

Re-imagining Communion

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 6 May 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Jolyon Bromley

Easter 6B

Genesis 14: 18-20; Hebrews 7: 1-6; Luke 22: 14-20

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Gatherings" tab

Well, I don't know about you, but despite all my years of attending church services and going to study groups, I have never come across that reading from Genesis 14: the story of Melchizedek bringing the bread and wine and blessing Abraham.

The passage from the letter to the Hebrews is somewhat more familiar where the unknown writer focuses on the enigmatic figure of Melchizedek. For early Christians at that time this was an important discussion because clearly Melchizedek is outside the priestly tradition of the Jews and yet is a servant of the most High God and manifests God's favour. The story of Melchizedek affirms that God is present and working through others outside of the chosen people.

Because this reflection today is about re-imagining communion I'm more interested in the symbolic gifts that Melchizedek brings to Abram. Actually it's not till the next chapter that God makes the special covenant with Abram and he becomes Abraham.

So, the bread and the wine. I spoke with a Jewish friend about this gesture of the gifts and she suggested they were symbolic of friendship and blessing. This is not just an offering of refreshments to Abram after a strenuous battle to free his nephew Lot from captivity by an alliance of enemy kings. It is a sacramental moment of blessing Abram, who responds by offering a tithe or tenth of all his booty.

This response indicates Abram's acknowledgement of the importance of Melchizedek and his blessing, as the writer to the Hebrews emphasizes.

In recent times I've been rethinking my understanding of our ritual of sharing bread and wine, as a result of my close engagement with the Jewish community, through the Uniting Church dialogue with Jewish groups and my participation in the Council of Christians and Jews.

In a way it takes us back to our Christian roots as a Jewish sect and my rethinking also connects with an experience I had many years ago. I want to share my new personal insights in the hope that they may refresh and deepen our experience of communion together but not impose, in any way, ideas that may seem irrelevant or contradictory to your own understanding.

Last year I was invited to 3 Shabbat dinners; one in the home of a progressive Jewish family the other 2 beginning with the Friday evening Shabbat service in the synagogue. The Sabbath begins at sunset on Friday. After the formal service in the sanctuary which welcomes in the Sabbath like a bride, we were invited into the social room at the Great Synagogue to share what was called Kiddush. (Later we would go on to the rabbi's home for the dinner.)

I had no idea what Kiddush involved but the table was spread with jugs of wine and grape juice and other things under cloths. A blessing was communally sung and we shared the wine. Then the cloths were lifted revealing the bread and other snacks which were shared after another sung blessing. It was all very friendly and relaxed as we shared the elements.

Even more so at another synagogue where the large group milled around in the foyer after the service, chatting as the elements were brought around to share after the singing. It became apparent that Kiddush could be celebrated in many different ways in different contexts. It is a very celebratory experience.

Doing research on Google I discovered that Kiddush literally means "sanctification", and that it is thanking and praising God for the gifts of creation and in particular the fruits of the earth. It marks a sanctification or separation of the Sabbath from the other days of the week. It was very similar to the Prayers of Thank-giving in the traditional Christian communion service.

It reminded me how fundamental these symbols of bread and wine are in religious tradition and how central they are to the actions of Jesus in the last supper. He was adding a new layer of symbolism to the traditional sacramental understandings when he said *this is my body and this is my blood*. Announcing a new covenant with God through him. The original covenant with Abraham was for a chosen people but the new covenant would be for all people.

The primal nature of the symbolism of the bread and wine, which predates Judaism and Christianity, called to mind another experience.

Towards the end of my training to be a Steiner teacher I was required to do work experience in different schools to see how the pedagogy can be applied in different ways. I chose to go to the Steiner school at Mt Barker in the Adelaide hills.

I caught the school bus from the city, which laboured up the steep climb and through the hills to the school gate. As I descended from the bus I was instantly struck with a massive sinus attack beyond anything that my over-the-counter medication could deal with.

It may not be a causal connection but I noticed large fields of ripening wheat coming right up to the school boundary. Not far away there were also vast vineyards producing high quality South Australian wine. So it made sense that in the reception area of the school there was an impressive mural on the wall depicting the stages of growth of the grain and grapes.

After administering more powerful medication from their own supply one of the teachers explained to me the deeper significance of the mural. The wheat was an example of the hardening forces at work in nature. The bud emerges green and soft and matures into the hardened golden grain that can be pounded into flour to make the bread.

The opposite process is at work with the grape. It starts green and hard and slowly softens into the succulent, rounded grape.

These are forces at work in the outer world of nature but they are also at work in the inner soul life of people. The hardening forces are about firming, forming, shaping, separating, thinking, analysing, individualising.

The softening forces are about flowing, feeling, reaching out, connecting, unifying. We have these two tendencies within us – to separate and to connect, that need to be held in balance and in a sense this is what the Christ within does. The bread symbolises the body of Christ within us and the wine his lifeblood.

Another way of looking at the act of communion is to see it as a celebration of Christ's gift of wholeness as the two contradictory, opposing soul forces are unified in his being; but it also reminds us of the cost. Perhaps in the past there has been an emphasis on the cost rather than a celebration of the gift.

There is a powerful line in the last film of the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky, who was undoubtedly one of the great geniuses of the cinema.

His last film, "The Sacrifice", begins in darkness with the pure sounds of a Bach cantata; gradually a bright object appears in the darkness and you realise it is being held in a hand, as the camera pulls back it is revealed that this is the figure of one of the Magi offering a gift to the Christ child in a Renaissance painting. Later one of the minor characters says – "*Every gift is a kind of sacrifice.*"

That line has stayed with me for many years and I think about it a lot. Every gift is a kind of sacrifice.

So today when we dip the bread in the cup of wine or grape juice we see it as symbolically balancing the two soul forces and connecting with the Christ within. As we take in the wine soaked bread it reminds us that the spirit of Christ is within us as he is within every human being. So the taking of the bread and wine can be an intensely personal moment of inner communion and wholeness, but also as a sense of wider connection as we recognise that the Christ within, which we experience, is present in all people as a balancing force at work in human consciousness.

To finish let's go back again to the primal metaphor with some verses from the Kiddush:

"Prepare the meal of perfect faith which is the delight of the holy God; prepare the meal of God.

Blessed are you our God, ruler of the universe who creates the fruit of the vine.

Blessed are you, our God, ruler of the universe who brings forth bread from the earth."

We could add: Blessed are you loving Christ who invites us to the feast, who sustains us and makes us whole with his conscious presence.