesus' day. The Jews regarded the Samaritans as half-pagan (though their ideology may not in fact have been very unorthodox), and the religious Jew tried to have as little to do as possible with the Samaritans (see Jn. 4:9, 8:48).

This attitude had its origin right back in Old Testament times, when Samaria was conquered by the Assyrians and a substantial part of its Jewish population was deported, being replaced with pagan settlers (see 2 Kings 17). Although these immigrants learned the local religion of Israel, they were never regarded as religiously *kosher* by the Jews of Jerusalem, and there was constant enmity and tension between the Jews and the Samaritans. In the book of Nehemiah we read of conflict between them when the Jews were rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem (*e.g.* Neh. 4–6). It is not perhaps surprising that at some point—we are not quite sure when—the Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerizim. But the building of a rival temple to the temple in Jerusalem rubbed salt into the wound so far as the Jews were concerned, and in 128 BC, when the Jews were temporarily in the ascendant militarily, they marched to Gerizim and destroyed the Samaritan temple, lock, stock and barrel, gloating over the thoroughness of their destructive action. The question of the temple continued to be a very sensitive one to Jews and Samaritans (see the Samaritan woman's conversation with Jesus in John 4:20); in 6 AD some Samaritans broke into the Jerusalem temple at night and scattered human bones there, thus defiling the sacred place just before a Jewish feast—an unfriendly

act, to say the least, that will have confirmed the Jews in their hostility towards their neighbours.

The tensions between Jews and Samaritans were liable to come violently to the surface at any time, not least when Jewish pilgrims passed through Samaria on their way to Jerusalem; Jesus himself faced such hostility when he was going up to Jerusalem (see Luke 9:53,54 'They would not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" ' Notice the mutual antagonism between Jews and Samaritan!). To avoid such hostility the Jews of Galilee would often avoid the direct route to Jerusalem via Samaria, preferring to go the long way round on the far side of the Jordan river—a route that brings you up to Jerusalem through Jericho.

The second bit of background to the parable has to do with that road. It is a road that in only seventeen miles descends quite precipitously from 2500 feet above sea level to 770 feet below sea level, Jericho being near the river Jordan and the Dead Sea down in the Rift Valley. The Jerusalem-Jericho road is steep, very rocky and ideal terrain for highwaymen. It has been a notoriously dangerous road for travellers right up into our present century; in Jesus' day it was desirable for pilgrims to travel in groups (or caravans) for safety; in the Middle Ages the Crusader order of Templars specifically had the task of protecting Christian pilgrims coming up to Jerusalem.

Given this background, we can begin to appreciate how Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan 'works'. Jesus describes a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, a road familiar to his listeners. They could picture the rocky dangerous road, and sympathize with the lonely traveller going down it. They will not have been surprised to hear that he 'fell among thieves', and they will have felt for the man, being robbed and stripped and left half dead. But then a sign of hope: someone coming, a priest! A lot of priests lived in the Jericho area, and so we (as Jesus' hearers) are not surprised to see one coming down from Jerusalem, perhaps after his priestly duties. Our hopes are raised for the poor man lying half-dead by the roadside, but then the priest passes by on the other side. Our hopes are dashed. Jesus' Jewish hearers may well have nodded their heads at this point: 'Yes, that's the clergy for you. Religious maybe, but . . .' Then a Levite comes. Again our hopes are disappointed; again Jesus' hearers will probably have nodded their recognition of the situation: 'That's religious people for you . . .'

So far Jesus' story has been one that has gripped his hearers' attention, involving them in the action. And so far they have been with him—sympathizing with the poor man and recognizing Jesus' portrait of the religiously hypocritical. But what next? The way the story should go on for Jesus' hearers is that now a layman—an

ordinary Jew—will come and do the decent thing for the poor man by the roadside. That would have made a most satisfactory story. Instead Jesus says 'But a Samaritan while travelling came . . .' This is not how the story should go! For Jesus' Jewish hearers this is a decidedly difficult turn in the story. Samaritans are irreligious half-castes with whom we like to have as little as possible to do. The thought of a Samaritan coming up to me and helping me is very uncomfortable. But Jesus describes the Samaritan not just coming and doing the bare minimum to help the muggers' poor victim: no, the Samaritan does everything, bandaging the wounds, pouring in his own oil and wine, putting the man on his donkey, taking him to the inn, paying the innkeeper for several days' care, even promising to return and pay anything extra that may be needed. Going the second mile is not in it! The Samaritan is amazingly kind!

What are Jesus' hearers to make of this story? It is a gripping account, which then takes a problematic turn. Jesus challenges his hearers through the story to choose whether they are going to continue with their traditional prejudice, which wanted to limit their neighbour—love to fellow Jews (see the question that introduces the parable in 10:29), or whether they will accept Jesus' revolutionary attitude which is that our love should be even for our enemies (Mt. 5:44). Jesus invites his hearers to 'Go and do likewise' (10:37)—to be like the amazingly generous, unprejudiced Samaritan of the parable.

Scholars have described what happens in a parable like that of the Good Samaritan as a 'language-event'.[1] The parable does not just give us information about the sort of people we should be; it involves us and confronts us with a choice—a choice between our old prejudice (dislike of the Samaritans and others) and Jesus' new way of the kingdom of God (love of enemies, such as Jesus himself exemplified).

Not all Jesus' parables are such powerfully engaging dramas; but it is illuminating to see the Last Supper as just such a parabolic drama, and it is helpful to interpret the Supper as we would a parable.

b. General principles in parable interpretation

In interpreting parables we need, as we have seen, to understand their context. First there is the historical/social/geographical/religious context of first century Palestine (*e.g.* the history of Jewish/Samaritan relations, the geography of Palestine). Secondly, there is the context of Jesus' teaching: Jesus proclaimed the coming of God's revolutionary kingdom, and his parables must be seen in this context, not for example in the context of modern psychology (Jesus was not intending to teach non-directive caring counselling through the portrayal of the Good Samaritan, but rather something about the revolution he had come to bring!). Thirdly, there is the context of the story in the

gospels and the hints or direct indications that the evangelists give us about the interpretation (*e.g.* the question of the lawyer 'Who is my neighbour?' and Jesus' final comment 'Go and do likewise' help us to see that the parable is about revolutionary neighbour-love, and that it is not the sort of complex allegory of salvation—Adam falling into sin and being rescued by Christ—that ancient interpreters supposed.)

Another key to understanding Jesus' parables is appreciation of the form or shape of the particular parable being interpreted. The old allegorical method that saw significance in every detail of the parables (for example, the two coins in the parable of the Good Samaritan) and the more modern scholarly view that Jesus' parables all have only one point are both mistaken. Each parable must be judged on its merits: we must see how it is constructed, what the points of emphasis are, and so on. The parable of the sower with its description of the four types of soil is—obviously enough—constructed as a multi-point parable; the parable of the Good Samaritan is much more nearly a one-point parable (about neighbour-love), though there is probably a negative point about empty religion (the priest and the Levite) as well as a positive point.

2. The Last Supper

Given this preliminary discussion of method, we can turn to the Last Supper itself. The relevant New Testament texts are Mt. 26:20–29, Mark 14:17–25, Luke 22:14–38, John 13:1–30 (*cf.* 6:52–58), 1 Cor. 11:23–26.

a. The Background and Context of the Last Supper

What is the background to the story of the Last Supper and the context in which it must be interpreted?

i. Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God

The first thing to say is that the Last Supper story must be seen in the context of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God, because this was so central to his ministry. We must interpret the supper in a way that fits in with Jesus' proclamation that 'the kingdom of God has come near' (Mk. 1:15).

What did he mean by this proclamation? To put it very simply: he meant that the day of God's salvation which the Old Testament promised and which his contemporaries were longing for had dawned. First century Palestine was, of course, an occupied country: the Roman imperialists had been in control of the country for almost a hundred years, and, although the Romans were relatively benign rulers, the high taxation that their subjects had to pay was a great burden on a poor country, and it was in any case extremely irksome to have to live under a culturally and religiously alien superpower. Jesus' announcement of God's new day—of the day of God's rule—was good news.

Jesus explained that God's marvellous Old Testament promises to his people were being fulfilled in his ministry (Lk.4:18–21 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled'; *cf.* Mt.13:16,17), and he demonstrated the truth of his claim in action (Mt. 11:2–6): he healed the sick, he welcomed sinners back to God, he broke through the social barriers of his day (for example, between Jew and Samaritan), he changed selfish people like Zacchaeus into generous people. He was visibly overcoming that 'strong man' Satan and restoring the 'rule' (or kingdom) of God. (Mt. 12:22–32, especially 12:28). He did not bring the kingdom all at once (to the disappointment of his disciples), but he saw himself as starting the process, like a sower sowing his seed that would produce the harvest (see the parables of Mt. 13).

ii. Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem

If the broad context of the Last Supper was Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God, the more particular context was his last journey up to Jerusalem. Jesus had come up from Galilee with his disciples to the holy city in order to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem. This journey was, as Jesus made clear and as his disciples recognized, one of particular significance. We read that 'Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem' (Lk. 9:51), and his disciples recognized that there was something special about this journey (see Mark 10:32). They knew that something momentous was to happen in Jerusalem. According to Luke 19:11 they hoped that Jesus was now going to complete the revolution that he had begun, driving out the Romans and rewarding them with positions of privilege in the new regime (Mk. 10:35–37). Their excitement was evident as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, and they welcomed him as king.

But Jesus' own understanding was different. Yes, the journey was of momentous importance. But he had spoken mysteriously of the need for him to suffer (*e.g.* Mk. 8:31–33): his disciples found this incomprehensible. It did not fit into their understanding of the kingdom. But Jesus knew himself to be on the way to his death.

The Last Supper comes in this context—of excitement and anticipation and of Jesus' death. Jesus was, of course, right. The Last Supper led directly to Jesus' betrayal ('on the night that he was betrayed . . .' 1 Cor. 11:23), to his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane and to the crucifixion.

iii. Passover time

The third thing to note by way of background is that the Last Supper took place at Passover time. Passover was a great pilgrimage festival for the Jews. The German scholar Joachim Jeremias has calculated that Jerusalem's regular population was around 30,000; it was quite a small city by our standards. But Jeremias reckons that perhaps 100,000 pilgrims came to Jerusalem each Passover. We can imagine

the crowds and the excitement of the feast, the packed guest-houses and camping grounds, even out as far as Bethany.

Passover was tremendously important for the Jews, being the annual celebration of God's deliverance of his people from Egypt (Exodus 12 *etc.*). They remembered the Exodus under Moses, the great liberation from slavery. The festival was a feast of remembrance *and* of identification: it was seen not just as a celebration of what happened 'to them', *i.e.* to distant ancestors, but also as a celebration of what God did 'for us' as a people.

It was not only a backward-looking festival, but also apparently a feast of anticipation. A rabbinic saying runs as follows: 'In this night we were delivered, in this night we will be delivered', and a modern Jewish scholar[2] speaks of Passover time as 'permeated by a thirst for, and an immediate expectation of, salvation'. The celebration of God's liberation in the past and the anticipation of his future liberation will have had special poignancy in the face of the Roman occupation of Palestine.

The focus of the feast was the Passover meal. According to Matthew, Mark and Luke the Last Supper was a Passover meal. John's gospel gives a different impression, suggesting that the Passover meal took place after, not before, the crucifixion. This divergence between the Synoptics and John is a particularly knotty question of gospel harmony, and there are various different explanations: was Passover celebrated on two different days of the week by different Jewish groups (there is some evidence of this)? Did Jesus celebrate Passover early with his disciples, because he knew that he was going to be arrested very soon? Is John referring not to the Passover meal itself as happening after the crucifixion, but to other festal meals that took place in Passover week? We will not explore these suggestions here, but simply express the opinion that the Last Supper was indeed a Passover meal. Even if it was not, the argument of this article is not seriously damaged: on any reckoning the Last Supper took place in the Passover season and had a Passover background.

If it was a passover, what probably happened? Jeremias thinks that the Passover pattern was roughly this: on the 13th day of the month Nisan (March/April) all unleavened bread was cleared out of the houses in preparation for this feast of unleavened bread. On the afternoon of the 14th the passover lambs were killed in the temple, and then in the evening the family would gather for the meal, which would be served on low tables, with everyone reclining around the tables on couches or cushions. It may have been customary to dress in white.

The first course was eaten after the father of the family had prayed, giving thanks to God for Passover day and for the first cup of wine—there were four cups in the course of the meal. The wine

would be drunk, and the first course consisted of bitter herbs dipped in a sauce of fruits and spices.

Then came the main 'service' part of the meal (or the liturgy), when the father of the family would explain the Exodus story and its meaning in response to leading questions from one of his sons. A hymn was sung (probably Psalms 113, 114), and the second cup of wine was drunk.

Then came the main course. First, the father would give thanks for the unleavened bread, which he would break and pass to his guests. We may guess that it was at this point that Jesus took the bread and interpreted it as 'my body'. Then the roast lamb would be served with herbs and sauces. After this had been eaten the father would give thanks for the third cup of wine, the so-called 'cup of blessing'. We may guess that it was this cup which Jesus took 'after supper' and spoke of as 'my blood'.

The meal would then end with the singing of more Psalms (Pss. 115–118)—the gospels tell us that Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn before going out into Gethsemane; there was a final cup of wine, then the blessing and dismissal.

Whether or not all the details are correct, seeing the Last Supper in this sort of context makes a lot of sense. It makes sense of the details of the Supper as described in the gospels, including of the interesting 'longer text' of Luke's gospel, which has Jesus give two cups to his disciples, one before the bread and one after (Lk. 22:17–20). More importantly, it helps make sense of the Supper as a whole, as we shall see.

b. The Form and Wording of the Story

Although the first Lord's Supper was probably a Passover meal, the synoptic gospels focus their description on the two actions of Jesus in taking the bread and the wine and giving them to the disciples. This was what was distinctive about this Passover, and these actions together with Jesus' words explaining his actions must be central in our interpretation of the Supper. The words vary slightly in the different gospels, but not in any way that complicates our task significantly.

c. The Significance of the Eucharist

i. Jesus's death

Given the context and paying attention to the form and wording of the story, we can proceed towards an explanation of the Last Supper and Jesus' so-called eucharistic actions. The first and most important thing to say is, to use Paul's words, that the Supper is a proclamation of the death of Jesus: 'As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death' (1 Cor. 11:26). This we learn not just from Paul, but also from the context of the supper, which took

place 'on the night that he was betrayed', and from the central action of Jesus in taking bread and wine and speaking of them as 'my body' and 'my blood'. This acted parable of Jesus was a parable about his death. Of course, Passover itself was a festival in which a sacrificial death was central: the death of the lamb brought salvation to the people.

ii. The Passover

That brings us on to one of the most important keys to the interpretation of the Last Supper, namely its Passover context. It was no accident that Jesus spoke of his death in this context: he deliberately came up to Jerusalem at Passover time, and he told his disciples how much he wanted to celebrate Passover with them (Lk. 22:15). By choosing to speak of his death in the Passover context Jesus was showing to his disciples that his death was to be a liberating event, rather like the Exodus. It was, when you think about it, a quite extraordinary thing for Jesus to do—for him to use the occasion of the great Israelite celebration of God's salvation to speak of his own death. In anyone else we might think of it as arrogance; but Jesus was making a deliberate point by doing so; he was interpreting his death as a liberating event like the Passover. The thought of Jesus' death as a liberation comes out too in that vitally important verse Mk. 10:45: 'The Son of man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many'. The word 'ransom' suggests a price paid to free someone from slavery or imprisonment. Jesus' death is seen as bringing liberation. The Greek word for 'ransom' is related to the word 'redemption', a term often used in the Old Testament for the Exodus—for the liberation of Israel from Egypt. Jesus' death is portrayed in the Last Supper as a new Passover: as Paul puts it in 1 Cor. 5:7: 'Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us'.

But what sort of liberation does Jesus' death bring? Obviously not liberation from Egypt this time. What then? Before answering that question we must note the 'covenant' language used by Jesus in the Last Supper. There is a slight variation in the wording used at this point between Matthew and Mark on the one hand, who have Jesus say 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many' (Mark 14:24; Mt. 26:28), and Luke and Paul on the other, who have the words 'This cup . . . is the new covenant in my blood' (Lk.22:20, 1 Cor. 11:25). The slight difference in wording is not very important; perhaps the Luke/Paul version is a clarification of the more original Matthew/Mark version. But the point that Jesus speaks of the wine in terms of covenant blood is common to both.

The background to this language is, like the whole Passover idea, in the book of Exodus, ch. 24:6–8, where Moses after explaining to the people the law of God and the terms of the covenant (or agreement) between God and themselves throws the blood of

sacrifice on the altar (symbolizing God) and on the people. Thus the old covenant between God and his people was publicly sealed.

In speaking of his blood in covenant terms Jesus is implying that his death is a new covenant-making event. We have a new Passover, a new Exodus, and a new covenant being established between God and his people. The Old Testament, of course, had looked forward to such a new covenant, most explicitly in Jer. 31:31–34, where the prophet says:

> The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

It is this new covenant promised by the Old Testament prophets that Jesus brings (see Paul's teaching in 2 Cor. 3); it is this new covenant that Jesus speaks of at the Last Supper.

We can now answer the question about what sort of liberation Jesus' death effects. It is not this time liberation from someone like Pharaoh; it is rather liberation from the sinfulness and powerlessness experienced under the old covenant. The new covenant brings forgiveness ('I will forgive their iniquity') and inward transformation ('I will put my law within them'). Jesus' contemporaries looked for political liberation from Rome; Jesus in his ministry proclaimed a greater liberation—from sin and from the power of the cosmic imperialist, Satan (the 'strong man' of Mk. 3:27). His liberating work was evident in his ministry, as he cast out demons from people; but his death was the supreme defeat and exorcism of Satan as Jesus explains in Jn. 12:31, speaking of his death: 'Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out'.

How does Jesus' death achieve this liberation? The clue to this is in Jesus' words: 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many'. The language used here, in particular the last two words 'for many', are reminiscent of the great description in Isaiah 53 of the 'servant' of the Lord who suffers terribly for others, bearing the sins of 'many'. Jesus sees himself as that servant. The idea comes out also in Mark 10:45, where Jesus speaks of himself as one come to serve and 'to give his life a ransom for many'. Isaiah speaks of one who 'was despised and rejected . . .', and explains 'Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows . . .' 'By his knowledge' (or 'through

his humiliation') shall the righteous one my servant make many to be accounted righteous . . . He poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sins of many.' (vv. 5, 11, 12) The picture in Isaiah 53 is of people deserving the judgment of God for their sins—compare Paul's pithy diagnosis of the human condition 'the wages of sin is death' (Rom. 6:23)—but of that judgment being taken by the servant. Jesus sees his work on the cross as being that servant's saving ministry. He took the 'cup' of divine judgment that we deserved (see Mk. 10:38, 14:35,36; *cf.* Ps. 75:8 *etc.*); he experienced our god-forsakenness to set us free (Mk. 15:34).

We are now in a position to sum up schematically the point about the Last Supper being set against the context of the Passover:

The Passover:	*The Lord's Supper:*
In the old age of law and prophets	*In the new age of kingdom*
Was the great festival meal of God's people	*Is to be the new celebratory meal of God's people*
They remembered the Passover sacrifice, the Exodus from Egypt, the new beginning for covenant people	*To remember the sacrificial death of Jesus, bringing freedom from sin, the new covenant of the Spirit*
By participating Jews associated themselves with this salvation and covenant,	*By participating Jesus' followers associate with his redemption and covenant*
Looking back to Exodus and forward to God's salvation	*Looking back to cross and forward to the kingdom.*

iii. The kingdom

We emphasized that the Last Supper must be seen in the context of Jesus' kingdom teaching, and we are now in a position to see that Jesus' death, as celebrated in the Supper, is a kingdom-anticipating, kingdom-producing event. Jesus' words at the Supper associate it with the coming kingdom: thus in Lk. 22:16 Jesus promises that 'he will not eat Passover again until fulfilled in the kingdom', and in Mk. 14:25 he says 'Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kindom of God'. In saying these things Jesus is not simply making an interesting statement of fact; rather he is implying a strong connexion between his death and the coming kingdom. Paul in 1 Cor. 11:26 says that in

the eucharist we 'proclaim the Lord's death until he comes'. The meal looks forward to the coming kingdom.

But what exactly is the connexion between cross and kingdom? We have already suggested that in a real sense the cross makes the kingdom which Jesus preached possible. Just as the Passover made possible the Exodus and ultimately the Promised land, so the cross makes possible the new covenant and the kingdom. The first Passover dealt with Pharaoh, the second brings release from Satan and sin. During his ministry one of the things that offended people about Jesus was his mixing with sinners, his offering of the kingdom and of forgiveness to sinners. People rightly asked who he was to proclaim forgiveness. How could he do so? The answer lay in something else his contemporaries found hard to comprehend—namely the cross. Jesus could preach forgiveness to sinners, because he was to take their judgment on himself.

iv. Acted parable

Much of what has been said so far in this article is very familiar. But we now come back to the thought of the Last Supper as an acted parable. On the night of his arrest Jesus did not just gather the disciples and say: let me explain what is going to happen when I die. Instead he took bread and wine, said 'This is my body', 'this is my blood', and gave it to them. Why? We have already seen how Jesus' parables, like that of the Good Samaritan, were verbal dramas that involved and challenged people in a very personal way. The Last Supper was the same: in it Jesus symbolically acted out what he was about to do on the cross before his gathered disciples. And he did not just act it out before them: he involved them personally, in a terribly vivid way.

We have got so used to the eucharistic words and actions that they hardly move us: but for those first disciples to be given the bread and the wine, to be told 'This is my body' 'This is my blood', and to be invited to eat and drink must have been a bewildering and even shocking thing. We can imagine them questioning in their minds: 'Your body? Your blood? Eat it, drink it?'. What was Jesus doing? Not simply giving them theological information, but rather giving them a theological experience. In the Last Supper they experienced for themselves what the cross was all about—about the body and blood of Jesus being given up, broken, poured out *for them*, and about the need to take that death to themselves ('eat . . . drink'). The Supper spoke vividly and powerfully of the love of Jesus through the cross.

In this case we are dealing not just with a 'language-event', as we were with the parable of the Good Samaritan, but with something even more powerful. Marriage counsellors explain to couples that communication between people happens in all sorts of ways—

through words ('I love you'), visually (through our eyes, through how we dress, *etc.*), through touch (the handshake or the kiss), even through smell (*e.g.* perfume!). The Lord's Supper is multi-media communication: it speaks to us of the death of Christ and of the love of God in words, but also visually and through touch—we see and take the bread and wine—, and even through taste—we eat and drink.

The Lord's Supper is brilliant communication. We cannot see God (though in his ministry his followers did), but God has given us a multi-media sign, bringing home to us the reality and meaning of our Lord's death. The Lord's Supper is not magic, not a trick of converting bread and wine into something else; but it is a brilliantly acted parable that communicates the love of God demonstrated in the cross to us in a way that involves us and challenges us. It communicates to us that that costly act was for us; the death of Jesus is something he shares with us; the death of Jesus is something we are to take to ourselves, into our very being. Paul expresses this thought about the Lord's Supper when he says 'The bread which we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?' (1 Cor. 10:16)[3]. The cross is no abstract idea, but the source of our life, food for our spiritual life, as we take it to ourselves. The Lord's Supper is both a way that God communicates to us—communicates the death of Jesus—and also a way that we can respond. We do not just say thank you or think it, but we take the bread and the wine to say that we accept into ourselves the death of the Lord.

There has been a lot of discussion as to whether John 6:53,54 is referring to the Lord's Supper. I take it that Jesus' words in 6:53 'Truly, truly, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you' are a vivid way of saying: 'Unless you have faith in the death of Jesus, you have no life in you'. They are not in the first instance referring to receiving the bread and the wine in the Lord's Supper. But the Lord's Supper is saying precisely the same thing in action: we take the bread and wine to say that we accept the death of Christ for ourselves. We express our faith in the death of Christ in this way.

The evangelical and Protestant traditions have often been suspicious of things sacramental, largely because of the magical interpretation and superstitious use of the sacraments in some Catholic circles, though perhaps also in some cases because we have bought into an exclusively 'spiritual' and intellectual notion of Christianity that down-plays the body and its senses. Some, such as the Salvation Army, have gone so far as to dispense with the sacraments altogether. Many others play down the visible, physical nature of the sacrament: the important thing is the thought being expressed, not the outward action. But to see the sacraments in this way is to miss out on something important: the God who made us with all our

senses has given us visible tangible signs of his love, not just theological statements about it; and he has given us visible, tangible ways of expressing our faith.

In the New Testament church the way of expressing faith at the time of conversion was not just by saying a prayer in one's heart (nor by putting up a hand in a meeting or walking to the front), but by going forward to profess that faith in the waters of baptism (*cf.* the probable reference to baptism in Rom. 10:10); the way of expressing continuing faith in the death of Christ was not just by meditating or praying, but by taking the bread and wine and eating and drinking in the Lord's Supper. The sacraments are, we have suggested, multi-media parables—speaking to us not just through words (though those are centrally important), but also through touch and sight and taste as well. We miss out on something of their power if we shut our eyes during communion and ignore the touch and taste; we need to allow Jesus' acted parables to function as they were designed—in all their multi-dimensional power.

d. Washing the Disciples' Feet

But to return from the present-day to the Last Supper itself. John's gospel does not describe the giving of the bread and the wine at all, but instead tells us the story of the washing of the disciples' feet by Jesus. It was a startling action: it would normally have been a servant's job to wash the dust of the road off the feet of guests at a meal, if you had a servant (though we are told that a master could not require a Jewish slave to do this particularly menial task). It was certainly not right for an honoured teacher and master like Jesus to wash his followers' feet. And Peter's protest is quite appropriate: 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' 'You will never wash my feet' (13:6,8). Jesus' reply to Peter was more surprising: 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me' (v.8). Why does Jesus take this strong line when Peter is quite properly recognizing Jesus' greatness and the inappropriateness of what is happening?

It could be that Jesus simply wishes to make it very clear that service is the lifestyle that he expects of his followers; thus Jesus goes on to say: 'If I, your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.' (v.14). But the language that Jesus uses ('You have no share with me', v.8, and then his comment about the disciples being 'clean', v.10) and the whole context of the story make it very probable that there is more to the story than Jesus setting a good example. The context of the story is, of course, Passover time; and John in his gospel makes it very clear that the meal and the footwashing took place when Jesus was looking forward to his coming death (see 13:1,2 'Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and to go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had

already put it into the heart of Judas . . . to betray him.').

Given the context—the startling nature of Jesus' action, his surprising words to Peter, and the probability is that the washing of the disciples' feet was another acted parable of Jesus, specifically an acted parable of his death. On the cross Jesus was to demonstrate the extent of his love by 'laying aside his garment;' (literally and metaphorically) and undergoing the greatest humiliation possible. In washing the disciples' feet Jesus explains that his death is lowly service for others, that his purpose in dying is to wash them (from their sins, of course) and that they must receive his service—'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me'. The incident is an acted version of Jesus' saying in Mark 10:45 'The Son of man came not to be served, but to serve and give his life a ransom for many'; but how much, much more vivid is his acted parable (to Peter, for one) than the simple statement.

Jesus the great parable-teller did not abandon his parabolic method at the end of his ministry. At the Last Supper he explained his coming death through two startling and movingly acted parables. By taking the bread and wine and giving it to them he spoke of giving himself to us as the food of eternal life. By washing the disciples' feet he spoke of the cross bringing cleansing. In both parables he spoke of the need for us to receive his death—the spiritual food, the spiritual cleansing. The old version of the Prayer of Humble Access brilliantly combines the thoughts of the two marvellous parables: 'Grant us therefore gracious Lord so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.'[4]

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NOTES

1 This terminology is associated with the so-called New Hermeneutic, an approach to biblical interpretation that is questionable in certain respects, for example in its downplaying of propositional statements. It is not true that the parables cannot be explained propositionally; it is true that parables communicate powerfully in a way that non-parabolic statements do not.

2 Pinchas Lapide in his fascinating book *The Resurrection of Jesus* (S.P.C.K. London 1984) p. 70.

3 It may well be this thought, so vividly expressed in the eating of the bread and the drinking of the wine, that contributed to Paul's understanding of the Christian being 'crucified with Christ' and his concept of the church as the 'body of Christ': the Lord's Supper speaks of Christ's crucified body coming into us (we are speaking not literally, but parabolically), and it is only a short step from this to the thought of the Christian being united to Christ's body and becoming part of it. Notice how 1 Cor. 10:17 follows from 10:16. As husband and wife become one flesh in marriage, so for Paul the Christian in faith and baptism becomes one with Christ,

his death and his body, a union expressed and sustained in the Lord's Supper. *Cf.* Rom. 6:3, 1 Cor. 12:13; 6:15–17,Eph. 5:29–32).

4 The standard work on the Last Supper in the New Testament to which I have referred is J. Jeremias *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (S.C.M., 1966). An excellent introduction to the subject is I.H. Marshall *Last Supper Lord's Supper* (Paternoster, Exeter 1980). In this article I have made some generalized and unsubstantiated comments about parables; for more detail and bibliography see my *The Parables of Jesus: Pictures of Revolution* (Hodder & Stoughton, London 1989).