

# 5

## The body of Christ

### Leader article

#### What do we mean?

Well, are we dealing with the bread of life, Jesus truly present with us, or simply bread that we could pick up in Tesco or Lidl? That is the question that lies behind the Church's language about the Eucharist.

#### How do Anglicans speak?

In the Book of Common Prayer (our Anglican standard of faith and doctrine) there are parts which speak explicitly about the 'Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ' or 'the Holy Communion of the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ' or 'the spiritual food of the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son' (we see this in the First and Third Exhortations before Communion, and in the Prayer of Thanksgiving after Communion). More common perhaps is reference to 'the Holy Communion' or simply 'the Communion'. But even where reference is made to Bread and Wine, there appears a clear intention to 'make a statement' by using a capital letter to refer to the elements over which the Prayer of Consecration has been spoken – no longer simple bread

## The body of Christ

and wine, but transfigured Bread and Wine. The Prayer Book's instruction about the disposal of what remains after Communion is also clear; it must be consumed, not disposed of in any other manner, for this is no common bread and wine that might make an appearance at the dinner table. This convention – making a statement about the meaning of what lies on the altar once the Eucharistic Prayer has been spoken over it by referring to it in a special manner – has been somewhat fractured in the newer texts of services in the Church of England where the Eucharist is referred to, without capitalization, in phrases such as 'the consecrated elements' or simply 'bread and wine'.

The Church of England's Catechism has this to say about the Eucharist:

*Question* Why was the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper ordained?

*Answer* For the continual remembrance of the sacrifice of the death of Christ, and of the benefits which we receive thereby.

*Question* What is the outward part or sign of the Lord's Supper?

*Answer* Bread and Wine, which the Lord hath commanded to be received.

*Question* What is the inward part, or thing signified?

*Answer* The Body and Blood of Christ, which are verily and indeed taken and received by the faithful in the Lord's Supper.

*Question* What are the benefits whereof we are partakers thereby?

## The body of Christ

*Answer*      The strengthening and refreshing of our souls by the Body and Blood of Christ, as our bodies are by the Bread and Wine.

And famously, Queen Elizabeth the First's dictum: 'His was the word that spake it; He took the bread and brake it; And what His word doth make it; That I believe and take it.' And if Christ says it is his body and blood, end of discussion! That Christ is truly present to us in his body and blood is perhaps more important than discussion about the means of that presence.

### Mind your language'

The language we use about the Eucharist matters, yet even the most well instructed people (and priests!) will not infrequently speak casually of receiving 'the bread' or 'giving the wine' during Communion, when just a few generations back we would almost invariably have spoken about the Blessed Sacrament or the Holy Communion; this is not a matter of using shorthand to speak about the sacrament but rather the weakening or dismantling of an older and more careful language. This is the present context in which we work, and which we must address in words and teaching to make clear the Church's understanding (and Scripture's) that 'the cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?' (1 Corinthians 10.16, RSV). In John's Gospel (John 6 which opens with the miraculous Feeding of the Five Thousand and segues into

## The body of Christ

Jesus' teaching about the 'food which endures to eternal life' (v. 27), 'the bread of God . . . which comes down from heaven' (v. 33, RSV)) the language Jesus used brought to a head a division between those who could accept his very realistic language about what he was offering them, and those who could not. Jesus said that the bread of life and the cup of which he said we should drink is his flesh for the life of the world and his blood. If Jesus was merely using symbolic or metaphorical language – that bread and wine in some way 'represents' or 'reminds us of/symbolizes' his body and blood – surely no one would have taken the slightest offence. But they did, and numbers of his followers depart the scene because of the language Jesus uses (John 6.66). John's portrayal of Jesus as refusing to compromise the highly realistic language he used is a doctrinal statement by the Gospel writer that we find carried over into the life of the infant Church in the generations after John's death.

### The early Church's understanding

Thus, very early in the Church's life, St Ignatius of Antioch was able to write in his *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* (in c. AD 110):

They [the Docetists, early Christological heretics] abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ, flesh which suffered for our sins and which the Father, in his goodness, raised up

## The body of Christ

again. They who deny the gift of God are perishing in their disputes.

And in his *Letter to the Romans* he says:

I have no taste for corruptible food nor for the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, who was of the seed of David; and for drink I desire his blood, which is love incorruptible.

Again, in the book *Against Heresies* written by St Ignatius of Smyrna (who died c. AD 202), the author states:

For as the bread, which is produced from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly; so also our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, having the hope of the resurrection to eternity.

The consequence of receiving the bread of life is for the recipient is, quite simply, the promise of eternal life.

St Justin Martyr (writing in c. AD 150) left us a series of works in defence of the Christian faith ('Apologies') against those who accused it, among other things, of cannibalism (a clear reference to what they understood Christians to say about the Eucharist); and Justin has left us a description of the Sunday Eucharist of his day which is remarkably similar to what we do in ours. And in his unfolding of the meaning of the Church's worship, Justin writes:

## The body of Christ

For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Saviour, having been made flesh by the word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, *so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of his word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.* For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them; that Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, said, ‘This do in remembrance of me, *this is my body;*’ and that, after the same manner, having taken the cup and given thanks, he said, ‘*This is my blood;*’ and gave it to them alone.

(*First Apology* LXVI; emphasis added)

Writing in about AD 350, St Cyril of Jerusalem says in his *Mystagogical Discourses*:

[Jesus] himself, therefore, having declared of the Bread, ‘This is my Body,’ who will dare any longer to doubt? And when He Himself has affirmed and said, ‘This is My Blood,’ who can ever hesitate and say it is not His Blood?’ Do not, therefore, regard the bread and wine as simply that, for they are, according to the Master’s declaration, the Body and Blood of Christ. Even though the senses suggest to you the other, let faith make you firm. Do not judge in this matter by taste, but be fully assured by faith, not doubting that

## The body of Christ

you have been deemed worthy of the Body and Blood of Christ.

### A common faith that Christ is present

In 1971, the Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission in its *Windsor Statement* (agreed by both Communion(s)) was able to affirm that

The Lord’s words at the last supper, ‘Take and eat; this is my body’, do not allow us to dissociate the gift of the presence and the act of sacramental eating. *The elements are not mere signs; Christ’s body and blood become really present and are really given.* But they are really present and given in order that, receiving them, believers may be united in communion with Christ the Lord.

(emphasis added)

Consequently, we would want to ensure that our language about the Eucharist is clear that, although it is bread and wine that are placed on the altar at the preparation of the gifts (the ‘offertory’), by the action of the Holy Spirit they are received as Christ’s body and blood, and not ‘empty’ signs or symbols. With the early Church we want to affirm that the Lord’s words giving us the gift of the Eucharist, ‘this is my body . . . this is my blood’, mean that Christ is truly present as our bread of life and cup of salvation (cf. the *Common Worship* prayers at the preparation of the table in Rite One).

## Questions

### **1 Which passages in Scripture deepen your understanding of meeting Christ in the Eucharist?**

Though we may be used to having Sunday's scriptural message at Mass include a reading from the Old Testament, we may also have become desensitized to it, regarding it in effect as just the prelude to the 'real thing' of the New Testament passages we are given, and, if anything, just a homiletic nod to our Jewish background. And this is perhaps why it is good that this session began by looking at the expectation of our God feeding us in the Old Testament references at the beginning of the participant article (Eden, Elijah, the exodus). It is also good that the Elijah and Exodus references (1 Kings 19 and Exodus 16) both include the notion of 'journey' (a motif picked up later in the text by the account of the Emmaus event's importance in Luke 24.13–35) – our eucharistic meeting with Christ is as 'food for the journey' to the kingdom. In the Eucharist, we should expect to be so fed and watered by the body and blood of the Lord that we receive strength to walk towards that heavenly banquet where the blood of the true Lamb, Christ, purifies us (Hebrews 9.11–14) and full and final worship offered (Revelation 7.9–12).

The early texts about the institution of the Lord's Supper in the synoptic Gospels and St Paul stand as testimony to the 'why' we celebrate the Eucharist (even the Emmaus account, despite the 'revelatory' aspect of the two disciples recognizing Jesus, is a conscious harking back to the events of the upper room of taking, blessing, giving). We do this because Jesus told us to do it, and he promises to be present to us/with us in his body and blood. John's Gospel, written



## The body of Christ

at some significant length of time after the Lord's institution of the Mass (and when the Christian community was used to celebrating the Eucharist in its regular diet of worship), contains a more theologically charged 'who and what' we experience and meet in the Eucharist. John's language is starkly realistic, so much so that some of his followers decide they can no longer journey with Jesus because his language and claims (John 6.52–59) have become too difficult to countenance (the *New Jerusalem Bible* uses the stronger word 'intolerable' rather than 'hard' (RSV) in John 6.60). The 'bread of life' texts and 'flesh and blood' language clearly inform the Church's belief in the Real Presence of Jesus in the bread and cup of the Eucharist:

I am the bread of life . . . I am the living bread which came down from heaven . . . the bread which I will give for the life of the world is my flesh . . . unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood . . . he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood . . . my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.

(John 6.48–56, RSV)

Jesus is present to us in his body and blood.

The Pauline texts in 1 Corinthians (10.15–21; 11.17–34) emphasise the communal nature of the Eucharist, building on the Lord's revelation to St Paul of its institution. But again the language is strongly realistic:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty

## The body of Christ

of profaning the body and blood of the Lord . . . For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment upon himself.

(1 Corinthians 11.27–29, RSV)

These words find liturgical expression in the Prayer Book's Exhortation before Holy Communion, where worshippers are called to examine themselves before receiving the Blessed Sacrament lest they eat and drink damnation to themselves. The Real Presence of Christ is discerned not simply in the holy gifts but also in a community that is also *Corpus Christi*. From Cana to post-resurrection Galilee, the table fellowship of Jesus throughout the whole Gospel narrative gathers folk to himself and with one another around one table, the outworking of which is found in the gift of the Lord himself at the table of the Last Supper and at our table of word and sacrament.

### **2 How have you experienced *koinonia* (communion) with your brothers and sisters in the church?**

It should perhaps go without saying that our communion with one another finds its deepest expression around the table of Christ's sacrifice – our 'vertical' Communion with the Lord reflected in our 'horizontal' communion with one another. This is one reason perhaps why those occasions on which we are unable to receive Holy Communion together can be so painful, for example when attending a Roman Catholic funeral Mass for a departed friend, where the discipline of that Church does not permit us 'non-Catholics' to receive the Blessed Sacrament, or the initial experience

## The body of Christ

of the COVID-19 pandemic where for months most people were denied the opportunity to be in church for the Eucharist together, or receive Jesus in Holy Communion even on their death bed. Virtual worship, which emerged so strongly from that period, while a necessity, was certainly no substitute for a real flesh-and-blood encounter with one another or with Christ, whose presence is normally ministered by reception of the holy gifts. Those negative experiences can in fact highlight the positive experience of communion with one another on the occasions when we can listen, pray and praise together, and together receive the living bread which is Christ himself, drawing us to be one with him and with one another. The very inability to receive the holy gift of Christ's body and blood may become an impetus to break down those barriers that divide us from one another and our common Lord.

This theological truth is bolstered by many of the ways in which we live our common faith. Christians engage in a variety of practices, which include both private and public worship. For some, pilgrimage to 'holy places' is important in perceiving the communion that lies at the heart of our faith; a pilgrimage to Walsingham or the Holy Land can often be as important for the relationships made or sustained, as for its aspect of 'religious tourism' or experience of treading in the footsteps of Jesus or his saints. The pilgrimage experience of eating, living, worshipping and socializing together is a stark contrast with the individualistic nature of much contemporary culture, and the virtual isolation (no pun intended) of a people who live and operate behind the screens of laptop computer or tablet. But

## The body of Christ

equally, community is made and communion experienced in very practical ways, whether that be cleaning a church together, volunteering with other Christians in running a food bank, or going into school with others from our church family to present 'Open the Book' during collective worship.

### **3 When has the Eucharist felt for you like a glimpse of heaven?**

This passage from Scripture, sometimes read on a dedication festival, says,

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers entreat that no further messages be spoken to them . . . But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel.

(Hebrews 12.18–19, 22–24, RSV)

And occasionally this will indeed be our experience when we celebrate the Eucharist – heaven will suddenly be thrown open to us, and the Scriptures themselves, or the liturgy's words about angels and archangels or the intercession of the

## The body of Christ

saints before God's throne, will be made absolutely real for us in that moment.

The words of a hymn – 'The Servant King' or 'Soul of my Saviour', or 'Be still for the presence of the Lord' – can open our eyes to what is actually going on before our eyes where 'Christ our God to earth descendeth, our full homage to demand' ('Let all mortal flesh keep silence'). Clouds of incense, colour, drama, music, the experience of being 'surrounded by so great a crowd of witnesses' (Hebrews 12.1, rsv), the whole razzamatazz of Anglo-Catholic worship at its best, all have the potential to open heaven to us. And, in a sense, we should perhaps expect the Eucharist to be an epiphany, for worship on earth mirrors the worship of heaven, and Christ the true Lamb is at the centre of both earthly and heavenly worship. But equally, a quiet midweek Mass or Sunday 8 o'clock, or Eucharistic Adoration, may be the opening of heaven, as 'When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour' (Revelation 8.1, rsv). Theatrics or drama, words and music, or quiet contemplation, something unexpected or something so familiar, all these may be points at which heaven is glimpsed.

Personally, though I had lived away for some years, the day after my mother's sudden death I went to my 'home' church for the Sunday Mass, having made the decision to arrive just a little bit late in order to be spared having to talk to anyone before the celebration. As I entered church, the first hymn was just beginning:

Let saints on earth in concert sing  
with those whose work is done.

## The body of Christ

They had just reached the words,

One Church, above, beneath;  
though now divided by the stream,  
the narrow stream of death.

As I stood at the back of church, in that moment I had a glimpse, if not of heaven exactly, then of the transition from earth to heaven, and experienced a great consolation that our earthly worship could span life and death, here and hereafter.

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