

## Blessed, Broken and Poured Out

*Luke 22:14-20 (23-34)*

Author Alister McGrath is a theologian at Oxford University with a background in molecular biology. He has written many books including one called *Doubting: Growing Through the Uncertainties of Faith* [IVP, 2006]. In this book, he told the following story to illustrate how we can know God loves us:

An aunt of mine died some time ago, having lived to be 80 or so. She had never married.

During the course of clearing out her possessions, we came across a battered old photograph of a young man. My aunt had, it turned out, fallen hopelessly in love [with him] as a young girl. [But] it had ended tragically. She never loved anyone else and kept a photograph of the man she had loved for the remainder of her life.

Why? Partly to remind herself that she had once been loved by someone. As she [grew] old, she knew she would have difficulty believing that, at one point in her life, she really had meant something to someone—that someone had once cared for her and regarded her as his everything. It could all have seemed a dream, an illusion, something she had invented in her old age to console her in her declining years—except that the photograph gave the lie to that.

It reminded her that it had not been invented; she really loved someone once and was loved in return. The photograph was her sole link to a world in which she had been [so loved].

[McGrath then commented:] **The Communion bread and wine are like that photograph. They reassure us that something that seems too good to be true—something that we might even be suspected of having invented—really did happen.**

In the Scripture this morning, Luke told us that Jesus was filled with deep emotion about the Passover meal he was going to have with his disciples: “You’ve no idea [said Jesus] how much I have looked forward to eating this Passover meal with you before I enter my time of suffering.” These disciples were his dear friends. He had spent almost three years with them and now his time with them on Earth was coming near the end. He knew he was soon to be crucified and he wanted to leave them with his “last testament.” We can only imagine how Jesus must have felt knowing the great suffering ahead of him and realizing “*I will not eat [this Passover meal] again until it finds its full meaning in the kingdom of God.*”

As a former palliative care chaplain, I have watched family members – one by one -- gather around their loved one in the hospital room. They talk together – telling each other what they need to say and what their love for each other means. Sometimes they cry together. Sometimes they sit in silence, soaking in the feelings of the moment. This week our niece has travelled hundreds of kilometres to be with her grandfather who has been told he has a matter of weeks to live. I can only imagine their conversations and emotions. But Jesus understands more than we know what it means to say goodbye.

There was more depth to Jesus’ feelings than simply saying goodbye to good friends he loved. His life would be broken and poured out not only for his disciples but also for the entire world. And his disciples would be the carriers of what that good news meant to the whole world. In the context of the most sacred meal of the Jewish year – the Feast of Passover – Jesus did something incredibly

new. **He refocused the intent of the meal onto himself!** No longer were they to centre their thoughts on any ordinary lamb (no matter how pure it was) as a sacrifice for their sins; now they were to understand that he – Jesus -- was the ultimate sacrificial lamb given by God to provide for their forgiveness from sin and their freedom from slavery to everything against God’s loving and just purposes.

Because this was new, Jesus wanted his friends to be sure to remember this time together. And when they repeated the meal, they were to do it remembering **him**. They were to remember Jesus’ body broken on the cross and his life blood poured out for them and for the whole world. And as *we* repeat this meal 2,000 years later, we also remember Jesus’ death on the cross was for us too. “Do it and remember **me**,” Jesus said.

When the Jews celebrated the Feast of Passover each year, they were reminded of God’s past great act of redemption. They were reminded they were God’s free people and no longer slaves as they once were in Egypt. They were reminded annually of the lamb sacrificed for their freedom -- the lamb’s blood was put on the doorposts of their homes so God would **pass over** them and they and their household would not die – but live!

Jesus knew what was going to happen to him in a few hours. But even though he had told his disciples at least three times before, they did not understand. It would take the resurrection of Jesus to happen before that understanding would come to them. So I wonder what his disciples thought and felt when Jesus took the loaf of bread, gave thanks to God, broke it and gave it to them, saying: “This is **my** body, which is broken for you. Do this in memory of **me**.” I wonder if Jesus had reminded them what John the Baptist had said about him at the very beginning of his public ministry: “There is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). At this last Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus was identifying himself as the sacrificial Lamb of God, broken for them to take away – to forgive -- their sin.

I wonder what his disciples felt and thought when Jesus gave them the cup saying: “This cup is God’s new covenant sealed with my blood, which is poured out for you.” A covenant is a binding agreement usually under a seal between two or more parties. Jesus was saying that God’s new covenant of *love* was sealed by his blood poured out for them and for us. When we gather for Communion, which means “participation” or “fellowship”(1 Corinthians 10:16) -- or the Lord’s Supper or Mass, which means “the meal,” or the Eucharist meaning “to give thanks” (Luke 22:17) as followers of Jesus in other denominations call what we are doing -- Jesus wants us to remember what he did. Jesus wants us to remember that his body was broken because of our sin and his life blood was poured out to seal us in God’s love. The Letter to the Hebrews says:

“Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. He did not give up because of the cross! On the contrary, *because of the joy that was waiting for him*, he thought nothing of the disgrace of dying on the cross.”

No wonder Jesus was filled with deep emotion. And he used a Hebrew idiom “I have desired with desire” to call attention to his depth of passion.

I take heart and comfort in the context of this meal that Jesus had with his disciples. We should have read to at least verse 34 to see more of the drama of this event:

Luke wants us to know that Judas, who **betrayed** Jesus, and Peter, who **denied** Jesus (not once but three times), were both with Jesus at the institution of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. I like Luke's Gospel. Throughout his book, he makes readers perfectly aware that God extends forgiveness to a prodigal, to tax collectors, to a dying thief and even to the crucifiers. And we know from other passages in the Scripture that Peter the denier accepted the forgiveness offered to him. Judas the betrayer, however, did not appear here to have accepted the offer of forgiveness. Perhaps he thought Jesus could never forgive him. It makes me wonder how well he knew or listened to Jesus.

Jesus loved all his disciples -- even when they argued about who would be thought of as the greatest disciple. Jesus knew their hearts, their deepest motivations and that they would come to understand, if they were to be like him, that he came to serve not to be served. And so they too would learn to serve as Jesus did.

Our Scripture this morning is full of imagery – a dramatic portrayal of how we and the entire human race are loved by God through the broken body and poured out life blood of Jesus the Christ. Think about this in these two complementary stories:

The late Roman Catholic priest Henri Nouwen wrote in the March 1994 *New Oxford Review*:

“A few years ago Bob, the husband of a friend of mine, died suddenly of a heart attack. My friend decided to keep her two young children away from the funeral. She thought it would be too hard for them to see their father put in the ground. For years after Bob's death the cemetery remained a fearful and a dangerous place for them.

“Then, one day, my friend asked me to visit the grave with her, and invited the children to come along. The elder one was too afraid to go, but the younger one decided to come with us. When we came to the place where Bob was buried, the three of us sat down on the grass around the stone engraved with the words ‘A kind and gentle man.’ As we sat, we reminisced about Bob.

“I said: ‘Maybe one day we should have a picnic here. This is not only a place to think about death, but also a place to rejoice in our life. I think Bob will be most honoured when we find new strength, here, to live.’ At first it seemed a strange idea: having a meal on top of a tombstone. **But isn't that similar to what Jesus told his disciples to do when he asked them to share bread and wine in his memory?**

“A few days later my friend took her elder child to the grave, the younger one having convinced his sister that there was nothing to fear. Now they often go to the cemetery and tell each other stories about Bob.”

The second story by Isak Dinesen is called “Babette's Feast” – perhaps you know it.

It is about a strict and cheerless community in Denmark. Babette works as a cook for two elderly sisters who have no idea that she once was a chef to nobility back in her native France. Babette's dream is to return to her beloved home city of Paris, so every year she buys a lottery ticket in hopes of winning enough money to return. Every night her austere employers in Denmark demand that she cook the same dreary meal -- boiled fish and potatoes -- because, they say, Jesus commanded, “Take no thought of food and drink.”

One day the unbelievable happens: Babette wins the lottery! The prize is 10,000 francs, a small fortune. And because the anniversary of the founding of the community is approaching, Babette asks if she might prepare a French dinner with all the trimmings for the entire village.

At first the townspeople refuse: "No, it would be sin to indulge in such rich food." But Babette begs them and finally they relent, "As a favour to you, we will allow you to serve us this French dinner." But the people secretly vow not to enjoy the feast and instead to occupy their minds with spiritual things, believing God will not blame them for eating this sinful meal as long as they do not enjoy it.

Babette begins her preparations. Caravans of exotic food arrive in the village, along with cages of quail and barrels of fine wine.

Finally the big day comes, and the village gathers. The first course is an exquisite turtle soup. The diners force it down without enjoyment. But although they usually eat in silence, conversation begins to happen. Then comes the wine: the finest vintage in France. And the atmosphere changes. Someone smiles. Someone else giggles. An arm comes up and drapes over a shoulder. Someone is heard to say, "After all, did not the Lord Jesus say, 'Love one another'?" By the time the main entrée of quail arrives, those austere, pleasure-fearing people are giggling and laughing and praising God for their many years together. They are transformed into a loving community through the gift of a meal. One of the two sisters goes into the kitchen to thank Babette, saying, "Oh, how we will miss you when you return to Paris!"

Babette replies: "I will not be returning to Paris because I have no money. I spent it all on the feast."

Jesus spent his life for us. His body was broken for us. His life blood was poured out for us. He gave his all so that people everywhere and in every circumstance and in every century might be together in a community of love -- for God, for one another and for others all over the Earth.

My friends, this is a morning to remember Jesus and what he did for each of us on the cross.

May this be so for me and for you.

Rev. Chris Miller  
Worldwide Communion Sunday  
October 4, 2009