

MATTHEW 26:17-30
A STORY IN PICTURES

"Every picture tells a story". Leonardo Da Vinci's painting of the Last Supper tells a story. We're sitting round a table, eating; there are lots of little conversations going on, groups of people here, there, whispering; we can't hear, but we know what it's like. In the shadows there's someone we can't quite see; he doesn't seem to be part of the group, but he is there at the meal, in the room; what's going on with him? The whole picture draws our eye to the centre, to the person in the middle of the picture, to the person in the middle of the group, at the centre of the table. The picture tells us that this is the most important person at the table; this is the person at the centre of the story. I gave this picture to some school children four years ago at Easter and asked them to tell me what they thought was going on. They wrote about Jesus at the centre; they wrote about the figure in the dark shadows and what would happen next. Every picture tells a story!

Robert Bruce was the minister of St Giles in the late sixteenth century. While he was there, he preached a series of sermons on the Lord's Supper, on communion. In one of these sermons, he coined the phrase "the Visible Word" to talk about the communion service. He said that the bread and wine of communion tell a story to the eye in the same way as the Bible does to the ear; we see the bread and wine and they tell us things about Jesus. We live in visual age, when people take in far more by what we see now than by what we hear; the communion service is ideally suited to people who learn by what we see! Every picture tells a story; what story does the bread and wine of communion tell us?

In the background there are two themes. The first theme is Passover: this is a Passover meal, so this is part of Israel's history, part of Jesus' history. Every element of the Passover is there bar one: they sing the Psalms, they tell the stories of Moses; the table is full of food, including bread and wine; the only piece missing is the lamb, because this is the day before Passover; it was later understood that Jesus is the lamb to be sacrificed. The second theme is conflict: the person in the shadows is Judas, ready to go out to betray Jesus; he is going to be paid for doing it and will betray Jesus with a kiss; someone who shares food round Jesus' table will later give Him up to His enemies. There are all kinds of things going on in the background today as we come to communion: how you feel, what you think, the events of your life, events in the life of the Church, good things and difficult things, your hopes, ambitions, fears, and your faith. All of that and more, acts as the background to our story today.

What do we see? As part of the feast, Jesus takes some of the flat, unleavened bread that was sitting on table and He gives thanks to God as He always did; then He broke it and passed it round the table, sharing it with His disciples. There is nothing unusual in what we see, but the words that go with it are stunning: "*Take...*" (*Matthew 26:26*) The same happens with the cup and again there is nothing unusual in passing the cup round the table; it has happened several times during the course of the Passover meal; yet again, the words take us by surprise: "*This is...*" (*Matthew 26:28*) Conflict and betrayal are in the background and we know that the next day, Jesus would die, giving up His life for the sake of others, sacrificing Himself to take away the sin of the world. Every time we hold a communion service this visible word is repeated, this story is told; the minister repeats the actions of Jesus and the words of Jesus, so that we see what He did and we hear what He said. The heart of our faith is here, for the eye to see, Jesus' body broken, His blood spilt, crucified for us.

There are two deeper truths to see, hidden to the naked eye, but there for us to see with the eye of faith; both tell us something about what this story means. *"This is..."* (Matthew 26:28) "Covenant" is a Bible word: God has made covenants with His people through all their history; a new covenant is made with us in Jesus. Covenant is about God making promises to us, but even more than that; it is about God making a commitment to us to bless us and to bless the world. When Jesus died and rose again, God made a new commitment to us to love and care for us, to be present with us and to bless us. That commitment has not been rescinded; every time we see bread broken and wine poured we see evidence of God's commitment to save the world. Forgiveness is a key part of that commitment: None of us is perfect; we have all fallen short, or neglected God at times, we have made mistakes, we have rebelled, we have made wrong choices; we all stand before God in need of forgiveness, no argument! In the bread and wine we see God's forgiveness achieved and accomplished for us; every time we see bread broken and wine poured we see God's forgiveness for us; we don't always take that forgiveness to heart, but that is a problem with our eyesight; story is there for us to see!

On the day after the events of this story, Jesus would die on the cross. After He and His friends celebrated the Passover, He went out into the garden and was arrested by His enemies; they trumped up charges against Him and He argued nothing. He deliberately put Himself in the way of the cross because He knew that by the way of cross lay the salvation of the world. This is what He came to do and with the resurrection, the salvation of the world is guaranteed and we are drawn to Jesus in faith. The Visible Word shows us what is central to the Christian faith, in the crucified and risen Saviour, Jesus. By taking bread and wine, we take a share in this story; we acknowledge that it is for us and we commit to love and serve the Lord. By sharing it with someone else, we tell the world that we belong together in the life of the church, that we are Jesus' people together, and we commit to love and serve one another in Jesus' name.

The Visible Word is a simple story. We act out what Jesus did; we repeat what Jesus said; this story has been at the centre of the life of the Church ever since and by it we remember Jesus. We see and remember to strengthen our faith: the story reminds us that God did all of this for us and did it simply because of His love for us; we did nothing to deserve this, but Jesus has done it for love's sake. This is the last thing we see: we see what lies behind the whole story, the love of God for His world, the love of Jesus for us. He has not done this because we have loved Him perfectly and this is our reward; He has done this because we have not loved Him perfectly and we need saving and this is living water for thirsty people.

What do we see today? We see a table set with bread and wine ready to be served to the Church; we see Jesus' actions repeated and His words are heard all over again; we see a commitment from God to bless the world, especially to forgive sins, but so much more besides; we see the love that God has for the world, love enough to send Jesus and to embrace us! The Visible Word: a story for us to see! May the Spirit open our eyes to see and our hearts to embrace Jesus!