



*from the East Mercia Methodist Circuit*

## **Session 2.6: HOLY COMMUNION**

### **INTRODUCTION: A SACRED GATHERING**

It is sometimes called Eucharist, Mass or the Lord's Supper. It can be embellished with the grandest ceremony and in the most spectacular settings, with wonderful choirs and superb liturgy. Or it can be shared simply, at a bedside, with whatever humble words and scraps come to hand. From one extreme to the other, in the heart of the believer, it becomes something special. It is a *sacrament*, that is an outward sign of what God is doing on the inside. Bread, wine, broken, shared, giving thanks, remembering Jesus, and the belief that God is present sharing the meal with us. God takes ordinary things and an ordinary bunch of people and makes them holy.

There are, of course, a range of understandings on what happens in Holy Communion, and great controversy over the spiritual significance of the bread and wine. We might ask, is it for the church

to tell the believer what the significance should be for them? Or should that be for the person to discern? Where doctrine can keep us apart, should we instead concentrate on the togetherness this sacrament is meant to achieve? Perhaps we should let the Bible give us the starting point, but let the Spirit complete in us the understanding as we grow.

How God chooses to work through the sacraments (of Holy Communion and Baptism) are a mystery. Experience shows that God can indeed work different things in different people! But always for good. Holy Communion can be a place where people find forgiveness, reconciliation, blessing, strengthening, encouragement, fellowship, unity, affirmation, calling, conviction, the seal on a new start, or even just 'food for thought'. But always for good.

## **PREPARING FOR THE SESSION (before you arrive)**

### ***Group leaders:***

You might like to think (or discuss with your group) whether it would be appropriate in this session to include a short informal service of Holy Communion. Please speak to your minister about arranging this with an authorised person to lead. Or you might think it appropriate to simply encourage your group to attend the next Holy Communion service at your church, and use this session as preparation.

### ***For all participants - preparing ourselves at home:***

*What is your experience of Holy Communion?*

*Can you put into words what it means to you?*

*Can you remember the first time you took it? Or are you waiting for the right moment to be the first time?*

*Has it's meaning for you changed over the years?*

*What questions about it do you bring? And will you feel able to ask?*

*Pray that God will help you grow in faith as you look at this together.*

## **STARTING THE SESSION: FINDING OUR ROOTS!**

Ask for volunteers to read aloud the words of these **two hymns**:

**As we gather, Father, seal us**

in the love that knows no fear.

Draw us, heal us, reconcile us,

may there be a place of refuge here.

*Who share one living bread,*

*one Father's love,*

*one Saviour's grace,*

*one Spirit's breath;*

*one holy communion.*

No more outcasts, no more strangers,

all dividing walls are down.

Here is love that redefines us,

dignifies the least and lowest one.

*Who share one living bread...*

Source of joy, belonging, friendship,

form your family likeness here.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

that the world may know our God is near.

*Who share one living bread...*

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Taken from *Singing the Faith*, no. **570**.

**Jesus, we thus obey**

your last and kindest word;

here, in your own appointed way,

we come to meet you, Lord.

Our hearts we open wide

to make the Saviour room;

and lo! the Lamb, the Crucified,

the sinners' friend is come!

His presence makes the feast;  
and now our spirits feel  
the glory not to be expressed,  
the joy unspeakable.

With pure celestial bliss  
he does our spirits cheer;  
his house of banqueting is this,  
and he has brought us here.

Whate'er the Almighty can  
to pardoned sinners give,  
the fullness of our God made man  
we here in Christ receive.

by **Charles Wesley** (1707-1788)  
Taken from *Singing the Faith*, no. **590**.

*Which best expresses what Holy Communion is for you? (Not which style or tune you like best; think about the meaning of the words.)*

*Is there another Holy Communion hymn you prefer? Or how would you put it in your own words?*

## **A PRAYER TO SAY TOGETHER**

Let us pray.

**Almighty God,  
to whom all hearts are open,  
all desires known,  
and from whom no secrets are hidden:  
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts  
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,  
that we may perfectly love you,  
and worthily magnify your holy Name;  
through Christ our Lord. Amen.**

**The Collect for Purity**, taken from *the Methodist Worship Book*,  
'Holy Communion During Ordinary Seasons (First Service)', p.185.

## READING THE SCRIPTURES

Three of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) include slightly different versions of what we call ‘the institution of the Lord’s Supper’ – when Jesus first gives his disciples the bread and wine on the night before he died. John’s Gospel does not give us those details (giving us instead the washing of the feet), but it is packed full of allusions to the sacraments, talking at length about ‘The Bread of Life’ (John 6) and the ‘Living Water’ (chapters 4 & 7). It is clear that by the time the Gospels were written, some sort of act of fellowship and worship involving **breaking bread** was common among the early churches.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the believers in the first churches ‘*devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to **the breaking of bread and the prayers***’ (Acts 2: 42 & 46, NRSV). Later, Paul breaks bread with the Christians before and after a boy is brought back to life after falling out of a window (an interesting little story in Acts 20:7-12). Finally, after two weeks of hunger on board a boat adrift at sea, Paul breaks bread and urges his companions to eat (Acts 27:33-38; verse 35 sounds rather like an act of Communion). *You might like to read some of these passages at home.*

But the earliest preserved record of the Lord’s Supper is believed to be this account from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. It contains words we still use in our Holy Communion services today, especially in the Prayer of Thanksgiving (or Eucharistic Prayer):

### **1 Corinthians 11: 23-26 (New Revised Standard Version)**

*<sup>23</sup> For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you: that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, <sup>24</sup> and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ <sup>25</sup> In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ <sup>26</sup> For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.*

## DIGGING DEEPER

*Does this passage seem familiar to you?*

*Do we always ‘take in’ the words of the Prayer of Thanksgiving at Holy Communion, or are we simply swept up in the tradition and ritual?*

*What can it mean to ‘do this in remembrance’ of Jesus? Remembrance can have connotations of death. And yet Christians believe Jesus is alive! Might we treat Holy Communion too much like a memorial? After all, the traditional verb for doing Communion is to ‘celebrate’! What are we remembering, and what are we celebrating?*

*What do you think Jesus means by ‘the new covenant in my blood’?*

*Are you comfortable with the language of eating the body of Christ and drinking his blood? What does this mean to you?*

*How important is it to have the tangible signs of Jesus to hold, to eat and drink? Does this somehow make it more real to you?*

*What does it mean that Christians corporately are also called ‘the body of Christ’? Is there a connection between what we **receive** in Communion and what we **become** in Christ?*

The New Testament seems to emphasise breaking bread together (like an act of fellowship) rather than the more ritualistic traditional services of Holy Communion today. And yet, ‘giving thanks’ is always part of it. *When might ritual and ceremony be important, and when might it be better to be less formal?*

*How important is it to remember to give thanks to God? And how important is it to invite God’s Spirit to be present, or to ‘lift up our hearts’ to God?*

*Can you think of times when sharing Communion has been extra special for you?*

*How can we grow in our relationship with God by continually coming back to be fed in Holy Communion?*

## PRAYING TOGETHER

- Thank God for the fellowship you've shared together;
- Pray for any who are in need or healing or comfort at the moment; or those suffering in our world.
- Pray for our growing relationships with God, and for our church.
- *You might like to say the Lord's Prayer together:*

**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your Name,  
your kingdom come, your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins,  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,  
now and for ever. Amen.**

## IF YOU ARE SHARING HOLY COMMUNION TOGETHER

You might like to share **the Peace** together, introducing it with a word of scripture.

The Peace of the Lord be always with you.

**And also with you.**

In a Communion **Prayer of Thanksgiving:**

We give thanks for all God has made, and all God has revealed to us in Jesus, especially Christ's death and resurrection;

We remember the story of the Lord's Supper;

We trust that when we come to God and worship, we are part of a bigger congregation on earth and in heaven;

We ask God's Spirit to come, that the bread and wine may be for us the body and blood of Christ;

We usually praise God in the traditional words (called the 'Sanctus and Benedictus'):

**Holy, holy, holy Lord,  
God of power and might,  
heaven and earth are full of your glory.  
Hosanna in the highest!  
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.  
Hosanna in the highest!**

And we give God all the glory and honour.

Importantly, the prayer never belongs just to the presiding minister, it is a prayer of the people, and so all God's people respond: **Amen!**

We are thankful to God *after* sharing communion as well as before. And we go with God's blessing.

(To see how a Communion service is generally ordered, there is guidance in *the Methodist Worship Book*, pages 221-222.)

## **SUGGESTED SONGS TO LISTEN TO (or your own choice)**

Available on *YouTube* using the links below:  **YouTube**

***Remembrance (Communion Song)***, by Matt Redman  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oCNwIA6xLc>

***Miracle of Grace*** by Curtis Stephan, sung by Lisa Gordon  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c36nJVj3Yps>

***I Am the Bread of Life***, by S. Toolan, sung by J. Thietten  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKNHIJoS14w>

## **GOOD SOIL WILL RETURN!**