

Not so long ago in a time not unlike this, people thought that there was only one point of view, only one way to see things. Then they found that it was possible to read the same thing but understand it in a number of different ways. So now, when we read the Bible we need to take into account the perspective from which we come. This is called the hermeneutic. For example, as Christians we read the same Old Testament texts as our Jewish sisters and brothers but we read them differently because we read them through the lens or the hermeneutic of Jesus' life and teaching. Even the way we think about them is different – for us they are part of the Scriptures, the so-called “Old” Testament but for them they are the complete scriptures.

I mention that this morning, because as reformed Catholic Christians the sacraments are central to our understanding of our identity as the Body of Christ, and so I don't think we can hear the words “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” without it speaking to our sacramental life in Christ. In about thirty minutes I will be holding up the chalice and reminding you once again that “After supper [Jesus] took the cup of wine; and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and said, “Drink this, all of you: This is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for all for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this for the remembrance of me.”” And these words will echo in our minds, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”

James and John had a lot more confidence than I do. They were sure that they could drink the cup and be baptized just like Jesus, but then they didn't know what it would entail. They didn't know how the story was going to go. We do. And who among us really has the guts to say, “Yes Lord, we are able.”?

And yet it is our calling, our vocation as the members of the Body of Christ. We are the ones who are baptized with the baptism of Jesus - we are the ones who share the cup. The cup of the New Covenant.

There are a number of covenants in the Scriptures: there is the one from the time of Noah, between God and all creatures that there will never again be a flood that obliterates everything; there is the covenant between God and Abraham that his descendants will be like the sand; the covenant of Moses in which God promises to make the Israelites his holy people if they follow his law; and the covenant that says that the house of David will be established for ever. But Jesus says that the cup that we share is the cup of the New Covenant.

The making of a covenant usually involved blood in some form and Jesus follows that convention as he tells us that this cup is the cup of his blood which is shed for all for the forgiveness of sins. How are we to understand this? What is the forgiveness of sins?

If sin is that which separates us from God, then the forgiveness of sin is reconciliation. Just as when we forgive someone who has hurt us, someone who has “trespassed against us” we are reconciled with them, so the forgiveness of sins means that we are reconciled with God. So the blood of the New Covenant is the symbol of our reconciliation, our oneness with God.

But wait.

We are hearing another echo. It is Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane praying “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want... ‘My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.’”

Here is a paradox. On the one hand, the cup is a symbol of God's grace freely given to us so that we might be reconciled with him, and on the other hand, it is a heavy and fearful burden that Jesus can hardly bear to drink.

It is the cup of the world's suffering.

There is much suffering. We all experience our own suffering and that of those we love. We see the suffering of those who are trying to find a safe place for themselves and their children to flourish, we see the suffering of those whose lives have been swept aside by floods or those who are starving because of drought. We see the suffering of the land as the climate changes. In some way that we shall never understand, Jesus the Christ, the God/human drank that suffering during his betrayal, mock trial and painful crucifixion. He drank the cup of the world's suffering.

And in Jesus' suffering, which was somehow one with all our suffering, God suffered. God entered into human suffering in a new way. Reconciliation is not a one way street. God, the father of the prodigal sons and daughters is not just passive. He does not just stand there, waiting for us to run into his arms – he is on the road running towards us – sharing in our suffering, sharing in our grief, sharing in the devastatingly-awful-comic-joyous mess that it is to be human.

If we truly think that Jesus was both fully human and fully God, as our creeds declare, then the cup of his blood is both the human life force and the life force of God, completely comingled. For that is what blood is – it is our lifeblood. Without it we die. With it we live. The cup that we share is the cup of life, the fountain of all that is nourishing and all that makes holy. It is the cup of the New Covenant sealed in the co-mingled blood of God and human.

Jesus asked James and John, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" Since this is long after he was baptized by John in the Jordan, Jesus was not talking about baptism in water. He must have been talking about his coming passion as baptism. In our baptisms we were made one with Christ – dying to the sin matrix and being raised into his new life. In this final baptism Jesus literally was stripped of everything, died and then was raised again. He rose triumphant from the grave; from the baptism of fire.

This baptism of loss and new life is one we dread and yet it is one that we all experience. I am sure that if we went around the room many of us would say that we are in some stage of that experience of loss, grief and rebirth. It may be that we have lost a loved person to death or because the form of the relationship has changed or because they have changed in some way; it may be that we have lost our health, some abilities, or a cherished dream and hope; it may be that we are facing the loss of a job that has sustained us these many years; or perhaps a dear pet has died or is dying. Or it may be that we are experiencing the stripping away of ego – that strangely devastating process by which God takes away our identity and everything that has given us inner moorings and for a while we cannot see the new – we are in Hades and can only hold to the promise that God never leaves us – while we become that which we are becoming.

These are all experiences of baptism; the cycle of death and the promise of new life. Like the caterpillars who in the chrysalis are completely transformed and emerge as totally different creatures.

Jesus asked, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" and our answer is surely, only if you O Christ will go with me.

James and John were hoping for higher status, more power – not for greater suffering. But then Jesus taught them about the reign of God saying, “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

At the heart of the mystery of our God is deep loving humility. Let’s take a look at the passage from Philippians that we will use as our affirmation of faith this morning. It’s on page 3 of your service leaflet.

“Though he was divine, he did not cling to equality with God, but made himself nothing. Taking the form of a slave, he was born in human likeness. He humbled himself and was obedient to death, even the death of the cross.”

This is the Christ, the one whose cup we drink, with whose baptism we are baptized. He did not cling to equality with God. How we cling to our privilege and our status, at least I know that I do. But the cup of the New Covenant is a cup of humility and a cup of amazing unconditional love.

It is not just about our individual relationship with God but the relationship we have with all beings and which all beings have with us. This cup calls us to a clear-eyed humility in which we recognize that we are no better than anyone or anything else but neither are we lesser. We are held in the love of God as surely as the next person, as surely as the ground squirrels and the cypress.

As we share in the cup of the New Covenant where God’s love and the world’s suffering are co-mingled, pride and ego-attachment have no place. Because we are called to be servants, not to be served. We are called to be servants to the world, but within the family of God we have a relationship of mutual service – each one of us gets to serve and be served. To refuse to be served is as much a result of pride as to refuse to serve.

In this way we imitate the Trinity, the three Persons of God who live in a community of mutual love, praise, joy and service. That is our vocation – to imitate God – and to become one with God as we participate in the awesome mystery which is baptism with Christ and participation in his cup.