

Eucharist: The Bread of Life

Parallel Event at *Adoremus: National Eucharistic Pilgrimage and Congress*

Statements by Church Leaders

The Rt Revd Paul Bayes, Bishop of Liverpool

Let me use my 7 minutes to talk about two things: to talk about theological and philosophical theories of things, and to talk about what Anglicans do when they come to Communion. ARCIC 1 on Eucharistic doctrine says: “When his people are gathered at the eucharist to commemorate his saving acts for our redemption, Christ makes effective among us the eternal benefits of his victory and elicits and renews our response of faith, thanksgiving and self-surrender.”

I don’t know of any Anglican who would deny this. As one writer has said: “Anglican eucharistic theologies universally affirm the real presence of Christ in the eucharist... Evangelical Anglicans believe that this is a pneumatic presence, while those of an Anglo-Catholic churchmanship believe this is a corporeal presence.” But we stay in the same church. In other words, philosophical clarity is not important for us. This is most clearly summed up in the verse attributed to Queen Elizabeth I:

*“Christ was the word that spake it,
He took the bread and brake it,
And what the word did make it,
That I believe and take it.”*

This relaxed approach to philosophy is not, of course, held by all Anglicans. For some there is a full and glad embracing of the doctrine of transubstantiation in its most conservative expression. For others there is a passionate adherence to the bare memorialising of Ulrich Zwingli, for whom the Eucharist was a mnemonic, a reminder, like a photograph, and nothing more.

The problem is that in Anglicanism these two extreme views, neither of which is held by many, is presented as a bare choice. “Do you believe in the presence of our Lord Jesus in the sacrament or do you not?” Philosophically speaking, is it all or is it nothing?” This crude opposition is not a helpful frame for our theology, or our devotion. For myself I prefer to look to the language of two of the Fathers in God of the universal Church, John Calvin and Pope-emeritus Benedict XVI. Calvin said that in the Eucharist we see “the true and substantial communication of the body and blood of the Lord”. Pope Benedict said that “[The doctrine of transubstantiation] is not a statement of physics. It has never been asserted that, so to say, nature in a physical sense is being changed. The transformation reaches down to a more profound level ... Christ lays hold upon what is, from a purely physical viewpoint, bread and wine, in its inmost being, so that it is changed from within and Christ truly gives himself in them.”

Queen Elizabeth’s verse may imply that it doesn’t really matter what the theology is. But for Anglicans it is not so. We come to church to engage in the true and substantial communication of the God who gives himself and changes creation from within, and we understand it variously. This is a way of speaking that embraces a mystery. And so in this spirit Anglicans can all say that we meet Jesus in Communion in a real way. We tend to talk about what it means to us in pictures, or not to talk about it at all.

Let me give an example of how we speak in pictures, and try to echo the Bible. You’ll hear

the echoes I hope in a moment. When I was installed as Bishop of Liverpool (that makes me sound like a piece of software, but I prefer it to the older word “enthroned”!) I preached a sermon to the Diocese in which I spoke of the Christian Church as if it were a table. And in that sermon I said this: “It’s a simple table but it’s well made, because it was made by a carpenter. The guy who made it is a poor man, but he’s generous. He offers a place at the table to anyone who wants to sit and eat. This is a table that started in one place but now it can stretch down every street, and it can go into every home, if people want to sit there.... “Most of all it’s a table for eating. You can’t eat alone at this table. You can’t buy a meal at this table. You can’t buy a ticket to sit here. Anyone can sit here. It’s a table like a table at a wedding. You sit with guests you never knew, and you find out about them, and they become your friends. And the table is spread with a beautiful fair white linen cloth... And if you eat the food served here you will never be hungry again. Because the poor man offers the food at this table. And the poor man will serve you, and the poor man’s hands are wounded when he serves you, because the food came at a price, and he paid the price. The poor man’s name is Jesus, who though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor so that through his poverty we might become rich. And if you sit at his table he will feed you and he will ask you to feed others; he will serve you and he will ask you to serve others; he will love you and he will ask you to love others.”

With this understanding I can stand gladly beside my brother here (the RC Archbishop) and my sister here (the Methodist Chair of District) as a Eucharistic Christian. I can rejoice that Adoremus is here in our city. And I can walk proudly and gladly in the Procession of the Blessed Sacrament tomorrow. I cannot receive that sacrament. But I know and I hope that in attending the Solemn Mass, and in venerating what my friends venerate, I am gathering with them around the table of the poor carpenter where in the end we will all sit and be filled. Thank you.

The Most Revd Malcolm McMahon OP, Archbishop of Liverpool

The Catholic Church's teaching on the real presence of Christ in the liturgy is much broader than most people realise. It is quite clear that the Lord is present in the assembly of the faithful gathered in prayer in his name. It is also clear that he is present in his word when the scriptures are proclaimed in Church and explained. These are quite easy to understand and accept. After all we have Jesus' own word for it that he will be in our midst when we gather in his name, and as we believe that Jesus is the Word made Flesh it is not too difficult to see the reading of the Scriptures as being a moment when Christ is present to his faithful followers. The church also teaches that he is present in the person of the minister – that is trickier to understand but the fourth presence of the Lord is in the Eucharistic sacrament. In a way that is completely unique, the whole and entire Christ, God and man, is substantially and permanently present in the sacrament. This presence of Christ under the appearances of bread and wine "is called real, not to exclude other kinds of presence as if they were not real, but because it is real *par excellence*". (*Eucharisticum Mysterium*, no 55)

The Holy Eucharist was initially reserved for the sick so that if they could not attend mass to receive Holy Communion they could have the sacrament brought to them. It followed because it was reserved it became an object of devotion. But the church has never taught that reserved eucharist should be honoured in isolation from the liturgical life of the church. When the faithful honour Christ present in the sacrament they should remember that this presence is derived from and directed towards sacramental and spiritual communion.

We believe that prayer before Christ the Lord, sacramentally present extends the union with Christ which the faithful have reached in communion. It renews the covenant which, in turn, moves them to maintain in their lives what they received in the midst of human society by faith and by the sacraments. They should try to lead their whole lives with the strength derived from the heavenly food, as they share in the death and resurrection of the Lord. Everyone should be concerned with good deeds and with pleasing God so that he or she may imbue the world with the Christian Spirit and be a witness of Christ. (*Euch. Myst.* 13)

Some controversial issues

Eucharistic processions.

Some Christian traditions see these as a kind of idolatry, but their purpose is to give a public witness of faith and devotion to the sacrament. Unfortunately, these have become triumphalist in some places and at times in history so that their purpose in witnessing the suffering death and resurrection of the Lord has been lost.

Intercommunion.

It is difficult to explain to Christians who share one Baptism, one Faith and one Lord that they cannot receive holy Communion in a Catholic church. One way of understanding this is to say that the Catholic church is in a real but imperfect union with their fellow Christians. The controversy centres on what we believe about the eucharist both personally and as a community. Because the different communities have different beliefs about the eucharist it is not possible for them to receive. On the other hand, on special occasions (e.g. weddings or a funerals) it is possible for non-Catholic Christians to receive holy communion if they share the same beliefs as Catholics regarding the Eucharist. Catholics believe that intercommunion is a fruit of unity not a means to it – but that may be controversial statement even for Catholics. (e.g. in a marriage between a catholic and a non-Catholic Christian sacramental unity in Christ exists in the sacrament of matrimony, but usually the non-Catholic partner cannot receive communion in a catholic church).

On a personal note my prayer is that of the Lord: that we may all be one. I have longed to share this Passover with you. (Lk 22:15)

The Revd Dr Sheryl Anderson, Chair of the Liverpool Methodist District

Much of what follows comes from a 2003 Report to the Methodist Conference. The Report is entitled, 'His Presence makes the Feast' which is a line taken from a Charles Wesley hymn.

His presence makes the feast;
and now our spirits feel
the glory not to be expressed,
the joy unspeakable.

*Charles Wesley (1707-88)
Singing the Faith, 590
Hymns on the Lord's Supper, 81*

Methodism inherited from John and Charles Wesley a devout appreciation of Holy Communion as a divinely appointed means of grace. The undefined but real presence of Christ was proclaimed in their sermons and hymns. The Wesleys taught an understanding of the eucharistic sacrifice as one in which the offering of the obedient hearts and lives of the communicants was united by grace to the perfect, complete, ever-present and all-atoning sacrifice of Christ. John Wesley adapted the liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer (at first for use in the American missions) and this was later widely used in the Wesleyan Methodist tradition. However, in other branches of Methodism (eg the Primitive Methodists), the form of worship was closer to that of other Free Churches - less fussy, although no less significant.

The early Methodists were expected to practise constant and frequent Communion, either at the parish church (although in the first century of Methodism, 1740 to 1840, it was not the custom to celebrate Communion every week in most parish churches) or in their own chapels, receiving Communion either from Church of England clergy or, later, from their own itinerant preachers (ministers). However, in each of the branches of Methodism before the 1932 union, the number of Sunday congregations far exceeded the number of such ministers. This was usually the main reason why the Lord's Supper continued to be celebrated no more than monthly in the town chapels (and sometimes not that often) and usually only quarterly in the villages.

Today, Methodists vary hugely in their attachment to Holy Communion. For some it is at the very heart of their discipleship, for some it is one treasured means of grace among others and, for a small minority of Methodists, Communion is not perceived as either desirable or necessary.

There is a wide diversity of practice in Methodist churches across the Connexion. Such differences reflect, to some extent, the different historical traditions that have come together to form the present day Methodist Church. Having somewhat diverse roots, it is not really surprising that British Methodism as a whole has not developed a unified set of practices or beliefs in respect of the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

As to a Methodist theology of the Holy Communion, it could be said that Methodist doctrine exists more as an undefined (or under-defined) tradition. The theology is implicit in the liturgies, hymns and the practical arrangements for Holy Communion. Which is why the Charles Wesley verse that I quoted at the start, is significant. We know we believe that 'his presence makes the feast'.ⁱ because that is what we sing. I could have chosen many others, including the last two lines of 'Victim divine, thy grace we claim' in which we pray:

To every faithful soul appear,
And show thy real presence here!ⁱⁱ

Despite this, many Methodists do not appreciate Methodist teaching on the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. In *A Catechism for the use of the people called Methodist* (Methodist Publishing House, Peterborough, 1986 and 2000) it states:

49. What is the Lord's Supper?

In the Lord's Supper Jesus Christ is present with his worshipping people and gives himself to them as their Lord and Saviour. As they eat the bread and drink the wine, through the power of the Holy Spirit they receive him by faith and with thanksgiving. They give thanks with the whole Church for Christ's sacrifice of himself once and for all on the cross. The Lord's Supper recalls Christ's Last Supper with the disciples. It proclaims Christ's passion, death and resurrection, unites the participants with him so that they are a living sacrifice in him, and gives them a foretaste of his heavenly banquet.

To most Methodists, Christ's presence in the consecrated elements is not an issue with which they are greatly concerned and they do not emphasise any particular moment or words in the liturgy as effecting an act of consecration. (World Methodist Council and the Roman Catholic Church - The Durban Report, 2011), §84 says: 'Methodists [...] recognize the significant role of the Holy Spirit in the Lord's Supper, and they speak of Christ's real presence in a spiritual sense. Yet Methodists seek not to define the mystery of the transformation of the bread and wine, and trust that the presence of Christ and the gift of his grace are "sure and real" while the manner remains unknown.'

Two alternative conclusions can be drawn from this. Either Methodism has signally failed by default to respond to the desire of other Churches for fuller definition (or doctrinal development) and perhaps doesn't know what it believes; or it has deliberately maintained a proper reserve and agnosticism on some issues - at least in some circumstances. It can, however, be firmly said that Methodists have always sought to base their belief and practice in respect of the Lord's Supper on thoroughly biblical foundations. Strictly speaking, 'Holy Communion' is, in Methodist understanding, a service that includes both Word and Sacrament.

For Methodists, you see, theology often arises from reflection on practice, rather than beginning with 'abstract' theories. John Wesley's method of 'practical theology' is still central to Methodism, which is at heart a method of responding to God's gracious offer of salvation and holiness. In order to know what Methodists believe it is necessary to look at what they do, for they are truest to themselves when they express, transmit and modify their beliefs in the context of the worshipping, learning, serving and witnessing life of the faith community - in the Church and in the wider world.

It is also the case that many Methodists recognise that there is an immense amount to be learned from other Christian traditions. Increasingly, this is not just from those traditions which have long been established in Britain, but also from the world church. The universal tradition and the local tradition need to be in constant dialogue, so that by sharing with our sisters and brothers each other's insights and practices, we may all grow towards a fuller appreciation and expression of the complex mystery of Holy Communion.

ⁱ *Singing the Faith* (StF) 590, verse 3 (*Hymns on the Lord's Supper* (HLS), 81, verse 2, lines 5-8 [StF, 590 is verses 1a, 2, 3a, and 4b of HLS, 81])

ⁱⁱ *StF*, 600, verse 3 (*HLS*, 116, verse 5 [*StF*, 600 is verses 1, 2, and 5 of *HLS*, 116]); also see the opening verse of *StF*, 590:

Jesus, we thus obey your last and kindest word;
here, in your own appointed way, we come to meet you, Lord.