

NOT MUCH OF A MEAL

Adams House in Elderslie is a Church of Scotland Home set up to care for people with dementia.

It was not far from where I lived for 10 years.

Susan's dad lived there for a while towards the end of his life, when he never really knew what was happening around him.

For a while he was head of the escape committee and he **did** escape more than once, but there are other memories too.

Once it was noticed that he had put up lots of family pictures on the walls of his room. But looking closely at the pictures it was hard to recognise anyone.

Turns out he'd gone into all the other rooms of residents and nicked all their family photographs so he could decorate his own room with them.

But I had another involvement with Adams House. I was the local minister and one of my tasks was trying to organise a Sunday service there each week.

I had to draw up a rota of ministers from the Paisley area. And we took turns to cover for that service.

I decided it might be best if I always did communion.

Because anything could happen and I knew that not all ministers might feel comfortable with the fact that "*anything could happen*" – at least not in a communion service...

There weren't so many men as women in the Home, and so it's the women I remember most.

There were the Zimmer war ladies.

At the end of one communion service they demonstrated their unity in Christ by punching lumps out of each other to take command of the zimmer that was standing between their chairs – one woman not seeing her own zimmer on the other side of *her* chair...

Then, during the serving of communion itself things would happen.

One woman tried to grab all the bread off the plate for herself.

Another woman took a piece of bread and a few moments later just chucked it across the room.

But here was the best comment.

A woman had been given one of the tiny glasses of wine.

She hadn't even eaten her bread. But she looked down at the wee glass and the morsel of bread in her hand and shouted out in a loud voice...

"Son! It's no much of a meal!"

Well, she was right.

What we call the Lord's Supper, or Mass, or the Eucharist, or Communion isn't much of a meal.

It's a symbolic meal featuring a tiny piece of bread and a tiny drink.

But back in the day, when the Church was just starting out, Communion was a real meal – an actual meal.

The early church used to gather together for a literal feast, and that's what it was.

A problem emerged with the progress of these meals.

Instead of waiting for one another, some would start early and others would be arriving late.

And those who started early were those that could arrive whenever they wanted – they tended to be the rich. They could come and go as they pleased.

And those who were late tended to be the slaves and the labourers who could not get away till they had finished their duties and chores.

So they would arrive to find that the wealthier people had already started eating.

That might seem a bit rude, and not too friendly - but it was much worse than that.

The first crowd had helped themselves to all the best food, and sometimes they hadn't just taken the best food – they had eaten **all** the food.

People would arrive to find the food gone - eaten up. There was little or nothing left over. And enough wine had already been consumed so that some of early guests were a bit drunk.

And this was supposed to be a Christian community who cared for one another and who were meeting together in Jesus' name!

Paul was outraged by this – he is scandalised by this - and so he writes in his letter to the church in Corinth making it clear that the behaviour is out of order and far from the spirit of Christ.

He totally criticises them and lets them have it...

He tells them that if people really need food they should be getting food at home anyway, and sharing with one another.

He actually says that the way they are behaving towards one another means that what they are doing is not fit to be called Communion.

This lambasting from Paul no doubt had a big effect.

Because it seems that very early on in history Churches stopped having communion in the context of a meal together and moved towards a wee ceremony as part of Sunday worship – similar to what we know now.

Church communities still would meet up for food and have meals together but Communion, the Lords Supper itself – was changed to being a short symbolic action – not a big feast.

But this story from Corinth – and the very reason for the words Paul wrote has largely been forgotten.

What has been remembered are the actual words – the warning to *“not eat and drink unworthily.”*

And for some people the words have acted almost as a divine curse - as a mysterious warning to stay away.

It is still there in the thinking of Christians today. For example in Scotland in the highlands and islands many of the regulars in the Free church Sunday by Sunday are not actually members.

They don't actually officially join because then they would be invited to take Communion.

And what would be bad about that?

It would be boasting.

The feeling is *“we are not good enough” “not worthy enough”* for Communion.

And that view is not simply unfortunate – it actually negates the whole point – misses the point of what Communion is.

Communion is not for those people who have got it made and who are good enough – it's for those who haven't got it made and who aren't good enough.

And actually, that's all of us.

That's all of us.

That's you and me.

It's a means of grace - of help and support to us as we try to live out the journey of faith.

Its bread for the journey.

In communion we draw near to God and we remember in the elements of bread and wine what Jesus has done for us.

But there's more to it than this.

Communion might be about remembering what happened a long time ago and giving thanks but it is more than that.

Communion is drawing near to God and asking God's blessing on our lives.

And God is able to bless us with what we need for our road ahead.

God offers us love, peace, courage, forbearance.

Maybe we need to be comforted by God.

Maybe God needs to disturb us and shake us up.

Maybe we need to accept a situation.
 Maybe we need to move into action to change it.
 Maybe we need to spend more time in reflection.
 Maybe we need to get up and do something practical.

Communion really is bread for the journey. It helps us on the road. It feeds us for the next part of our lives whatever that entails.
 And like other spiritual practices, it draws us closer to God's presence and allows us to encounter God.

Do we have to wait till we are perfect people or attain some spiritual grade? No.
 Do we have to wait until we understand exactly how it works? No.
 It's a mystery that we will never totally understand.

That's why we can take part now.
 All of us.
 And that's why Communion should be open to children as well.

Who do we think we are to deny God's grace to any group of people?

God is able to care for children and bless them in ways that we don't understand.
 We can leave God to take care of the blessing.

Thanks to some bad behaviour in Corinth the whole idea of Communion has been tinged with warning instead of welcome.

Some people have felt unworthy to take part.
 And some other people have felt that if they don't take part they will not be acceptable to God.
 Down through the years the church has tried to use it as a way of controlling people and getting them in line.
 And that is terrible.

But the truth is that this sacrament is one to which all are welcome – like the meals that Jesus had throughout his ministry.

And God wants to bless us through our sharing together of bread and wine.

And who knows what happens?

A few months ago I mentioned the communion story of another woman.
 Let me mention her again briefly. Her name is Sara Miles.

Her grandparents on both sides were missionaries. Both her parents rebelled against their religious upbringing and as a result Sara grew up with no religious knowledge, to the extent that she could say that at age 46 she had never heard a gospel reading, had never said the Lord's Prayer, and she only actually knew one person in the whole world who went to church.

Living in California as a radical journalist, a lesbian and into progressive politics her image of church then suggested to her that she would not be welcome. Anyway that was fine. She had no interest in church and was sure that church would had no interest in her.

One day she found herself outside St Gregory's Episcopal Church in San Francisco just as a service was about to start and for some reason she walked inside.

She had no idea why she did it or what to expect. Everything was strange to her. She didn't have a clue. She didn't really understand what was going on.

Then it was Communion and people walked to the front to receive the bread and wine. She found herself joining the crowd going forward, and suddenly she could sense that something was happening.

Suddenly and out of nowhere it seemed she had an unmistakable sense of God. Suddenly she began to believe.

Eight years later she is on the staff of that church.

And she began something in that congregation that has become well known.

Each week groceries are collected and placed on that communion table, before being given out to the poor and homeless in that city.

She wrote a book about it, and it became a best seller.

And the model she created for this has been picked up by other churches in America, and even in Canada.

Sara Miles is now a well-known Christian writer, campaigner and commentator, even though a few years ago she had almost no knowledge of the faith.

And it all started for her by the sharing of bread and wine.

Is that what happens to everyone who takes Communion?

Certainly not.

But what we are all doing is opening ourselves up to the blessing of God.

And that can take many forms.

That woman was right.....

"It's no much of a meal."

But it's an important occasion, and one where God can break through to us.

We can open ourselves up to the blessing.

There's no magic in the bread or the wine.

But God can take the ordinary things of life and make them special.

And one last thing.

Communion isn't just about remembering Jesus, or hoping to receive from God.

It's also a way for us to say something about ourselves – about who we are and about what matters to us.

When we take part in Communion we are joining together as family of people.
We are uniting together.

When we take Communion we are remembering what Jesus has done and we are choosing to take our stand with him.

We take Communion as a way of saying that we are his people – that he is the one we follow and his agenda of turning the world around for the better is our dream too.

We take Communion as a way of saying that we want to line ourselves up with Jesus.

The message of Jesus is that there need be no barriers between God and us.
We are welcome. We are called. We are wanted. We are accepted.

And God wants to bless us through this sharing together of bread and wine.

1 Corinthians 11:17-28, 33-34a

James 2:1-9, 14-17

September 6 2015