Book 2

Sunday January 7, 1973

"COMMUNION AND REALITY" Luke 22:14-27, Matthew 2:13-16

Often when we think of worship and particularly the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, we picture a kind of quiet, peaceful and especially holy affair. We may even think of worship and communion as something kind of removed from the world and reality.

However, the setting of the first Communion, the Last Supper which Jesus had with his disciples, had within it and around it some very disturbing events and conditions. We read the story of the last supper as part of our scripture lesson.

That first Communion took place in a time of revolution and unrest. The world was changing. There was agitation for the Jews to try to throw the Romans out of their country. Some had thought Jesus would be the leader of the revolt.

The disciples had come to Jerusalem with Jesus for the observance of the Passover; a celebration of the freeing of the Hebrew people from the Egyptians. As Jesus and his disciples had come near the city, a demonstration developed as people hailed Jesus as a new king. Emotions ran high.

Then in the days immediately following, there had been hate and opposition to Jesus and his ministry. There was talk of assassination. Jesus had entered the temple and in anger had driven out the money-changers. Here was another kind of demonstration.

And then not long after, Jesus and his disciples had gathered together in an upper room for a meal together. Jesus knew it would probably be his last meal with his disciples. Outside that room opposition to him was growing. It was anything but peaceful and calm.

And then as they were gathered around the table, Jesus introduced another disturbing note into the conversation. He announced that one of them--one of the twelve-- would be a traitor, would betray him that very night. We can imagine how this announcement further unsettled the evening and the meal. The disciples were surprised and yet not surprised, for each one asked, "Is it I, Lord?" Could it

be me? Perhaps each one felt a little guilty and at least admitted the possibility that he was capable of being a traitor.

And then right after the supper was finished, the disciples got into an argument among themselves as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. Immediately after a supper in which Jesus broke the bread and spoke of his body soon to be broken and poured out the wine and spoke of his blood soon to be poured out, the disciples began to argue among themselves.

And that was not all that was disturbing that night. As they left the room to go with Jesus to the garden to pray, some of the disciples fell asleep while Jesus was in his deepest agony.

And all the while a conspiracy was brewing and coming to a head. Judas led a band of soldiers to arrest Jesus. Then came the denial by Peter and the flight of the rest of the disciples. Just a few hours after the first communion service, Jesus was in custody and all of the closest followers of Jesus had deserted him.

Not much later an unruly mob gathered, a kind of lynch mob, full of hate and crying out for violent action against Jesus, "Crucify him!" "Crucify him!"

Thus we can see that the setting, the events before, during and after the first Communion supper were anything but peaceful and quiet. It was not something removed from the world. Rather the first communion service was hled in the middle of the world's problems, right in the middle of tension, revolution, violence, betrayal and death.

The first Christmas too, had surrounding it some disturbing events. As we read in our other scripture passage this morning, when King Herod heard about the birth of Jesus, and when the Wise Men did not return to report to him, he orded all the male children in Bethlehem and in that region who were two years old or under, killed, hoping in that way to kill the infant Jesus.

So we have the paradox that the birth stories of Jesus which announce a joyful event, also report widespread suffering of the innocent. The birth of the savior brings at the same time opposition and death.

Joy and sorrow, sickness and health, support and opposition, all are a part of the reality of the world in which we live.

This morning as we prepare for Holy Communion not long after another celebration of the birth of Jesus, we are aware that like the first communion and like the first Christmas, we too live in a time of unsettledness, violence, and the suffering of innocent people.

Among other things, we wonder when and how peace will come in Vietnam. How many more people will have to suffer and die? There aren't any easy answers, but sometimes it helps us as Christian and as human beings to give voice to our feelings of anguish and helplessness as well as our feelings of joy and victory. It's part of our opening of ourselves to God and to others as we seek to find answers and understand our situation.

For example, I worry because somehow the war in southeast Asia has become rooted in our lives. Instead of our controlling it, it has adapted us to its needs and bent us to its purposes.

I am concerned lest we become so desensitized to suffering and war that we simply take it for granted. Soon then we will come to believe that life is always like this, and that nothing can be done to change it. We are called as Christians to hold each other accountable. We are called as Christians to be peacemakers. "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God," is the way Jesus put it in the sermon on the mount.

Communion amidst the reality of the world and it problems and joys-- Just as Jesus and his followers celebrated that first Communion in the midst of revolutiong, tension, violence, betrayal and their own failure, so also we do the same. And Christ has not promised that coming to his table will completely change us as persons and that from now on life will be peaceful, serene and easy.

But he has promised us that if we are open, he will be with us in the midst of these tensions and failures. Surely, that is one of the important things to remember about that first Communion service--Jesus was right there in the middle of the world's life--the last supper was held in the middle of all the problems and troubles. And so it has been throughout history. The Lord's Supper can be

celebrated at any place and at any time. No restrictions can be placed on the presence and activity of God.

The Lord's Supper is celebrated because it speaks of God's presence with his people wherever they are and in whatever situation they are in. God suffers with us and through our suffering together, healing comes about and we are made new people and the world is made new.

Our faith does not speak of escape from the world, but speaks eloquently of God being present in the world, right in the middle of the world's life. Further our faith holds that we can take courage from the unexpected, unforseeable victories of God in history.

So today our communion service is held in the middle of a world often filled with violence, war and tragedy, yet it is our hope that through it we can also hear the notes of peace and joy.