

Sermon

Holy Communion and the Church's Fellowship

Year B 2021, Pentecost 14, Mark 7.1-8, 14-23



Dropping by St Paul's Cathedral on Friday afternoon to pick up some holy oil for anointing the sick, I was given the Cathedral as my waiting room. 'It's particularly beautiful when you're alone,' my host told me. As I entered into the silence, and the stillness, of Christ, I felt Christ enter the silence and stillness of my heart.

St Paul's is a monument to Christ. Its soaring architecture, its location at the entrance to the city, all of it, is a testimony to Christ, to a city in need of him. A need met, in St Paul's liturgical worship. By the presence of Christ, and with him, the future kingdom of God himself.

Christian Eucharistic celebration is the purpose of that sublime room. Of that sublime architecture. Christian mission, too. The One who is present in the liturgical life of the Church, is Lord. The Son of God 'lifted up'. In the glory of the cross. In the glory of his resurrection and ascension.

At the Last Supper, Christ founded the church. He himself is the founding stone. The cornerstone. The centre. The host of Eucharistic celebration. We, sinners, like the woman in the Gospel this morning, come and bow down at his feet. His feet who hung upon the cross. We bring our lives to him, who gave his life for us. We worship Him, and through him, the Father. Our hearts raptured, we enter heaven itself. God himself gazes upon us, who is Love. As we cry out, along with all the host of heaven. 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord. God of power and might. Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosannah in the highest.'

Holy communion, the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, is a multi-layered feast. 'Layer, upon layer, upon layer', to borrow a phrase from Sarah Lee. At the first layer it is the presence of Christ, through the act of remembrance, the re-presentation of Christ in his Passion, his once for all death, for the reconciliation of the world to God. At the second layer, it is the self-offering of Christ, to death, in fulfilment of the mission he received from God, and our participation in that offering, in that mission, as an act of thanksgiving to God, for all that he has done for us, in creation and in salvation. At the third layer, it is the presence, too, of the future kingdom of God himself, as an anticipation of the future kingdom of God. And it is all of this, in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead.

The completion of the world, and ourselves with it, is still a future event. And yet it has begun already now, in the missional life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In Jesus who is present in holy communion, according to his promise. And in holy baptism, too.

Thus far have we come on our sermon series on holy communion. Today, we come to the question, 'what are the implications for everyday life, of our participation in holy communion?'

Our participation in holy communion in fellowship with Jesus is our participation in holy communion in fellowship with the other participants in the common meal. The holy communion of the Church - the body of Christ. As with the body and the blood of Christ that we receive at holy communion, the language is to be understood, as no mere figure of speech. But on face value - literally. Holy communion with Jesus, and on that basis, with the other participants in the meal. The body of Christ is the spiritual reality of Jesus Christ himself.

In Eucharistic worship, the Christian Church is lifted up into the spiritual reality of Jesus Christ himself, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Outside of itself, in Jesus Christ, it is outside of itself, in fellowship with God himself. With God the Father, the Creator of all.

In Eucharistic worship, the Church is lifted up 'into Sonship'. Into its true identity. Into Sonship: into the eternal life of the Son. One with the Son, the Church is one with the Father. One with heaven itself. Lifted up, outside itself, into heaven itself, in the power of the Holy Spirit, the eternal love of God, binding Father and Son into one.

The eternal love of God, binding Father and Church into one. By the Son and the Spirit, the two hands of God himself.

By his own two hands, God is binding all things, the human race, and through the human world, creation itself, into one. Into God. Into the very life of heaven.

It is not yet the day of the Lord. Yet the day of the Lord has dawned. Already now, outside of itself, in its liturgical life, the worldwide Christian Church is at one with God. One with God, already now, it is a sure sign, of future hope. Of the human race, and creation itself, redeemed, in the future of God's kingdom. In restored relationship with God, and on this basis, in restored relationship with one another. When Christ returns, to complete what he has begun.

'People get ready
There's a train a-coming
You don't need no baggage
You just get on board
All you need is faith
To hear the diesels hummin'
Don't need no ticket
You just thank the Lord

So sang the Impressions in 1965.

'So, people get ready
For the train to Jordan
Picking up passengers coast to coast
Faith is the key
Open the doors and board 'em
There's hope for all
Among the loved the most.'

Faith is all you need, to come to Jesus. Faith is all you need, to enter the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God that in the Jewish hope was represented as a meal. A hope fulfilled, a time of waiting over, at least in the Christian proclamation, in Jesus Christ, and all who now share in the meal of the Eucharist.

Faith is all you need, to abide in the kingdom of God. Faith that Christ is here, in the act of holy communion. Faith that desires fellowship with him here in the kingdom of God. Faith that, while never failing to seek understanding, accepts that what is grasped in faith, is beyond understanding. Faith that, at the end of the day, is simple faith.

'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has drawn near; repent, and believe in the good news,' was Jesus message. It is the message of the Christian church. A message addressed to the world. To all people. So that anyone who, upon hearing the good news, repents and believes, may enter the kingdom of God. All that is needed is the serious desire for fellowship with him, and an acceptance of the rule of God that has come in him. Those who seek fellowship with Jesus at his Supper have to want this fellowship. And accept the rule of God that has now come in him. So that the one prerequisite for admission to the Supper, is discipleship. Like the Last Supper, the Lord's Supper is a meal for disciples.

Acceptance of the rule of God is acceptance of the relationship that participation in the meal establishes with every other member of the body of Christ. Acceptance of the responsibility, incumbent upon every member, to preserve the fellowship of the Church, by mutual regard. God has joined all Christians together in the unity of the one body, the body of Christ. This means that there should be no divisions in the body. All members are to care equally for one another. Because

divisions had come into the church in Corinth Paul could ask: Is Christ divided? Impossible as that is, it is a fact where the commandments of God are not fulfilled, by the Spirit, within the body of Christ. Where there is not the exclusive worship of God, where there is idolatry, where there is hatred, where there is false testimony against neighbour, where people covet one another.

What, for Paul, is the unworthiness that excludes from participation in holy communion?

Neither individual acceptance of a correct doctrine of Christ's presence at the Supper, which the apostle presupposed, nor individual moral righteousness, but breaches in the Church's fellowship, is the unworthiness, that excludes from participation in holy communion.

Why does Paul think there needs to be exclusion from communion in such cases? The answer is that such failings affect not merely individuals alone but the common life of the congregation. They are a breach in the fellowship of believers that is grounded in Christ. Here we don't have an additional prerequisite for communion alongside the serious desire for fellowship with Jesus, but the individual's failure firstly, to discern the 'the body of Christ', and then to preserve that spiritual body, by mutual regard.

There ain't no room

For the hopeless sinner

Who would hurt humankind

Just to save his own.

The Impressions sang.

Gospel, and Christian discipleship, go together. Where there is no longer this requirement, where there is no longer the link between admission to communion and Christian discipline, there the sharing in salvation is 'cheap grace', there faith and worship is 'opium of the people.' The occurrence of serious offences within the Christian church, is not compatible with fellowship at the Lord's table, and ought to be treated as such.

Conversion to God is needed, for participation in the kingdom of God. A condition met, once and for all, in Christian baptism. So that all that is needed is occasional recollection of baptism.

Holy communion is the joy of fellowship in the kingdom of God. Fellowship with Jesus, and by him, with God himself. On the basis of our fellowship with God, we have fellowship, too, with one another.

Behold what you are, become what you receive.

The body of Christ.

Jesus said 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'