

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 17 Year B 2021

Without doubt the time we now find ourselves is less than ideal. And less than ideal in so many ways we have probably lost count. Today we begin what I guess we might call a 'sermon series'. Perhaps somewhat unfamiliar in our tradition, but common enough in others. A sermon series in which over a number of weeks we are given opportunity to explore in greater depth a key biblical idea, or biblical book or theological motif. What is less than ideal is that we must begin our series separately and remotely. But I hope it may still be of some use, and that it inspires some further conversation or personal reading or thinking.

The starting point for our 'sermon series' is the Bread of Life discourse from John 6. We have heard the opening part of that long chapter today. But the gospel readings for the next five weeks are all taken from John 6. It is a towering theological and literary reflection on the Eucharist in the fourth gospel. As such it seems to me a suitable opportunity for some sustained reflection during *this* time on the church's faith in the Eucharist. And so over four weeks (with a break in the middle for our celebration of the Assumption in mid-August) we will look at four key ideas that have been a part of the church's reflection on the Eucharist: the Eucharist as Memorial, as Sacrifice, as Presence and as the Prayer of the Church. Today then, to set us off, as we 'cut the first slice off the loaf': the Eucharist as Memorial.

You would be aware that the ways in which we understand the Eucharist has been one of the most hotly contested areas in the church's life especially since the Protestant Reformation of the 16th Century. And it would be fair to say it was, and to some degrees still is, a fierce battle ground. That is why it is important in our considerations to turn to areas of convergence, to areas of broad agreement, because such agreements do exist. It is one of the fruits of recent scholarship and of ecumenical conversations over many years. But I will also seek to anchor our reflections here in the faith of the church catholic, and I mean that in the broadest and most ancient sense.

When we consider the Eucharist as memorial, we find ourselves at a place where in fact most Christian traditions begin their formulations on the Eucharist. Now of course as catholic Christians we assert the *fullness* of faith. We do not seek to stop where we begin. But it is important to notice where we do begin.

We begin naturally enough by the record of Scripture, namely in what we call the Institution Narratives of the Synoptic Gospels and Paul's reference to the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians: *for I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took a loaf of bread* and so on. The narrative traditions of Luke and Paul include Our Lord's command *do this in my remembrance*. In some translations *Do this in memorial of me* or *do this in remembrance of me*, the meaning all being the same.

The use of the word 'memorial' or 'remembrance' has certain connotations in English. It carries with it the idea of looking backward, of recalling something past. Now some Protestant sects took this idea of remembering to simply mean that when we 'do this' in obedience to Christ's command, we are simply looking back, namely to the Last Supper, and that we should try to replicate as much as we are able the simplicity of the Last Supper. (This of course ignoring the highly ritualistic and symbolically charged context of Passover, which we will come back to shortly). And in sharing a symbolic meal - bread and wine (or an equivalent) - we 'remember' Jesus. And even some Anglicans when asked, 'what are we doing when we celebrate Holy Communion?', will say something like, *we are doing what Jesus did at the Last Supper.*' And this will go some way to explain the discomfort or even aversion some have to ritualized sacramental worship: it seems so distant, so removed, from the pure, 'simple' meal of the Last Supper.

Well, Saint Paul himself suggests in the passage I noted a moment ago, that this is actually an inadequate understanding of what we do when we break the bread and share the cup. Paul argues that *when we eat the bread and share the cup we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again*. So, even before the gospels have been written, we find a theological overlay, a theological interpretation, to what the church is doing in its remembering. Not only does the bread and cup look to – a remembering – of a meal that Jesus shared with his followers. It is also a *remembering* – a memorial, a 'proclamation' as Paul says - of our Lord's death. And adding *until he comes again* points us forward as well, to the end of all things. So, this looking back, this 'remembering', is not just to an upper room and a simple meal. And this opens for us two important questions. What exactly is the 'this' of the 'do this' our Lord directs us to? And, what exactly are we remembering?

And this is where scholarship of the past half century or so genuinely has assisted the conversation. And it has centered around the term ‘memorial’ translated from the Greek *anamnesis*. Jesus says, do this in *anamnesis* of me.

Essentially, the idea is that *anamnesis*, drawn from the Jewish context our Lord speaks from, is not a mere recalling of events or people past. It is a ‘dynamic’ recalling in which those who remember are *brought to share* in the event past. And the example of this *par excellence* is the Passover. Importantly it is the context of this particular sacred meal which gives meaning to Jesus’ meal. For the Jew celebrating Passover, even to this day, it is a remembrance of God’s deliverance of his people. And not a just a recalling of a distant past event. But as a means of making present – in the here and now – God’s saving event. The meal makes real - it actualizes - that event in the here and now. So, Jesus’ words *do this in memorial of me* really means ‘do this so that my sacrifice may be present among you.’ The word memorial gave the Jewish Passover meal its whole meaning. And it gives its whole meaning to the Christian eucharist, as an actualization of Christ’s sacrifice.

Fr James will speak more fully next week on the idea of the Eucharist as sacrifice, an idea that is already present in the earliest Christian documents outside the New Testament. For now, enough to mention that when we speak of the sacrifice of Christ, we are not limiting that to the Cross. Christ’s sacrifice is his entire life. His whole life the pleasing offering to the Father. There is in essence *one work* of Christ. His Incarnation, his ministry, his teaching his suffering, Resurrection, Ascension and sending of the Spirit, is the *one* redeeming work of God in Christ. And *all of this* is brought into the church’s *anamnesis*.

In the Eucharist, then, all this we recall, *so we can participate in it*, so we can share in the one saving work of God in Christ. Now, what it was God’s will to accomplish in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, God does not repeat. These events are unique and can never be repeated. But in our memorial, our remembering, however, the church offers its prayer in union *with Christ*, our great high priest, the One who ever lives to make intercession for us. In our memorial of Christ, we are empowered to live with him to suffer with him, and to pray through him. The One, then, we remember in the supreme prayer of the church, is not of some figure locked in the past, but one who saves us *now*, and lives interceding for us *now*.

The Eucharist is the unique sacrament of the unique sacrifice of Christ. In obedience to Christ's command, we remember him. We recall how we – his body - are joined to Christ's eternal offering. We remember the one saving work of the one Christ. We remember and proclaim how we are caught up in this saving work. And in our remembering we look forward as we anticipate the great banquet of eternal life. Past, present and future all caught up in our celebration, our memorial. In the Eucharist, then, a memorial/remembering so dynamic our word can barely contain it! The word is stretched surely because of the great mystery we recall here! A mystery so wondrous and beautiful and profound that it is *rightly* cloaked, if you like, in the solemnity and beauty and richness of our worship such as we experience here. Conversely, the effectiveness of our *proclamation* will be undermined if the celebration of the Eucharist becomes flattened or one-dimensional. Recognizing the *dynamism* of our remembering will ensure we can truly obey our Lord's command: *do this*. Amen.