

# The bread and wine

## Jesus lives to serve his disciples

Exactly a year ago I began a series of five sermons on the meaning of the bread and wine to better understand what Jesus was getting at in **Luke 22:19-20**, when “he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.’”

So I thought I’d start this year off with the meaning of the bread and wine again, by going back to the first sermon in the series about Melchizedek bringing bread and wine to Abraham in Genesis 14, but this time tying it in with Matthew chapters 24 and 25 and what Jesus said in those two chapters that led up to him giving his disciples bread and wine in Matthew 26, just one chapter later.

It’s clear in those two chapters that the disciples are in for a rough ride after Jesus leaves them, so they’re going to need constant assurance and encouragement that all will be well without him. But how could Jesus give them that assurance and encouragement when he knew they were in for such a rough ride and he wasn’t with them in person to help them? Well, that’s where the bread and wine came in.

The underlying reason for the bread and wine, therefore, was Jesus’ love for his disciples. It was his way of helping them cope with the struggles he knew they would have in a world that would constantly tempt, scare and wear them down - and worse still, a world that would constantly try to get their eyes off him. So the bread and wine became his very practical solution in the real world they were living in, just as Melchizedek provided bread and wine back in Genesis 14 to meet Abraham’s very practical need in the real world that he was living in.

Melchizedek’s relationship with Abraham, therefore, is the perfect illustration of Jesus’ relationship with his disciples, because it shows us that Jesus exists for the same reason Melchizedek existed, to serve the needs of his disciples in a tough world, as pictured in the same service Melchizedek and Jesus provided in the bread and wine.

Bread and wine perfectly met Abraham's need after his return from an exhausting 400 miles round trip to rescue his nephew from a much larger army led by a tyrant king. But that was the world Abraham lived in, where warmongers were vying for power and they cared nothing for people or their property. But God had Melchizedek on hand for Abraham with exactly what Abraham needed in such a world - bread and wine. A blessing was included too, in which God promised he would deliver all Abraham's enemies into his hand (Genesis 14:18-20). That was then followed by a vision for Abraham in which God told him he had nothing to fear now that God himself would be his protector and rewarder (15:1). It was just what Abraham needed, to help him cope in his world and whatever temptations and stressful situations it threw at him.

Well, that was exactly the reason Jesus gave bread and wine (and a blessing) to his disciples, because he knew what world they'd be living in, and it would be scary too. So they too would need something to enable them to take on the world and whatever it threw at them. It was toward that end, then, that Jesus began to prepare the ground for the bread and wine for them too.

The scene opens in **Matthew 24** with Jesus and his disciples leaving the Temple, which at that point was still under construction. The disciples are clearly impressed with the huge building blocks and the dazzling white marble and gold decorations, but Jesus isn't impressed at all. "This whole thing will soon be a pile of rubble," he tells them, which really shocks Peter, James, John and Andrew. So they approach Jesus later on, when they're gathered on the Mount of Olives together, and they ask him when this terrible destruction is going to happen, and would this also be the time when Jesus would come in power and put an end to their miserable world at last (verses 1-3)?

Jesus' answer must have been disappointing, however, because instead of their miserable world coming to an end it would continue. Worse still was the destruction of the Temple, that would bring an abrupt end to their entire religious way of life and the place where they could communicate with God. They would also be preaching a message in a hostile, confusing and still very corrupt world too. So they're in for a rough time, in both the loss of everything they've held dear in the past, and having to shine a bright light on a whole new way of life in a world that won't want its own ways shown up for what they really are. But that's the same for any disciple of Christ, as we well know.

We too face difficult decisions that may cause loss of friends, family and jobs. People won't like us. They may even be vehemently hostile. We may end up living rather lonely lives, because there's so much in this world we can't participate in. And there'll be times when we have to face up to people and say, "I can't do that," because we're citizens of the kingdom of heaven operating by ITS ethics and rules, not this world's, and that will mean awkward situations with people that may well turn them against us. It won't be pleasant, especially when we're being gossiped about and misjudged and nobody wants to hear what we believe.

So we're not being called to an easy life, but we see in the chapters leading up to the bread and wine that Jesus knows that and he cares. And he cared enough for his original disciples to be absolutely frank with them, first of all, so they knew exactly what they were in for.

He tells them frankly in **Matthew 24:4-5**, as they sat there with him on the Mount of Olives looking across the valley to that brand new glistening Temple full of promise, that they should "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many." Well, the very man behind the building of that Temple, King Herod, was one such man. It looked like he was doing the nation a great favour rebuilding the Temple back to its former glory, but in fact it was a huge deception, because he was really building it for himself for his own fame and glory. History also tells us that Herod thought he was the Messiah, fulfilling Jesus' prophecy exactly, that people would be calling themselves 'the Christ'.

But listen to some politicians today promising great change if they're voted in, and it sounds like they think they're Messiahs too. And amazingly people vote for them, even though so many politicians, once voted in, blatantly break their promises. It's just as Jesus said; it's all based on deception.

And it really is based on deception, because for all their political posturing and promises of change, the world doesn't change for the better. Which is exactly what Jesus said in **verses 6-7**, that the world will carry on as usual with its insurmountable, unsolvable wars, famines and natural disasters, that no politician or king has ever been able to stop, despite them thinking they're like little Christs with the power to actually solve the world's problems.

And that won't change with the preaching of the gospel either, because people will hate having their delusional, deceptive facades exposed. Many very clever anti-Christian "false prophets" - as Jesus calls them in **verse 11** - will make Christianity seem so ridiculous it will even make Christians wilt and quit (verse 10). So for all the disciples' preaching of the gospel there won't be much headway, which could be horribly discouraging for them, and especially as people become more hateful and vicious too, not less (verse 12).

Jesus warns his disciples, then, that they're in for a major challenge, endlessly having to resist deceiving politicians, clever atheists, and people claiming divine powers. They must "stand firm," he says in **verse 13**, never relaxing their belief in the gospel of the kingdom of God, that only Christ in his life, death, resurrection and ascension has the solution to all our human problems. It's what all his disciples are called to faithfully preach, no matter what opposition we're up against, because as Jesus said in **verse 14**, "this gospel of the kingdom WILL be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations." That's the job he's given us, and only when it's done "will the end come."

So that's one huge challenge his disciples will face. But there's a second huge challenge too, because in **verses 45-51** Jesus makes it clear there's no room in his disciples' lives for hypocrisy. If we say we're Christians then we'd better act like Christians, at all times, no excuses. But how challenging is that, when we're stuck in a world where people easily excuse away lying, cheating, destructive gossip, and pretending to be someone they aren't? But that's just something else we have to resist, along with all the other things, like those who peddle alternatives to Christianity while "performing great signs and miracles" that are so convincing they could even "deceive the elect" (verse 24). We've got that nasty problem to deal with too.

So Jesus is painting a pretty negative picture here. He's talking about their entire lives being turned upside down, pictured by the sudden destruction of the Temple coming up, exactly as Daniel predicted (verses 15-25). What they'd based their entire lives on before, therefore, was about to be eradicated. Their anchor would be cut. But if that wasn't enough to scare them, Jesus was also landing them with the job of preaching the good news of the kingdom of God, which to most people would sound hollow and ridiculous - but too bad, his disciples must faithfully preach it anyway (verses 45-46).

But how do we do all that while navigating through our own problems of health, finances, stress, tension, awkward neighbours, foul-mouthed fellow workers, cunning salesmen, cars and appliances breaking down, family crises, and so much negativity in the news and in conversations with people?

To fulfill what Jesus asks of us, therefore, is tough in a world like ours, but if his original disciples are anything to go by, then we know Jesus understands what we're going through, and how deeply he feels for us, just as he did for them. He knew exactly what they were in for, and he cared. So as he sat there with his disciples looking across at the Temple and telling them what they were in for in Matthew 24 he was also very carefully preparing them for what he had in mind for them two chapters later.

It's with this in mind that he then talks in **Matthew 25** about wise and foolish disciples, pictured by ten unmarried young women. These ten women are waiting for the appearance of the bridegroom from a recent wedding so they can join the procession following him and his bride to the marriage feast, an obvious reference to joining Jesus at his marriage feast when he comes again.

Five of the girls brought extra oil for their lamps in case the bridegroom is delayed, because the reason they're waiting for him is to join the procession to the marriage feast, which they'll miss out on if their oil runs out - an obvious reference to Jesus' disciples in any age being ready at all times for his arrival. But that's why we're disciples, that one day we join Jesus in setting up his kingdom at last, and that's what motivates our daily thoughts and behaviour. It's a foolish disciple who doesn't have that focus, because he won't be joining Jesus, and Jesus is really strict on that point (verse 10).

So here again the calling of a disciple is serious business. We know what our future is: It's the kingdom of God, ruling alongside Jesus, and this is the time of our preparation for it. We're in constant training for it, never letting up on living what that kingdom is like. And our great hope in doing that is hearing Jesus say to us what he said to the man in **verse 21** who'd made the best use of the gifts Jesus had given him, "Well done good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"

But again, how can we be productive and useful with the gifts Jesus has given us in a world that constantly takes up our attention with so many petty and frustrating needs? How many hours do we have to spend, for instance, in waiting rooms going for check-ups, getting things repaired, and finding clothes, appliances and cars that last? What time and energy have we got left after all that to do anything useful?

But here's Jesus in **verse 32** telling his disciples that: "All the nations will be gathered before him and he will separate the sheep from the goats." To the sheep he then says in **verse 34**, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world." But what qualifies those sheep for their inheritance is feeding the hungry, housing strangers, looking after the sick, and visiting prisoners as if they're Christ himself (verses 35-40).

So Jesus is serious about his disciples caring for the needy too, because to him they're "brothers of mine" (verse 40). If we have the resources to help them, therefore, he expects us to help.

But put that together with everything else Jesus told his disciples on the hillside overlooking the Temple, and we have quite a list, enough to take the wind right out of our sails at the impossibility of it all. And imagine how his original disciples must have felt too, being told that their entire lives would be turned upside down, and they'd also be facing a world in future that would want to destroy everything they stood for as Jesus' followers, and, what's more, Jesus would be leaving them, and after he left there was no promise of him returning soon to set up his kingdom in power to put the world to rights either.

Instead they'd be stuck in a world that carries on as usual, with its same old problems, same old stresses, same old deceiving leaders making empty promises, and the same old belief in violence being the only solution to evil. Worse still, Jesus said, his disciples would "be hated by all nations because of me" (verse 9), so his disciples would always be facing resistance, but somehow they must stay positive and shine as bright lights as living proof that the gospel was true, that there really was a better world in the making.

So having been really frank with his disciples as to what their future holds, much of which would be a hard and lonely slog in a hostile world, what does Jesus offer them as a source of assurance, hope and encouragement?

Well, Jesus was a priest in “the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 7:15-17), in which case he would do what a Melchizedek priest does. And we know what that is from what the original Melchizedek did for Abraham.

Melchizedek brought Abraham bread and wine, and pronounced a blessing on him. And it certainly worked for Abraham, because he recovered quickly enough to resist an immediate temptation to solve a problem by human means. He’d lost a lot of his wealth firing up an army and marching it four hundred miles to and from a major battle, and then arranging transportation for hundreds of people and their animals for the two hundred mile trip back home. But he resisted the temptation to make up his loss from a pagan king offering him financial help. Abraham was trusting God and God alone for his needs, which he’d showed by giving a tenth of all his spoils to Melchizedek (Genesis 14:20-24).

And taking into account that Abraham is “the father of the faithful,” this is clearly an example for all of us who also say we trust only in God to supply our needs. Well, Jesus had just loaded a lot of needs onto his disciples’ shoulders in Matthew 24 and 25, much of which would involve great loss to them as well, so isn’t it interesting that he so quickly “does a Melchizedek” for them too? Right after loading a whole list of highly negative and worrying things on them about their future and his expectations of them - that must have left them feeling as emotionally exhausted as Abraham - Jesus ends his Passover meal with them a little while later with bread and wine for them, and a blessing, the same things Melchizedek did for Abraham.

But Jesus is only doing what God had set up the Melchizedek priesthood for. It was the job of the Melchizedek priests to serve the needs of those God had called to set up his kingdom, starting with Abraham and continuing all the way through to Jesus’ disciples and on to us in the church.

That priestly office and duty has never changed. It still exists today, therefore, for us. We still have a Melchizedek priest on the job serving us with bread and wine to remind us he’s there for us in exactly the same way he was there for Abraham. He’s there to serve our needs in a tough world, so that we don’t give in to temptation, don’t let the cultural nonsense overwhelm us, we don’t get caught up in the empty promises of human leaders, don’t fall for charismatic religious folks and their so-called miracles, and we don’t get flustered by world events.

Nor do we get bitter at hateful, spiteful, insensitive people, or get discouraged at things never getting better and only getting worse, or become cynical and negative, or turn on each other. Nor do we relax one minute in living the way Jesus would have us live, and nor will we ever give up preaching the gospel of good news that one day Jesus will come again to put this world to rights and justice will be done. No wonder, then, we take the bread and wine, to remind us of all that.

It's to remind us that Jesus lives to serve us, because that's what he's a priest of the order of Melchizedek for. We don't take the bread and wine as some sort of ritual we must do to prove we're good Christians. We take it, as Jesus himself said, "in remembrance of him."

In remembrance of WHAT about him, though? It's in remembrance that HE is our bread and wine and blessing every moment of every day. My hope is, then, that when I take the bread and wine I will remember he's that for me any time I need him. He is immediately on hand with bread and wine and a blessing, that he will deliver me from all my enemies in exactly the same way he promised to deliver Abraham from all his enemies (Genesis 14:20). And it's in Jesus' death, also pictured by the bread and wine, that I'm reminded that's what the blessing means, because in his death he defeated our worst enemy, so that we never need fall victim to the devil again.

In this world we will be up against resistance to Jesus and the ethics of his kingdom at every turn. This world will fatigue us, tempt us, scare us and frustrate us, where it feels like we're in a constant battle. I only have to think of what happened last week, and the nights I lost sleep due to some stupid actions of other people, dumb TV programs promoting the garbage ethics of this culture, the scary things this world is doing to my kids and grandkids and other members of my family, and worrying how I'm going to get anything useful and productive done when this world knocks the energy right out of me.

But I can't get negative about these things either, because Jesus has me in his church to set up his kingdom and all the hope and optimism that it represents. He also has the story of Melchizedek that tells me Jesus will meet my needs in this world on all counts. He lives to intercede for us and deliver us from all our enemies, whether it's people in the world or our own feelings of inadequacy. In all situations he promises to meet our need, whether it's peace, courage, wisdom, mercy, forgiveness, resistance to temptation, or awareness of deception.



And he will show us clearly, just as he showed his first disciples, that not only does he totally understand what we're going through in this world, he also totally cares.

And this is what brings the bread and wine alive for me, that Jesus is my ever-present bread and wine. He lives to serve us so we display the ethics and behaviour of his kingdom in every situation we come up against. He is, therefore, on hand for us with bread and wine and a blessing to meet our need every moment this coming year, and that's why we take the bread and wine - to help keep us in "remembrance" of that.