

Trinity 4 sermon by Andrew 21 July 2019 Every star shall sing

I had a sermon all ready yesterday, but last night I changed my mind about what I should preach about, and that's because I read something that absolutely wowed me.

Today is the fiftieth anniversary of the first landing on the moon. Apollo 11. "One small step for man; one giant leap for mankind" – words we all know. I remember my Dad got me out of bed to see the grainy pictures on TV, but I was in that indifferent teenager stage and couldn't see what all the fuss was about.

But I get it now. It was – it still is – something quite amazing. But the thing that wowed me, that I read in just the last few days, is something that very few people know and that wasn't broadcast at the time. Apparently, Neil Armstrong's fellow crew member, Buzz Aldrin, was a committed Christian, a Presbyterian, and he took with him very precious elements with which to celebrate their landing on the moon. He took bread and wine with which to celebrate Communion.

Just as Abraham knows that his meeting with the three angelic messengers requires a feast, and Martha and Mary know that when Jesus visits something special is happening, so Buzz Aldrin said that he wanted to express, in his words, the "feeling that what man was doing in this mission transcended electronics and computers and rockets." According to a journalist writing about this this week: Aldrin said, "it was also about communion with God; about reaching beyond humanity, and about putting faith not only in science, but in the aid of a higher power.

Aldrin wasn't allowed to announce what he was doing in that unforgettable broadcast from the Moon, but he did invite people to share almost a Mary of Bethany moment, to be silent in the face of something awesome: "Houston, this is Eagle. This is the landing module pilot speaking. I would like to request a few moments of silence. I would like to invite each person listening in, wherever and whomever he may be, to contemplate for a moment the events of the past few hours, and to give thanks in his own individual way."

So before Neil Armstrong set foot on the Moon, towards the end of a six hour period between landing and that first Moon walk, the whole of humanity was invited to keep silence. What people didn't know at the time was that during that time of silence Aldrin was celebrating Communion. He took out the bread and the chalice and the tiny phial of wine he'd been allowed to bring in his personal possessions.

Later he wrote: "In the one sixth gravity of the Moon, the wine curled slowly up the side of the cup." Then he ate the bread and drank the wine and read John 15:5 "I am the Vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him, will bear much fruit, for you can do nothing without me." At the very same time in Houston, 239,000 miles away, Aldrin's friends in his own Church gathered to celebrate the Eucharist together.

So personally, I find it mind-blowing to think that the very first food and drink taken on the surface of the Moon were the Body and Blood of Christ. When I wrote the few words for the front of our new liturgy booklets I said that Jesus on our Cross here embraces the whole world, but thinking about this, in truth he embraces the whole cosmos. And Buzz Aldrin clearly saw that and felt that. It was an amazing thing to do, to mark that incredible breakthrough with the holiest, the most sacred thing you can think of and at the same time the most human thing you can think of – a meal.

A meal is the first thing Abraham can think of when three angelic messengers come calling – he knows this is a breakthrough moment, even if he can hardly guess what it's going to lead to or what it's all about. Jesus visiting Martha and Mary is a breakthrough moment too – Mary responds with silent awe (annoying her busy sister in the process); Martha responds with a three course lunch, but learns in the process that silence can celebrate a sacred moment just as much as a feast.

Aldrin on the surface of the Moon, all those miles from home, did both. Silence and the most sacred feast Christians have to offer. Later Aldrin wrote: "It was a Christian sacrament and we had come to the Moon in the name of all mankind – be they Christians, Jews, Muslims, agnostics or atheists."

It's almost like Paul could see this when he writes to the Colossians: "Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created... and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his Cross." This is the cosmic Christ, the big picture, the Eagle's eye view of how things really are. At a time when there's so much human conflict, hard words and lack of vision – whether it's telling people they should go back to where they've come from, or brinkmanship going on the Gulf, the image of a man sitting in a tin can on the lunar surface, inviting our silence, breaking bread for the whole of humanity, that should call us back to our best selves.

Sydney Carter, who wrote "Lord of the Dance" catches this spirit in these words: "Ev'ry star shall sing a carol; ev'ry creature, high or low, come and praise the King of heaven by whatever name you know. God above, man below. Holy is the name I know."

I'm so grateful that Buzz Aldrin broke bread for all of us, the holiest thing he knew, on the surface of the Moon. I can't quite explain why, but somehow it gives me hope. Amen.