

## Narrative of the Institution by Roddy Hamilton

The tradition which I handed on to you  
came to me from the Lord himself:  
that on the night of his arrest  
the Lord Jesus took bread,  
and after giving thanks to God  
broke it and said:  
'This is my body, which is for you;  
do this in memory of me.'  
In the same way, he took the cup after supper,  
and said:  
'This cup is the new covenant  
sealed by my blood.  
Whenever you drink it, do this in memory of me.'  
For every time you eat this bread  
and drink the cup,  
you proclaim the death of the Lord,  
until he comes.

*1 Corinthians 11:23-26*

These are the words that have echoed in the mouths and hearts of countless followers who have gathered round a table in community breaking bread and sharing wine with the Saviour. These are the words that have been whispered daringly in secret gatherings celebrating an illegal feast, breaking bread and sharing wine with the Saviour. These are the words that have had one set of believers dying on the rack whose cogs were turned by another set of believers for the sake of the same bread and wine and the same Saviour. These are the words that have slowed down the liturgy to become *the* 'sacred moment' as the community held its breath as bread was broken and wine poured in the name of the Saviour. But what of their place in the practice of our own tradition in contemporary times and how do they, or rather, how are they allowed to shape our understanding, experience and sharing of the Realm of God in broken bread and shared wine?

### A Traditional Understanding

Marcus Borg<sup>1</sup> talks about the pre-critical naiveté of accepting without question whatever has been handed on to us by the authority figures of our faith. The Institution of the Narrative is one such rubric and while very few scholars debate whether or not Jesus said these words, what is more debatable is its place in the service and in what form it ought to take.

Our tradition is for these words of Paul to be spoken at each communion service. Every service in any book of order the Church of Scotland has produced beginning with mention in the *Book of Discipline* written by Knox, has included the Institution. Mainly it has been in the form of the words from 1 Corinthians 11, and far more infrequently, in fact, only once, have those words been altered in any way, and that one occasion is the fourth order in *Common Order 1994* where the service is designed for children being present<sup>2</sup>. The first *Book of Common Order* better known as the *Book of Geneva* brought to Scotland in 1559 states that any communion service must closely follow the words and action of the Lord as recorded in 1 Corinthians 11. Whether the liturgies in the *Book of Common Order* can be properly called such has been a matter of dispute for they are wordy and rough but they offer an insight into the reformers ardent biblical faith as the chief motive and strength of the liturgy<sup>3</sup>.

Ours is still such a tradition so the words of Institution connect us to our heritage as well as to Jesus. Without them the Supper could be just a common meal with little or no sense of the extraordinary and with even less to connect us to the action that brought our salvation.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 1995, page 6, Harper San Francisco

<sup>2</sup> *Common Order 1994* p167

<sup>3</sup> J H S Burleigh, *A Church History of Scotland*, 1960 page 163, The Hope Trust

## Telling the Story

The retelling of the story of faith has always been significant to God's People. To a large extent the Bible grew out of storytelling and the stories that grew into the Exodus traditions as we now have them have been shaped by the imagination of storytellers through many ages. The story helps us conceptualise who we are and where we have come from. Indeed it sends us forward into the future with a faith in what God has done in the past and a promise that God will continue to work our salvation. Thus the retelling of the story of the Last Supper itself is important to our faith for it roots us through our imagination to those early days of the Christian believers and thus shapes our imagination for living as the church today.

Turning the story into a theological concept, however, tears at the power of the story. Theology naturally inclines towards concepts and takes a meaning out of a story that is something altogether different from the story itself. The story is lost because we concentrate on the bits and pieces, as Marcus Borg<sup>4</sup> describes it and we are in danger of turning a moving picture into a set of actions that must be followed exactly for fear of heresy or law.

Yet the Institution as the continuing story of faith is essential to the retelling of the tradition and lies at the heart of making that past event present. The story itself does this in word and then in act. The action becomes the physical retelling of the story and the tradition is made present and real in the community.

Following the reading of the institution space could be given to allow the people to internalise the story. It is a transformational thing we are doing. It is not just the repeating of the story, but making what happened then part of who we imagine ourselves to be now in word and deed. The Church becomes the story and all God's People become the players.

## What kind of Story

Of course, when Jesus took bread and wine, as we are told in 1 Corinthians as well as the Synoptic Gospels<sup>5</sup> he wasn't inventing new symbols. Whether the real context was the Passover Meal is strongly debated as it would mean Jesus celebrated the meal a day early on the Thursday rather than the Friday. To justify this some have stated the Jews had been celebrating on the wrong day and Jesus corrected this or that Jesus, as a once-off, celebrated the meal a day early knowing what was coming. And with John stating that the Passover had not yet been celebrated when Jesus was on trial before Pilate along with the food Jesus and the disciples ate not always point towards a Passover menu<sup>6</sup> it may be that the meal was not designed as a Passover Meal.

Yet the moment of the Last Supper can quite rightly scripturally be described as the "Passover festival" and there are a number of similarities between the Last Supper and the Passover Meal that at least point towards some of the symbolism the latter holds<sup>7</sup>: Jesus offering the cup to Judas as he was about to betray him no doubt is symbolic of the bitter herbs of the Passover lamb, a symbolic connection between the Passover Lamb and Christ's sacrifice to name a few. And it seems that the gospel writers as well as Paul wished us to find that symbolism there and read into the Last Supper some of the meta-narrative of the Passover. Indeed both Borg<sup>8</sup> and Cassey<sup>9</sup> argue it is the appropriate context in which to understand the Last Supper.

If this is the case that this seminal story of freedom is wrapped up in the story of bread and wine at least pointing towards it as a mean of understanding some of its meaning then Jesus' timing in choosing the Passover as the moment to break bread and share wine is thus highly significant. The Passover's great deliverance in the past, pointed Israel to her future deliverance through the Messiah, and so the institution of the Lord's Supper is intricately linked and finds some of its meaning with Israel's history: the blood of the New Testament now replaces that of the Old; Christ's sacrifice for the sins of all is the final sacrifice; and through his death as the lamb, all people may now be free from sin<sup>10</sup>. With the words, "do this in remembrance of me" Jesus points to himself as the paschal lamb and his death as the saving act that will deliver Israel.

There is another story contained in the Institution Narrative as well. Known as arguably a subversive sage and a social prophet, Jesus' desire seemed to be to transform the community of God into a community

---

<sup>4</sup> *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Marcus Borg 1995, HarperSanFrancisco p120

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 26:26-30; Mark 14:23; Luke 22:15

<sup>6</sup> For two discussions see Hubert Krause *The Passover and the Lord's Supper* <http://home.alphalink.com.au/~sanhub/LordSupp.htm> and I Howard Marshall *Last Supper & Lord's Supper*, 1980 Paternoster Press p62-75

<sup>7</sup> *Last Supper & Lord's Supper*, I Howard Marshall, 1980 Paternoster Press p58-62

<sup>8</sup> op cit.

<sup>9</sup> *An Aramaic Approach to Q*, Maurice Cassey, 2005, Cambridge University Press

<sup>10</sup> *Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper*. A report of the Commission of Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod as prepared by its Social Concerns Committee. May 1983. <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/mosynod/web/sup-01.html>

shaped by radical compassion. Jesus shared many meals with others. Indeed he gained the reputation of a glutton and a drunkard illustrating an enthusiasm for companionship round a table. The detailed stories we have of him at table are ones where the marginalised and the sinner find a place and are welcomed in. Indeed the meal could even be in their honour such as Zacchaeus and the parable of the Prodigal Son.

When we read the words of the institution and Jesus' own words of, 'Do this in remembrance of me' how much do the politics of his table fellowship come into our understanding of what he says to us? If the picture of all this communing is reflected round the Lord's Table then it means a sharing with those who do not fit elsewhere, which means again, this is a sign of freedom and liberation, radical inclusion and a new order. The Institution Narrative proclaims the promise of the Realm to come, of inclusion, of freedom, of compassion with those not welcome elsewhere. The Institution becomes a quite political statement about the intent of God.

It is against these pictures that we may interpret Jesus' words over bread and wine and the New Testament statements about the Lord's Supper. There is a deeply tangled relationship in communion here between events past, present and future verbalised in the Institution Narrative and the action that then follows.

### **The Eschatological Action**

There is also ritual associated with the Supper which holds significance for the Institution. The practice of Jesus at the meal is given in great detail, actions otherwise seen as perfectly normal. Yet, the detail suggests they are significant in understanding the meaning of the whole event. The two actions the Early Church singled out were the act of breaking bread and the passing of the cup. These two have been placed together which normally in the course of a meal, would be separated by its length.

Jesus interpreted the bread and wine with new meaning. The food is presented to the disciples as a gift of salvation and it is important that the bread and wine are actually received by the disciples for the offering of the gift is only one part. It's receiving is equally important.

In this context the meal may be recognised as a symbol of the Messianic banquet particularly as Jesus has already spoken of this earlier in his ministry. The action goes beyond preaching because it includes, not just the offer of bread and wine and the promise of salvation, but the receiving of it also. Yet it is not complete. There is a tension in the elements as they are presented in the narrative of "already" and "not yet" for while we participate in the banquet, we are not freed from this world, but sent further into it, seeing the invisible as we do so.

### **1 Corinthians 11**

Already we can see that the traditions about Jesus evolved as the community of believers spread and the early Christian movement matured. As they stumbled into the reality of the ancient world, Gospels were written to explain and guide new communities that lived beyond the confines of Palestine.

Paul then finds himself writing to the Church in Corinth about the practice of sharing bread and wine within the Early Christian Community there. There was some chaos in the distribution of the meal where overfilled themselves while others starved; some began eating before others, and certainly before the bread and wine. And so Paul enters the argument in order to restore some order to the community's celebration and in so doing offers us the earliest words of Jesus we have, saying these have been handed on to him. His words are essentially the same as Luke's. If we can claim that Luke was not dependent on Paul, which most Biblical Scholars suggest<sup>11</sup>, this implies Paul never altered the wording of the Institution and hence it was already a formula being used. 'For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread...' Indeed the words Paul uses for 'received' and 'delivered' are those used for the handing on of a tradition.

Clearly, from these accounts, the supper was not rigidly structured. Some folk were found to be drunk as others starved, the community was divided among themselves and Paul comments that their worship did more harm than good. The passage does not necessarily imply that the words of the Institution were read at each meal however. The earliest documents of the church, such as the *Didache*, never mention the Institution. Indeed there is no connection made to the Last Supper<sup>12</sup>.

Paul's intent in using these words of Institution is as a corrective for bad practice. All tradition serves in such a way, taking us back to the original vision and purpose of the practice. If we omit traditions, then we are open to greater and more varied interpretation. That is not always a bad thing and not necessarily a reason

---

<sup>11</sup> | Howard Marshall, *Last Supper & Lord's Supper*, p112, 1980, The Paternoster Press

<sup>12</sup> Richard Giles, *Creating Uncommon Worship*, p171, 2004, Canterbury Press

to stop the practice of certain traditions, and in some cases it may be exactly the best reason to omit a tradition's practice. In the case of the Narrative of the Lord's Supper however, the tradition serves as a reminder of what is good practice in order to hand on what has been give to us.

### **Is the Narrative necessary?**

While the words of the Institution connect us in so many significant and profound ways to the action of God and the story of Salvation, they do not in themselves consecrate the elements. Thus omitting the words, on occasion, may serve as a "healthy corrective that might stir our thanksgiving and praying."<sup>13</sup>

Certainly for the majority of Christians worldwide, to omit the narrative would be close to heresy. Denominations through time and particularly in the Middle Ages, focused on these words as the 'special moment' where bread became body and wine the blood of Christ. Then it was nearly always said as part of the Eucharistic Prayer and became all important.

Depending on what the Church wants to say about the Lord's Supper to the world and depending on the importance of its core beliefs about the symbols of bread and wine determines how necessary the reading of the Institution ought to be. If we believe the link to the Exodus story tells the world something about the promises of God and of the longing of salvation coursing through the world's events, and if we believe the radical inclusion of Jesus fellowships meals are reflected in breaking bread and sharing wine in any community, and if we believe it is imperative for the world to know these things, then the Narrative is necessary.

If we repeat these words at every communion simply because Paul says without knowing why, or because we believe in some way the particular bread and wine we share on any particular day is changed because of it, then we would have to think again about these words for they do not cast spells, though they daringly shape the space in which we share the bread and wine.

And so they ought to be read for that purpose, but is it necessary to read directly from 1 Corinthians or even the other Synoptic Gospels? Being from the tradition of the Reformers, mention has already been made on how our liturgy is shaped by the value those reformers placed on the Word of God. Yet retelling the Narrative in our own words, to different congregations who engage in different ways, or by reading passages from the Gospels that reflect sacramental theology, is just as important. A fresh retelling of the story may bring to life again words that have become comfortable and automatic. As the art of storytelling is increasingly used in preaching and more fully in worship, as Storytelling centres open and God's People are discovering afresh the great narratives of our faith, use of the gospel passages and new rewording of the breaking of the bread may be appropriate, if not necessary. Indeed, the story could be told through images, symbols, drama and mime (a selection of these can be found in the Appendix) thus allowing God's story of bread and wine to be internalised and made new each time it is told.

### **Warrant**

*Common Order* (1994), which is not designed for prescriptive use, has the Narrative of the Institution standing alone in the five different communion services it offers. Four of the five services have a formal reading of the passage and the order designed for when children are present has a warrant that is of little likeness to the 1 Corinthian passage<sup>14</sup>. The fifth order has no formal Narrative of the Institution but has the 1 Corinthian passage as an option alongside other passages from the Psalms and from John's Gospel.

If *Common Order* reflects the worship of the church rather than lays down the law about its practice, then the common worship of the kirk does offer the option of omitting the Narrative. While it is perfectly reasonable to do so on occasion as it is not essential to make this particular communion, communion, it may not be best practice to do so regularly lest we forget the tradition, or fail to connect ourselves with the history the Narrative speaks from.

Thus the Narrative serves as a warrant explaining (in some limited way if there is no further explanation of the bread and wine) where they come from and point to. And as our church communities are becoming folk from beyond our parish communities and from different traditions, and as our post-modern society respects a different attitude towards membership from that which the church is used to, then we will have on any given Sunday a significant number of people who are neither members who have come through communicants classes, nor interested in doing so, and so the reading of the Narrative as a warrant explaining what we are doing, becomes increasingly essential.

---

<sup>13</sup> Richard Giles, *Creating Uncommon Worship*, p168, 2004, Canterbury Press

<sup>14</sup> *Common Order* 1994 p167

### **Words only for the ordained**

But who is allowed to read it? In some traditions the Narrative, even as it is included in the Eucharistic Prayer, is part of, and indeed the moment of, consecration and thus an ordained person would have to recite it. But in the tradition of the Church of Scotland, where the Narrative is not a means of consecration, or is normally part of the Eucharistic Prayer, it may be read by someone not ordained to Word and Sacrament could read. In many ways this voice may speak more to our theology of liberation than that of the clergy.

Paul, while he had plenty to say about the practice of the Lord's Supper in terms of sharing and behaviour towards each other, he does not seem to be concerned about who actually reads the words of Institution.

In popular understanding, the ordained are expected to speak the whole liturgy (other than responses when these are used) and our view of communion is shaped by the priestly function rather than the stories of freedom from bondage. We interpret communion through forgiveness of sins, a priestly function; our tradition is steeped in preparation for communion, again a priestly function. There is one story of Rev James Honyman, the minister of the parish of Kinneff in the Mearns taking 10 months from announcing his "examination of the parish" to breaking bread in which he catechised, visited, preached and distributed tokens<sup>15</sup>. We also, until very recently, distributed tokens or cards that invited only those deemed suitable to the table, which was fenced until the day of breaking bread. Again the emphasis is on the priestly function of being right before God. But what of those folk who cannot forgive yet, who come to communion needing forgiveness but cannot hand that over to God because of scars that are too deep, some anger too sharp or some psychosis that prevents them from seeking forgiveness. Is the table barred for them? In the priestly functioning of communion, it can be so interpreted.

This Priestly function tends towards an understanding of Christianity as a religion about sin and forgiveness and about right relationships with God only in terms of personal living. Whereas the rich tradition of salvation history that lies behind the Institution Narrative speaks more about liberation from bondage for a community, a liberation from injustice, from oppression, from slavery. This story as told at communion is maybe best told by God's People who have experienced that in their lives which is not always going to be the ordained clergy. To whom does communion speak who have had strong feelings of bondage or alienation or estrangement from justice and from full lives? These may be the folk to better read the Narrative.

### **Conclusion**

The conclusion of this particular essay suggests that the Narrative, while not essential to the practice of communion, is as near to it as it can be. Omitting it will not make communion a non-communion, turning it into an Agape meal, but without the reading of the Narrative we omit highly significant and valuable images of what it is we celebrate together. We omit the richest tradition of connecting us to the whole story of God's People through time, and fail to root ourselves in the unfolding of God's salvation for us. As it builds in our imagination, it provokes, also in our imagination, the story of the church yet to be told.

Such an significant moment ought to be given time to sink in. It ought to be preached about more often, the full meaning of what we do through the telling of our faith story. Thus part of the liturgy ought to be given over to pausing and reflecting rather than a steady check list of liturgical items before we get to the breaking of bread.

It may be, given the emotion such a story holds, those who best tell it are those who have strong feelings about justice and freedom, who recognise the movement of God in the world. The Narrative is in many ways a highly political story of a God who does not sit quietly when the poor are marginalised and the hungry go unfed. Those who tell a story best are those who know the truth of that story. Maybe it is them who ought to read the words of Institution. For it is those same people who were welcomed at the everyday tables Jesus sat and ate at.

Without the Narrative being read as a warrant somewhere within the liturgy, there is a danger that the tradition is forgotten and we find ourselves straying widely from where we began. Possibly no tradition is good for all time and there are some we have to stray from in order to grow, but the retelling of the story of the Last Supper serves as a corrective and reminding of best practice if we wish to hand on such a tradition.

For handing on is part of our responsibility. It may be through a straightforward reading of Scripture. But it may also be done more creatively engaging the imagination in different ways, recognising the different learning abilities and styles of God's People, making use of drama for the hard of hearing, using music for those who respond through the emotions music offers, telling stories for children in language suitable for all-

---

<sup>15</sup> *Studies in the History of Worship in Scotland*, Ed Duncan Forrester & Douglas Murray, 1984,p75, T & T Clark.

ages, using visuals or even silence that can offer profound retellings and opening up new encounters with bread and wine.

In these ways the Narrative becomes a significant moment in the sharing of bread and wine. Indeed, it becomes a dangerous moment when we recognise the covenant of God with the world to save it and move it from shadow to light. Hearing the story once more, we find a place for the here and now in God's Salvation History and recognise it is not time bound, tradition bound or theologically bound, to one place or one people but to all places and all people even as we break bread and pour wine at every table where God's People are gathered and wait to meet their Lord.

## **Bibliography**

Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time  
Marcus Borg  
Harper San Francisco 1994

A Church History of Scotland  
J H S Burleigh  
The Hope Trust 1983

Studies in the History or Worship in Scotland  
Ed Duncan Forrester & Douglas Murray  
T&T Clark 1984

Encounter with God  
Forrester/McDonald/Tellini  
T&T Clark 1983

Creating Uncommon Worship  
Richard Giles  
Canterbury Press 2004

Table and Tradition  
Alasdair Heron  
Hansel Press 1983

Last Supper & Lord's Supper  
I Howard Marshall  
The Paternoster Press 1980

The Meal that Unites  
D Bridge & D Phypers  
Hodder & Stoughton 1981

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry  
Faith and Order Paper no. 111  
WCC 1982

Pauline Christianity  
John Ziesler  
OUP 1983