

Maundy Thursday, 29 March 2018
St Peters Pretoria
1 Corinthians 10

14 Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. 15 I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. 16 Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? 17 Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf.

Dear congregation,

Receive, Repent, Renew - with these three words I can sum up the message of Paul to the Corinthians as he discusses communion (Holy Communion).

If one just reads the two verses actually prescribed for the sermon text, verses 16 and 17, it is not that clear. Then it almost looks like a theological reflection on what communion means. If, however, we read the whole of chapter 10 and 11 (the Epistle reading is taken from chapter 11), this pattern becomes clear.

Receive

Paul does not discuss whether the Corinthians should celebrate Holy Communion, nor does he encourage them to do so, nor does he attempt to withhold it from them. He assumes that the Christians are participating, are receiving it. Communion was an integral part of the early Church's worship services. In fact, it was unthinkable to have a worship service without Communion. Communion is the most intense form of fellowship for Christians - fellowship with each other, and especially with the Lord Jesus Christ. "Is not the cup, the bread, a participation in the body and blood of Christ?" he asks. And as we share it, we are one body, united in Christ.

Repent

If we now look at the context, we see that Paul challenges the Corinthians,

stating that their every day lives do not reflect this fellowship with Christ, nor the one-ness with each other.

He shows how their life style can sometimes even be called a betrayal of Christ - when it does not become clear that they belong to Christ, as they mingle and get absorbed by societies idolatry and godless behaviour. Actually, many of the ethical things that he mentions, at first glance, have no religious connotation. This includes not only immorality, but also greed, stinginess and self-centeredness. Paul asks: Does your action reflect that you belong to Christ? Repent, he challenges them. Recognise that this is wrong, that this is contrary to your participation in Christ at communion! Throughout the letter, and especially in chapter 11, he then addresses the one-ness of the congregation, or rather the division of the congregation, which does not at all reflect the "one body" of Holy Communion. Apart from the division into factions supporting Peter, Paul and Apollos, he also refers to the carelessness of the rich toward the poor, the well-off towards those who are hungry and undernourished. This is not good, he says.

Renew

The purpose of his writing is not to just make them feel bad, but that they change this behaviour. Let your lives, your attitude, the whole congregation, reflect Christ and his nature! That is the challenge to Christians. It is not enough just to repent, while not changing anything. It is not enough to acknowledge the wrongs, and then to continue doing them.

We believe that Christ came to save sinners - but not just to save them, but to transform them into people that live to his glory!

In the history of the Church quiet a few things went terribly wrong in this regard. One I have just touched on: Repentance without transformation. Last year we celebrated 500 years of Reformation. A major cause of it's start was the abuse of forgiveness through indulgences: After repenting you did not need to change your behaviour - in stead you could pay a fine, or do penitence - say a number of prayers, or fast a few days, until the next confession. Forgiveness in Christ however is linked to renewal: Go, and sin no more!

As we celebrate the institution of Holy Communion on this Maundy Thursday I want to focus on another wrong development which had a terrible influence on the celebration of communion.

It is the change in order of the three R's from Receive, Repent, Renew to Repent, Renew, Receive.

Whereas Paul assumes that communion is celebrated regularly and challenges the congregation to live accordingly, in the 2000 years that followed, communion - or rather, the withholding of communion - became an instrument of punishment. "Excommunication" was introduced to punish people for their actions. Some of you might be painfully aware of this practise towards young, unmarried women who fell pregnant.

But it also crept into the Church in the form of compulsory confession and absolution before communion. If you do not have some form of confession and absolution, you cannot participate in communion. You first have to repent, then show that you have renewed and only then can you receive.

This is not found in the letters of Paul, and surely not in the Holy Communion that Jesus celebrated with his disciples.

Jesus celebrated it, knowing that they would all deny him, knowing that Judas had already made up his mind to betray him. "One of you, sitting with us at the table, will betray me" he said. And to all: And all of you will deny me!

Had Jesus taken the traditional Church approach he would have eaten the bread and drunken the wine all by himself, as the only blameless, guiltless person. But he did not - he gave it to them, each one of them, with the words: My body, my blood, given for you, for your forgiveness, for your renewal!

And to Peter he says: When you then (after betraying me) have repented, then also strengthen your brothers and sisters (who have also fallen).

At this very first communion this is the sequence: Receive, Repent, Renew It all starts with the Receiving of the body and blood of Christ.

Well, almost. I want to add another word, the word with which it really starts, the word that really matters most:

Invite

Take and eat, Jesus invites his disciples. Drink of it, all of you, the invitation is repeated later on. When we celebrate communion just now, we will hear the words: Come, for all is ready - taste and see that the Lord is good!

Come, take, eat. No strings attached. No little star (*) stating "Terms and conditions apply" - just: Take and eat, drink, my body, my blood, given for you!

If that it true, if there are no Terms and Conditions - what about Repentance and Renewal? Are those not terms and conditions?

No, actually not. Let me use an illustration. If I say to my child: eat, so that you can grow - that is true. If I say: If you don't grow, I will not give you food! - then I have misunderstood biology, the nature of food. Growth follows eating, it is not the condition for eating. When a baby is born, the nurses don't wait till it starts picking up weight before giving it to the mother to be fed - they give it straight away, so that the growth process can start.

Due to the Church changing the sequence and adding terms and conditions to communion, we have withheld vital food from those who need it most - those in need of repentance and renewal. As a result the participation in communion has declined, because too many feel they don't qualify, don't meet the terms and conditions.

Well, we've got it totally wrong. It's the other way round.

You are invited: come, taste and see that the Lord is good. You can receive: his body, his blood, which gives you part of him, part in him, which makes us one body.

Let us repent where our lives do not reflect that. Let us be renewed to become what we receive, to grow into what Christ wants us to be.

In order for this to happen we need to eat, we need to drink - so that we can grow!

Amen

Horst Müller, Bishop, ELCSA(N-T) Email: hmuller@elcsant.org.za