

Introduction

The Holy Grail

A few years ago there was a headline in the newspaper which read, “Jewel encrusted goblet found gathering dust in a tiny Spanish Museum is in fact the Holy Grail”. Two researchers at the University of Leon, in Spain, Margarita Torres Jose and Manuel Ortega del Rio, claim to have found the cup used by Jesus and his disciples at the *Last Supper*. They wrote a book about it titled, “Kings of the Grail”.

Apparently in 2011 they discovered 2 medieval Egyptian parchments that mention and describe the chalice of Christ, saying it was taken from Jerusalem to Cairo. From there, apparently an emir in Muslim Spain received it as a reward for helping Egyptians during a time of famine. Finally, it arrived in Christendom in the 11th century after being presented to King Fernando (who was king from 1037-1065) of Spain as a gift. For the last almost 1000 years it had been known only as the goblet of the daughter of the king of Spain and had been resting, unseen, in the basement of the Basilica of San Isidoro in Leon.

Of course, it is a neat story, and provocative; the cup that touched Jesus’ lips on display for all to see. I must say though, that I am quite skeptical of such discoveries and the science/history behind them. Although this grail seems to match the description of the one mentioned in the parchments, the researchers admit that the first 400 years of its history is unknown. Placing such an item to the approximate time of Jesus’ life does not make it the very cup used by Jesus and his disciples that night before he was crucified.

I really do not know if this story of the discovery of the cup from the last supper is true or not. I suspect not, as we are not all running over to Spain to have a look at it.

Objects

Having said all this, *objects*, spiritual objects, do present an important pull in our lives. I think about the *black painting* I painted while at the seminary last year – made after the technique begun by abstract artist Ad Reinhardt in the 1950’s (I wrote about this in a newsletter article for the Zionews a few months ago). When you glance at this painting, it looks totally black but when you stare at it for a few minutes the shape of a cross emerges. The cross is actually not totally black at all, but rather subtle shades of black/blue, black/red, and black/green – but it only emerges once your eyes adjust to the subtle colour differences. It takes a certain patience to view the cross, a still waiting.

It is an *object* that I look at often. It carries with it a deeper reference to the Holy Spirit, to attending to the inner voice that we carry within us – more apparent from the quiet of reflective silence or meditative stillness. It points to a deeper reality.

Certain objects may help us go deeper, to reflect on the deeper mysteries of the world and ourselves. Some objects have meaning which transcends the object itself. The grail of Christ is a central such object in our lives because of what it represents.

If they did indeed ever locate the cup of the *Last Supper* the danger is that it might sit behind glass only to be looked at by the many people who would file by it, seeing it as a relic with no meaning today. But the grail is all about its meaning, to us and to all Christians over all time.

Today I decided to prepare this sermon on communion, the place where the cup is used – our tradition which was begun at the *Last Supper* of Jesus and his disciples and is the subject of our text for today.

Body of the Text

Mercy

The bread and wine of communion that we share twice a month at Zion, and today as the final time before Easter, are central aspects of why we come together to worship. They point to the essential message of Christianity, and they invite us into direct experience of God's mercy.

I must admit, there were times when I did not understand the word *mercy* very well – and yet there is perhaps no prayer in the history of Christianity that has been prayed so frequently and intimately as the prayer for God's mercy - *Kyrie Eleison*, which means exactly that, "Lord have mercy".

The word mercy reminded me of the days of the Roman Coliseum where two gladiators would fight it out until one stood above the other with sword drawn waiting for the emperor to give a thumbs up or thumbs down to letting this person live or not; mercy at the whim of the emperor. But that is not what mercy is at all, and certainly not the mercy of God.

The word *mercy* actually comes from the Greek word *eleos*, a word with the same ultimate root as the Greek word for oil, olive oil to be exact. This was a substance used extensively to soothe bruises and minor wounds. It would be poured onto a wound and was gently smoothed over it to aid healing.

The Hebrew word which comes from *eleos* and mercy is *hesed*. This is a wonderfully profound word meaning the *steadfast love* of God. *Hesed* does not refer to an act or relation of kindness which is shown *indiscriminately*, but to one where there is a definite relationship between us and God – bound up in God's covenant promise of everlasting mercy and kindness. So when we sing *Kyrie Eleison* "Lord Have Mercy", we are actually saying, "Lord soothe us, take away our pain, surround us with your steadfast love and deep personal relationship that is your covenant, your promise, to us".

Mercy is grace poured out on our wounds like a salve for the pain that comes with the human condition. God's mercy unites his infinite presence with the most intimate places of hurt that we all carry within us – and he offers healing.

Promise and fulfillment

That is the promise carried to us from our communion table. It is *a promise* that God in his unwavering love covers, soothes, and washes the wounds of our lives with a love gushing outward from the sacrifice of his son's life on the cross.

"This is my body given for you...this cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" – these words are the promise God makes with us, reaffirmed each time we kneel at the communion rail.

And then, through the mystery of the living God, present among us right now, God's promises to us are *fulfilled* in the deepest parts of ourselves in the eating of the bread and the drinking of the wine – promise and fulfillment; fulfilled – that is we are forgiven all our sins (no exceptions), we are given new life in Christ (both now and to come), and we are drawn into the salvation narrative (an eternal event of communion with us together and with the hosts of heaven) – these are all ours as we celebrate the communion meal as a community of faith. It is a means God uses to convey his grace on our lives. God does something to us in the communion meal; we leave the communion table changed.

The message from God is this: We are more precious than we dare believe.

Relationship

But there is something else too: at the centre of the sacrament of communion is God's earnest desire to enter into a relationship of intimacy with each one of us.

It is the model relationship of our lives. Do you remember my last sermon where Mary poured perfume over the feet of Jesus? It is almost uncomfortable to observe such servitude; and now this – the very Saviour of the universe washing the disciples' feet and then serving them at the *Last Supper* just before his death, calling us into relationship:

"Do you love me?" Jesus asks us. And then a second time "Do you love me?"...and a third time "Do you love me?" he asks us as he did Peter after his resurrection.

"Yes, Lord, yes!" and then he reminds us, "Then feed my sheep" orienting our lives with the fruits of grace. *Feed my sheep*, Jesus asks us. The grace which saves us involves precisely those things we cannot choose (it is free in every manner), yet even while immersed in grace there is a freedom in how we live in the world. Embedded at the communion table are Christ's instructions of how to be in relationship, how to live humbly, and how to serve each other with kindness and love - *Feed my sheep*. Even while Christ's presence is given *in, with and under* (a phrase used by Luther) the elements of the communion table – joining us, changing us, soothing our hearts, and beckoning us to union with him and with each other.

This is our call, to mirror God's love in the world – to leave the communion table and go out and love and serve each other; *to let God give through us*. And so in a very mysterious way, God allows us to decide how God will be God. This is a glimpse of the mystery of the incarnation. God became human not only to act among us but to be the recipient of our responses. "What you do for the least of these, you do for me".

Let us do this then, as we have been invited to do.

Conclusion

What makes the Holy Grail so important to us is not the cup itself, the one in Spain behind glass (real or not), or the one on our table today but it is the promise being fulfilled by God as we participate in the communion meal.

It is a way that God chooses to lavish his grace on our lives. This was true when Jesus shared the cup and bread with his disciples, and it is true today, right here at the table of Zion Lutheran Church. God is still working *in, with and under* this very bread and wine, transforming lives - that is what is holy, that is what is sacred, that is the gift of *forgiveness, life, and salvation*.

So...

Come, join us at the table.

This is the table where God intends us to be nourished;

This is the time when Christ makes us new.

So come, you who hunger and thirst

Jesus Christ who sat at our tables all those years ago

Now invites us to be guests at his.

Come join us...and be filled.

Amen