

# Sermon preached at King's College Cambridge

Maundy Thursday 2018

*1 Corinthians 11.17-26; Luke 22.14-30*

In the Church of England when my parents were children, in order to be confirmed you had to learn by heart the Catechism. This is a summary of the Christian faith in question-and-answer form, nestled in the middle of the Book of Common Prayer. Those were the days when the bishop would peer hopefully at the scrubbed faces of possibly-reluctant candidates and listen to them recite the Apostles' Creed and the Ten Commandments. At the end they would hit the hot stuff: the sacraments.

*Question* What meanest thou by this word *Sacrament*?

*Answer* I mean an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us, ordained by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive the same, and a pledge to assure us thereof.

*And breathe.*

If you are not familiar with the Church and the Christian faith, you may well be wondering by now what on earth I am talking about (and I don't just mean the Tudor-bethan language). What is this stuff about 'the sacraments', 'being confirmed', 'grace' and all the rest?

Well, it springs from what we celebrate today. In this gathering, in this celebration, in this moment, we are *making Eucharist*. That is to say, we are making thanksgiving. This is the day when we listen to the story of Jesus' last supper with his followers and friends, after which he is betrayed, arrested, tortured, crucified... At that last supper he scandalises them by washing their feet, not the thing a leader should do. He drenches them in a cascade of farewell teaching, much of which we are still trying to understand and live out. And he takes the bread and wine which they have for what is a Passover meal, and creates a new rite, a new ritual, a new form of worship. He begins what we call the Eucharist (or the Mass, or Holy Communion, or the Lord's Supper). And we call it a sacrament, which is to say a holy and mysterious action of God by means of very ordinary, physical stuff. Baptism is a sacrament, and the ordinary stuff there is water. In the Eucharist the ordinary stuff is bread and wine.

We do it because Jesus told us to. *Do this is remembrance of me*. Not to do it is to disobey the explicit instructions of Jesus. Over the centuries the Church, in all its manifestations, took this very seriously, and there grew richly varied ways of celebrating it. Such celebrations are the faithful and impassioned response to Jesus' first actions and words

during the Last Supper. They are full of meaning, because what looks like a simple sharing of bread and wine turns out to be about the whole of Jesus' mission.

Church without the Eucharist is like Hamlet without the prince. It is fundamental to the Christian life, to the life of the Church. Just in terms of what happens as an act of corporate worship, it has pretty much everything we need.

We gather. Simply to do this enacts our being part of the Body of Christ. You can't be Christian on your own.

We offer prayers of preparation and sorrow at our shortcomings. This is a bit like washing our feet. We shouldn't just amble onto holy ground, metaphorically or literally.

We sing of God's glory. We sing or say the song of the angels as they sang it to the astonished shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem. Praise bursts from us as we look to the glory of God and what he has done and does for us.

We hear words from the Bible. We can never hear enough of them, never hear them enough. As the ancient Byzantine saint John Chrysostom said, *It is not possible, I say not possible, ever to exhaust the mind of the Scriptures. It is a well which has no bottom.*

We then hear words of interpretation, exploration, teaching, encouragement. Such is the task of the preacher, to be undertaken with all due humility before the infinite riches of divine truth; and with love for her or his listeners.

We say a prayer of hopeful belief, the Creed. Those 'riches of divine truth' do not submit to capture or closure in crude human words, but we do our best with the hard-won prayer of the Church. There are no dotted lines after each phrase for us to sign our name. But there is a space around every word in which Jesus invites us to confess, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'

We pray: for the people of the world, for the Church, for the poorly, the bereaved, and for the dead. This is not about telling God what he already knows; or about specifying what he should do about it. More it is what a wise old archbishop once called *being with God with the people on our heart.*

And then we turn to the altar. Bread and wine and water are placed there, prayed over, and the Holy Spirit works through the words, the actions and the very things themselves to make Jesus present. The words speak of his saving mission, his sacrifice. This is our sacrifice, the sacrifice of praise-filled gratitude; and in offering it, we also make present again Jesus' own sacrifice of cross and resurrection. That sacrifice, offered once for all people and for all time, is not just represented, but re-presented. Jesus is not just remembered, but re-membered: bodied-forth again, as a foretaste of the culmination of

all things, the heavenly banquet. This is the stuff of mystery: not susceptible to simple explanation, not vulnerable to prosaic argument.

Whether we receive the bread and wine literally or commune with Jesus in their vicinity, we are in the presence of Jesus. It is therefore incredibly important to prepare, approach, encounter and leave with a due sense of the enormity of it all: St Paul was uncompromisingly strict about this. We're not cowed, though, but invigorated, animated, enlivened; and ready to be sent. For sent we are: the Eucharist ends with dismissal, a sending out. We have done what Jesus told us to do at that last supper. But he told us many other things to do, not least to wash the feet of others. That's what we have to go and do.

All this is shot through, sustained by what we call *grace*; *gratia* in Latin. This is the action of God in our lives, in the life of all people: that gracious action which begins in God's irrepressible love, and calls forth our irresistible gratitude.

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