

Column

Following the death of her mother, a young woman asked me if it would be alright to bury her with the gold cross she often wore. My response was that it certainly would be alright, but it would be more honouring still to wear that cross, not merely as an article of jewellery, but as a sign of her own Christian faith. In the end, she kept and wore the cross.

The cross is the best-known symbol of the Christian faith. Following Jesus' resurrection and ascension, a sign of torture and death became a sign of victory and life, but it is not the *only* symbol Christians have used over the years to witness to their faith.

Not as common is the fish. Early on in Christian history, an acrostic was formed out of the letters in the Greek word for fish representing: "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour". It has also been suggested that in those early days when a Christian met a stranger, he would draw a simple arc of a fish in the sand. If the other person responded in like manner, both would know they were in safe company.

The cross and the fish are just two obvious examples of Christian symbols. Many others have been used over the years. Some of the most common include: the triangle representing the Holy Trinity (the Christian belief God is one and God is three); the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world; and the letters IHS representing the first three letters of 'Jesus' in Greek – iota, eta and sigma.

All of these symbols are good and help convey truth. Nevertheless, I should like to propose yet another: a dining room table!

At first such a suggestion may sound a bit strange, but, if you think about it, Christianity and the table are closely linked. On the night of His betrayal and death, Jesus did not leave his disciples a 3000-page tome on the doctrine of the Atonement, but a meal around a table. The purpose of this meal was to help them discover for themselves the significance of His coming death on the cross.

Christians of all traditions continue to gather around a table to this day. This meal at which bread and wine are consumed is known by a variety of names, each representing some aspect of its meaning: the Lord's Supper, the Holy Communion, the Eucharist, etc.

Hence, the table (also called an altar) is the distinguishing mark of the Christian Church. All who confess Jesus as Lord and have gone through the waters of baptism – regardless of their past, clan or caste, their social or economic standing – are welcomed there.

The table of Christian fellowship then is (or ought to be) an outward and visible sign of unity. It represents the reversal of the story of Babel recorded in Genesis. In this ancient account, human pride and arrogance result in fracturing the family of Adam. Now, with Jesus as the new head of the human race, the world is being put back together again.

The table around which the one people of God gather is therefore a powerful symbol for the Christian faith. More than a symbol, it's an advance sign of the full arrival of the Kingdom of God 'on earth as it is in heaven'.

Hence, when the Church is being true to its Lord and its foundational document the Bible, all who have been baptised and confessed Jesus as Lord are welcomed to the Communion Table. It is not an optional extra or a nice thing to do: it is a Gospel imperative -- One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism . . . and we might want to pencil in: One Table.

O God, who has made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on the face of the whole earth, and didst send thy blessed Son to preach peace to them that are far off and to them that are nigh; Grant that all men everywhere may seek after thee and find thee. Bring the nations into thy fold, pour out thy Spirit upon all flesh, and hasten thy kingdom; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (The Book of Common Prayer)

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