



Jamaica Methodist District

Holy Week 2020 Meditation Series

MEDITATION FOR THE THURSDAY OF HOLY WEEK 2020

SANCTIFIED SUPPER

(MARK 14: 12 – 25)

Quite recently I had the opportunity to observe some of the preparations that were being made some hours before a wedding reception was due to take place. I noticed a decorating team, hard at work, ensuring that the hall where the reception was to take place was beautifully done in the preferred colours of the bride and groom. They checked carefully that the bouquets of flowers were strategically placed. As part of that working group, there were three men testing the PA system, so that whatever musical selections there were for background music and for dancing would be sufficiently audible when proceedings got underway. In the hall there were already huge food containers visible, a clear sign that the reception did involve food.

Special events necessitate careful preparation. In our reading of Scriptures, we notice that one of the most significant events in the Jewish calendar was the Passover. Its observance dates to the time when the people of Israel were enslaved in Egypt, then rescued from bondage under the leadership of Moses. The Passover pointed specifically to the fact that the angel of death that was taking the lives of the firstborn sons of the Egyptians "avoided" or "passed over" the Hebrew homes. This was supposedly due to the blood that had been smeared by the Israelites over the lintel and two door posts of their houses.

Jesus, as a first century Jew, had it in mind to celebrate the Passover with his disciples. The gospel account from Mark testifies to the fact that Jesus had made much preparation for this event. The disciples asked the question: "Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?" He instructed them to go into the city and they were to follow a man carrying a jar of water. On first thought, this may not seem significant. However, it was, because in those days, women were the ones who were to be seen bearing pitchers of water. A man carrying a jar of water would be conspicuous; you just couldn't help but notice him.

This man, as indicated, led them to a house where the owner had an agreement with Jesus that he could use an upstairs room for the Passover observance. The



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disciples then organized the Passover meal. The Book of Exodus, chapter 12, gives a description of how the celebration, which took place from the time of Moses, included the killing of a lamb. The disciples may not have known it, but this Passover meal was going to be one with a difference. Jesus knew that it was one in which he was symbolically the Passover lamb. He knew that this was going to be a meal under the shadow of the cross.

When they had assembled, Jesus indicated to his disciples that among them was one who would betray him. The high point of the meal was when he took a loaf of bread, blessed it gave them to eat, stating that it was his body. Then he passed around the cup with wine, so that in drinking they were to know that it was his blood. What a revelation! The Passover meal turned out to be of special significance, holy indeed, a sanctified supper. The directive has therefore been given to Christ's followers that whenever this meal is re-enacted, in His memory, we are to take note of the special significance He had given to it.

As followers of Jesus Christ today, we benefit from celebrating this sanctified supper. Like the Israelites down through the ages did, we too as Christians must pass on the significance of the event to our children. We may use the analogy about the blood of animals sacrificed for the atonement of sins to emphasize that Jesus, eventually crucified on the Cross, was the sacrificial lamb atoning for the sins of the world.

The sanctified supper continues to have tremendous spiritual significance for us today. It is significant the number of historical arguments that took place as to whether the bread and wine were "transubstantiated" or changed into the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ. This is because of its uniqueness. Interestingly, in its historical observance, onlookers and particularly those who had no notion of its spiritual significance, described what was taking place as cannibalistic behaviour. The transubstantiation or "change of substance" debate was countered by those who suggested that what really takes place is "consubstantiation", namely that the bread remains bread and the wine remains wine. The elements, though, are to be treated as special, sacred, holy since they symbolize the body and blood of Christ. Suffice it to say worshippers acknowledge that in partaking of the bread and wine in the sacrament, the risen Christ is truly present, whether you consider it a symbolic presence or a spiritual presence.



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Whatever interpretation one veers towards, it is still true that the Lord's Supper that we today observe is special, sanctified, and not to be lightly regarded. God is present, the risen Christ is present, the Holy Spirit is present, indeed the total Godhead, the Holy Trinity is there.

My early ministry was spent in the French and Creole speaking Republic of Haiti. At the time, not every congregation had care fund/communion stewards who could access the requisite non-alcoholic grape juice for the sacrament. Therefore, use was regularly made of the locally marketed bottled grape soda. Congregations were therefore celebrating the Lord's Supper with the bread and the drink that were available in their given situation. The point was being strikingly made that not because the original elements that Jesus used are not available, a congregation cannot participate in this sanctified supper. And even if the same symbols used by Jesus are available, is it wrong to use alternatives that might be even more effective in getting across the significance of the sacrament. The question has often been asked in certain parts of Jamaica: "Can we not use bammy and sorrel to observe the Lord's Supper?" This raises an issue that is often discussed by theologians, namely "inculturation". Inculturation refers to attempts made by the Church to communicate the Gospel message in terms that are relevant and meaningful to persons in their given cultural contexts.

Supper sanctified! We own it as one of the "means of grace" that every Christian should seek to partake of because it reminds us of God's grace. It says to us that Jesus Christ died on the cross as the supreme expression of God's love for humanity. God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life. Methodism's founder, John Wesley was of the mind that we are to partake of the Lord's Supper as often as is possible, given its value of ever proclaiming the death of Christ, his rising and his eventual second advent. It must be admitted that because the Methodist Church here in Jamaica, and indeed across the Caribbean, has not the full complement of ordained ministers as needed, that we continue with the practice of observing the sacrament once a month. However, the spirit of Wesley's thinking is that as often as we are able we should celebrate the Lord's Supper.

Not only must we admit that we do not partake of this sanctified supper as often as possible, we need to remind ourselves that in so doing, we are unworthy partakers of it. As we say in the prayer of humble access that precedes our



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sharing at the Table: "We are not worthy to gather up the crumbs under the table. But it is your nature always to have mercy and on that we depend." It is God's invitation to us to be guests at the Lord's table.

As we continue to reflect upon the sanctified supper that Jesus Christ instituted, we acknowledge that for their own historical and theological reasons, some church communions do not allow for children to receive the sacrament. It has been counter argued that excluding children from the communion table is like a family refusing to allow their children to dine at table. This matter is currently being addressed by different churches with the result that manuals for preparing children to receive the sacrament have been appearing on the scene. Methodism's current ruling is that parents should take responsibility for explaining the sacrament to children, and that if accompanied to the communion rail by an adult family member, the officiating clergy should not bypass the upstretched hands of a child desirous of receiving.

There is another interesting issue about the open table policy. In some Christian communions, the ordained priest or presbyter is made to understand that ordination vows limit serving the sacrament to bona fide members of their denomination only. So that you may not simply present yourself for communion in a church of which you are not a member. It has been deemed unfortunate that we do not acknowledge that it is the Lord's table and not the denomination's table.

When I served as a minister within the British Conference, I was teaching at a college that prepared lay and ordained Christians for missionary service overseas. It was a residential college, different from what might be regarded as a monastic set up. We lived in an open community, which meant that persons from across the world, and not exclusively Christians were there. We participated in all aspects of community life - table fellowship, games evenings, and naturally worship. One communion service that I cannot forget was when a Muslim young man of the community went up with others to the communion rail and received the bread and wine. After service, the officiant, a Methodist minister from Ghana, was criticized for his actions. In his defence he simply stated: "When I serve communion, I serve it to all persons for whom Christ died."

Couples who are about to get married make lavish preparations for their wedding receptions. Jesus made special preparations for the Passover meal with his



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disciples. How do we prepare for partaking of the sacrament? Another incident I will never forget occurred when I was in my first appointment in the Port-au-Prince Circuit in Haiti. I was doing my round of sick and shut-in members' visits. When I came to the home an elderly woman, she had not been informed by the steward that I would be visiting. We prayed, read Scriptures and sang hymns. But she refused to receive the sacrament because she had not been prepared beforehand. She apologized but explained that her practice was to have a time of prayer and fasting the night before, which she had not done.

We could take a leaf out of that woman's book. If not the night before, but while waiting for the start of a service, we could commit ourselves to prayer. We are well advised to avoid unnecessary idle chatter with others. Instead, we can concentrate in the silence. As the dramatic presentation of the communion liturgy evolves in worship, we will acknowledge our sinful nature, our receipt of forgiveness of sins, having confessed them. We will take seriously the admonition given in the liturgical build up to approaching the Lord's table that we make it right with anyone whom we have wronged or who wronged us before coming into the church. Reconciliation is so crucial to the sanctified supper. Remember, Jesus did not maintain hatred or enmity for those who might have wronged him, including those who were responsible for putting him on the Cross.

Covid 19 has been preventing us from meeting in our churches to observe the Lord's Supper. Despite this, the sacrament can be shared, virtually. We are to be reminded that we, the Body of Christ, are the Church. Therefore, instead of the church building, our homes become the places where we meet the risen Christ at his table. We are in a new, novel situation, which necessitates creativity, using the God given insights we are receiving daily through the power of the Holy Spirit. Just as streaming of services is now becoming more commonplace in the given context, whether the ordained minister is present or not, we pray that all may sense the risen Christ's presence. Wherever and whenever we observe the supper, may our hearts be fully prepared. In so doing, may we acknowledge the Son of God, who has promised never to leave us or forsake us, fully present on those occasions. May His name be ever honoured and glorified. Amen.