

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 19 Year B 2021

In this little sermon series on the Eucharist that I am sharing with Fr James – and so far we have considered the Eucharist as Memorial and the Eucharist as Sacrifice – we have seen how we enter some hotly contested areas. In some jurisdictions they form part of the demarcation barriers between the various churches. And so, I have argued for the importance of settling upon areas of broad agreement. Certainly not as a ‘lowest common denominator’ approach, but as a way of discerning what is *essential*, what is of the essence, the core of authentic Christian teaching and practice.

On the question of the Eucharist as Presence – which will explore today - we delve once more into some tricky waters. And before we can make a case for the Eucharistic faith of the church catholic such as faithful Anglicans can accept, it will be important to briefly flag some of the contested approaches to the question. Now we could spend four weeks looking at this one area of the church’s Eucharistic faith. (Just as we could four weeks each on the Eucharist as Memorial and Sacrifice!) But we must be brief. So, across the churches, three common ways the idea of Christ’s Presence in the Eucharist has been understood. Simply: symbolically, physically or spiritually.

Broadly speaking, a symbolic Presence is what was adopted by most Protestant churches. The bread and wine are ‘symbols’ of Christ’s body and blood. American novelist Flannery O’Conner (from the early half of last century) recalled in one of her letters a conversation at a dinner party which had turned to the question of the Mass. Someone had said that they thought the mass was a symbol to which Flannery shakily replied, ‘*Well, if it’s a symbol, to hell with it.*’ Like O’Conner’s dinner party companion, the 16th Century Reformers understood a symbol simply as representing something. They failed to understand symbol in *the sacramental sense*, in which that which is signified is actually effected. If the Eucharist is a symbol, it doesn’t really matter. To hell with it indeed! And this is evident in so many protestant sects where the Eucharist is treated so casually, indifferently and we must say profanely. Interestingly, 7 in 10 RCs in America hold this position. But this idea really should be put to bed once and for all, even from a plain reading of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians: *Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord... All who eat and drink without discerning the body of the Lord, eat and drink judgment against themselves.* It is difficult to see how the apostle could have asserted this position over a mere symbol.

In contrast, a physicalist approach, which would identify most closely with the Roman Catholic position. Known shorthand as transubstantiation, it remains the formal RC definition of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. At this point it may be helpful to mention that on the question of Christ's presence in the Eucharist, we are dealing with a mystery. A *great* mystery. And the idea that such a profound mystery might be fully understood this side of heaven is a hard claim to sustain. Yet, such hesitancy is not a feature of Roman approaches to this question. Yes, it is argued, Christ is present, so much so that the bread and wine *disappear* and are *transformed* into the very flesh and blood of Christ. The classic formulation of this idea coming from the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas, and he working from the Greek philosopher Aristotle.

Between, these, as a sort of compromise position if you like, an idea that Christ, yes, is present but *spiritually* so. A classic *via media* approach if you like, and so settled upon by many Anglicans. But actually, it doesn't get us very far. And overlooks the uncompromising nature of the New Testament witness, which we will look at in a moment. And the separate but related idea of receptionism, (again favoured by many Anglicans) holds to the idea that we receive Christ spiritually by faith in the Eucharist. The obvious issue with this is that it removes the Eucharist as God's pure gift to his church. It makes it about *us*. It's *our* faith which counts. And if we don't perceive him as present, well then he ain't present. He might be present for you, but not for me. In other words, Christ is not objectively or *truly* present, but subjectively present.

The symbolist, physicalist and spiritualist views are important to note because it is on these points that so often the discussions become derailed. We flag them to notice them. But it is difficult to make a compelling argument from what we don't believe, from what we are against. It is hard to make a case in the negative. And as Anglicans it is unhelpful to have either the medieval church *or* the reformation church set the terms of reference for approaching this question. And a *via media* compromise doesn't break the bind. The medieval church and reformation church do not set the terms of reference. These are set by the apostolic church. And that rests on Scripture.

Now, two traditions of the Institution of the Lord's Supper are preserved in the New Testament: the traditions of Luke/Paul and of Matthew/Mark. The four accounts from these two traditions each have their own unique emphases and indeed theologies. But they all – *both traditions* and *all four accounts* - include the phrase *this is my body*. Matthew and Mark include, *this is my blood*.

A fundamental point which cannot be stressed enough is that as faithful believers we take Christ at his word. If he says it is, then it is! He *does not say* this is symbol of my body. Nor, this is my spiritual body (whatever that is!). No. *This is my body. This is my blood.* And to these accounts we must add the account of John 6 which has been the springboard for these sermons. There, the language is unambiguous, and stressed and restressed throughout this long chapter. We hear some of it today. *I am the bread of life... Anyone who eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the world.* Later we hear how the crowds are scandalised by this. It is a hard saying. They reject it and Jesus. Taking Christ at his word is shocking. But it doesn't make it any less true.

This idea of eating the flesh and drinking the blood really does help us to understand what is going on in the Eucharist. In the Jewish idiom from which the gospel draws, the term *flesh and blood* is practically synonymous with 'human nature'. To speak of *flesh and blood* is to speak of *the whole man*, man in his totality. So, when Christ speaks of his flesh and blood in John 6, he refers quite clearly to his *whole person*. What is this flesh and blood of Christ *we* partake? In what way is he present? Simply, it is the *whole* Christ. In the classic definition: body, blood, soul and divinity, disarming some of the crude physicalist and simplistic spiritualistic notions.

In John 6 our Lord says, *except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink his blood ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood hath eternal life.* Here he is quite clearly *not* telling his disciples that they must enter into 'spiritual' relation with him by faith, that they, as 'spiritual creatures', must commune with him who is uncreated Spirit. What he *is* saying is that they, as living men of flesh and blood, *must feed upon him* who is a living man of flesh and blood. How they were to do this would be revealed at the Last Supper, but the fact is plain. This is not soul communing with soul, a spiritual Christ feeding the spirit of man. It is men feeding upon a man. And to repeat, shocking, yes. Scandalous! And people reject Christ and walk away from him because of it.

So, we too must be wary of diminishing Christ's very words. We must be wary of a gnostic dualism separating mind/body, spirit/matter, body/soul. When considering the Eucharist we can overlook that Christ's resurrected body *is not* as a spirit. This is the whole point of the resurrection narratives in the gospels! His is a glorious body, yes, and that a *true* body.

Too often, we imagine it is only the soul that matters, that only spiritual things count, and so conclude that the Eucharist must only be concerned with the sanctification and salvation of the soul. But the very words – *Body, Blood* – simply will not bear this. To hold an inadequate view of man (that only spiritual things matter) we end up with an inadequate view of the Eucharist.

But there in one formula in the Book of Common Prayer which disarms this lamentable dichotomy. (Here, *the law of praying is rule of believing* shines through most helpfully!) The words of administration of the Holy Communion: *the body/blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given /shed for you. Preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. It is the whole Christ - flesh and blood, the total Christ - which feeds the whole man.* It is the whole Christ in his ascended glory, who is present in the Eucharist, and he is present as food for the whole man. Now, we might stretch the language on *how* this is so. But because our Lord exists *now* as a true body, we are right to say that in the lowly form of bread and wine he is present in his true body: actually present, *truly* present. In the church's own language *sacramentally* present. He is present in the Eucharist simply because, by his institution and promise, the bread and wine have become the effectual signs of his body and blood.

It is right that we allow the veil of mystery to remain when we consider Christ's presence in the Eucharist. Neat philosophical categories may be helpful, but are not in fact essential, for Christ's own words are enough. And at the same time these very words must not be diminished or reduced. What we receive when we kneel at the altar is nothing less than the living and ascended saviour. We take Christ at his word, and allow it to become the centre and gravity of our life and worship. Amen.