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The bread of life

Leader article

Hymns have played a formative part in my Christian life. They illustrate and communicate the faith, and are poetic commentaries on the Church's teachings and sacraments, as well as on the worship in which we are engaged. For me, two hymns particularly serve to underline what we mean when we talk about the bread of life. Bishop Richard Parsons (1882–1948) is the author of 'We hail thy Presence glorious':

- 1 We hail thy Presence glorious, / O Christ our great
high Priest,
o'er sin and death victorious, / at thy thanksgiving
feast:
as thou art interceding / for us in heaven above,
thy Church on earth is pleading / thy perfect work of
love.
- 2 Through thee in every nation / thine own their hearts
upraise,
offering one pure Oblation, / one Sacrifice of praise:
with thee in blest communion / the living and the
dead
are joined in closest union, / one Body with one Head.

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- 3 O living Bread from heaven, / Jesu, our Saviour good,
who thine own self hast given / to be our souls' true
food;
for us thy body broken / hung on the Cross of shame:
this bread its hallowed token / we break in thy dear
name.
- 4 O stream of love unending, / poured from the one
true Vine,
with our weak nature blending / the strength of life
divine;
our thankful faith confessing / in thy life-blood
outpoured,
we drink this Cup of blessing / and praise thy name,
O Lord.
- 5 May we thy word believing / thee through thy gifts
receive
that, thou within us living, / we all to God may live;
draw us from earth to heaven / till sin and sorrow
cease,
forgiving and forgiven, / in love and joy and peace.

This hymn is one which, from the outset, gives an understanding of the **Real Presence**. This expression has been used at least since Reformation times, and seeks to emphasize the real and actual presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament. Though it has been employed to encompass several eucharistic doctrines (of which **transubstantiation** is one), it stands in contrast with others that maintain that

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the Lord is present in the substance of the consecrated ('eucharistized') bread and wine only in a symbolic or figurative way.

Further, the hymn names what the Church is doing at the altar. As Christ, our Great High Priest, is offering himself to the Father in heaven in one continual prayer for those he has redeemed, so as they offer the Eucharist his people are pleading on earth Christ's 'perfect work of love' which he pleads in the heavenly places. And in and through Christ we offer the 'one pure Oblation, one Sacrifice of praise'. The Eucharist is about Christ's self-offering, his oblation, and we share in that as we offer the bread and wine for consecration, which, through the invocation of the Holy Spirit, become what Christ himself offered in the sacrifice of the cross. Joining ourselves with what Christ does in heaven is an action which expresses the communion that exists between Christ and his Church. And in response to what Christ has done for us on the cross, and continues to do in heaven – of which the bread on which we feed and the cup of which we drink are sacramental signs – we the Lord's people also '*offer and present . . . ourselves, our souls and bodies to be a . . . lively sacrifice*' (as the **Prayer of Oblation** in the *Book of Common Prayer* puts it).

The other hymn, written by William Bright (1824–1901), which may be of significance at this point is 'And now, O Father, mindful of the love':

- 1 And now, O Father, mindful of the love / that bought us,
once for all, on Calvary's tree,

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and having with us him that pleads above, / we here
present, we here spread forth to thee
that only offering perfect in thine eyes, / the one true,
pure, immortal sacrifice.

2 Look, Father, look on his anointed face, / and only
look on us as found in him;
look not on our misusings of thy grace, / our prayer so
languid, and our faith so dim;
for lo, between our sins and their reward, / we set the
passion of thy Son our Lord.

3 And then for those, our dearest and our best, / by this
prevailing presence we appeal;
O fold them closer to thy mercy's breast, / O do thine
utmost for their souls' true weal;
from tainting mischief keep them white and clear, /
and crown thy gifts with grace to persevere.

4 And so we come: O draw us to thy feet, / most patient
Saviour, who canst love us still;
and by this food, so awful and so sweet, / deliver us
from every touch of ill:
in thine own service make us glad and free, / and
grant us nevermore to part from thee.

The author of this, one of the finest and most affective of eucharistic hymns, was Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Oxford from 1868 until his death in 1901. He was a keen High Churchman and a devoted student of the

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Church Fathers. In this hymn, which first appeared in 1873, he seeks to explain the meaning of the **anamnesis** during the eucharistic action, that is, what it means when, at the altar, the celebrant speaks of ‘calling to mind’ (Latin: *unde et memores*) the passion, death and resurrection of Christ and what effect this has on the gifts of bread and wine that have been placed on the altar.

It is suggested that looking at these two hymns (but, of course, there are many others!) might provide some helpful background reflection on the issues of **eucharistic remembering** and **eucharistic presence** which are at the heart of gaining an understanding of what the Church does, and what it signifies, at the breaking of the bread.

It might be helpful here to be reminded of the belief of the early Church in this respect. For instance, St Ignatius of Antioch, writing to the Christians of Rome around the year AD 106, says:

I desire the bread of God, the heavenly bread, the bread of life, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became afterwards of the seed of David and Abraham; and I desire the drink of God, namely His blood, which is incorruptible love and eternal life.

A more developed understanding is set out by St Ambrose of Milan (d. AD 397) in *On the Mysteries* where he writes:

Perhaps you will say, ‘. . . how is it that you assert that I receive the Body of Christ?’ . . . ‘Because by blessing nature itself is changed . . . For that sacrament

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which you receive is made what it is by the word of Christ. But if the word of Elijah had such power as to bring down fire from heaven, shall not the word of Christ have power to change the nature of the elements? . . . Why do you seek the order of nature in the Body of Christ, seeing that the Lord Jesus Himself was born of a Virgin, not according to nature? It is the true Flesh of Christ which was crucified and buried, this is then truly the Sacrament of His Body. The Lord Jesus Himself proclaims: ‘This Is My Body.’ Before the blessing of the heavenly words another nature is spoken of, after the consecration the Body *is signified*. He Himself speaks of His Blood. Before the consecration it has another name, after it is called Blood. And you say, Amen, that is, It is true. Let the heart within confess what the mouth utters, let the soul feel what the voice speaks.

And St Augustine of Hippo (who had been baptized by Ambrose) declares in one of his *Sermons* that the bread consecrated in the Eucharist actually *becomes* the body of Christ: ‘The faithful know what I’m talking about; they know Christ in the breaking of bread. It isn’t every loaf of bread, you see, but the one receiving Christ’s blessing, that becomes the body of Christ.’

From even so small a selection of writings we can see indications about the belief of the Church from earliest days – that Jesus is especially and substantially present in his Eucharist.

Questions

1 Can you think of a time when the Eucharist has spoken to you or touched you personally in some way?

As I considered the possibility of a call to priesthood, I often thought about the passage in Isaiah 6 describing the prophet's vision in the Temple in which he experienced his calling: 'In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord . . .' (v. 1, NRSV). Isaiah is profoundly affected, knowing that a grubby, earthly man cannot look on the face of God and live. Significantly, Isaiah speaks of having 'unclean lips' (v. 5), so that he could not form words to speak adequately of the righteous God. In response to Isaiah's understandable feeling of inadequacy, his mouth is touched by a burning coal taken from the altar, and he is told that his guilt is removed and his sins forgiven. The purging prepares him to hear the Lord who says, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Isaiah is enabled to answer 'Here am I; send me!' (v. 8).

In the Eucharist, each one of us is called to the Lord's table. Inevitably – and rightly – there are feelings of inadequacy. Like the prophet Isaiah, we feel out of place in the Lord's presence, preferring to draw back, convicted of our own unworthiness:

- (a) because of our sinful nature, that is, the sin we share with others;
- (b) because of our fallen humanity from which we cannot escape; and
- (c) because of personal sin (those things we have done or omitted to do) which lead us to fall 'short of the glory of God' (Romans 3.23, NRSV).

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We need to see the part the Eucharist plays as a continual assurance of redeeming grace, reminding us of what Christ won for us on the cross. In close relationships, human beings offer one another signs and tokens of love. The Eucharist is the Lord's gift to us to remind us that he loves us and that he has done something for us that is of lasting value. We need to be open to the signs of sacramental grace and the effect this has on our own inner life in Christ. The Lord speaks to us in the Eucharist ('This is my body . . . given for you'), and he touches us with himself as he feeds us.

2 'The Eucharist is a fire that inflames us' (St John Chrysostom). Do you think this is a helpful idea?

St John Chrysostom (c. AD 347–407), Patriarch of Constantinople, was known for his preaching and public speaking (hence the epithet 'golden-mouth'), as well as his teaching and personal holiness. The phrase above is part of this sentence: 'The Eucharist is a fire that inflames us, that, like lions breathing fire, we may retire from the altar being made terrible to the devil.' We feed upon the Eucharist to be strengthened in our Christian life, so we may confront our adversary 'the devil (who) prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour' (cf. 1 Peter 5.8). When speaking about the Eucharist as 'a fire that inflames us', it may be that St John Chrysostom had in mind the disciples' experience of meeting the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus when they said, 'Did not our hearts burn within us?' (Luke 24.32, RSV).

Aware of God's love at work in us, the only meaningful response is to desire to offer, like for like, our own love even

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though we may think it inadequate. God has given us a heart to love him, and so our devotion and our service is of value. The Eucharist forcibly makes us recall the cost to God of his love for us – the death of his Son so that we might have life. The breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup are the means by which this sacrifice is made real to us. *Being caught up into this offering, we are renewed and enlivened by it.*

Can we say, then, that we are set on fire by what God has done for us in Christ? Does our sharing in Holy Communion enable us to enter more deeply into the mystery and work of God's love? God loves us and will do so for ever because of what his Son has done for us and for all by his sacrifice on the cross. He will continue to feed us as we journey on.

3 Do you think the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist may be different from his presence elsewhere?

Although we believe God's presence permeates all created things because God is their first beginning, God the eternal Word is recognizably and particularly present in specific ways. At the annunciation to Joseph, the promised birth of the child, who was to be called Jesus, is said by the angel to be in fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah 7.14: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emman'u-el' (Matthew 1.23, RSV). That name, says the Evangelist, means 'God with us'. And at the end of Matthew's Gospel, the closing words of Christ as he departed from the disciples are recorded as 'lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age' (28.20, RSV). The continuing presence of Christ – whom St John had named as this same eternal

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Word who ‘became flesh and dwelt among us’ (1.14, RSV), by whom and through whom all things came into existence – is, then, a promise from the Lord. Indeed, the Church teaches that Jesus is present in so many ways: he is present in holy Scripture, especially in the proclamation of the Gospel; he is present in his people the Church through the baptism of each one (hence the Church is his body); and he is present in the sacraments, each of which is a promise and sign of his presence (the word **sacrament** means a promise or pledge).

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