



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
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Sermon

Eating in the Presence of God

Exodus 24:9-11; 1 Cor 11:23-25; Luke 24:13-16, 28-35

21st October, 2012

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Emmaus

What a day they'd had. All their hopes dashed. The man they'd followed cruelly struck down. Perhaps they would be next? Would the authorities be satisfied with the ringleader or want to snuff out his followers too? And so as soon as they were free to travel, they left town with heavy hearts. They were joined by a stranger – friendly type but surprisingly ignorant about the horrors which had taken place. Yet he talked of the Messiah and the Law and the Prophets and they found in spite of themselves they were excited by what he said. It was nearly evening when they came to their village. He would have gone on but they invited him to stay the night. He came in and - surprisingly - acted as host at the table. He prayed over the bread, broke it and gave it to them – and in that they recognized him! Their eyes were opened and he was gone! They had walked with the Risen Jesus!

It seems obvious that there is a parallel to communion here. The terms used are too similar and there is no stating that this is not the case.

Christ is hidden from them – there but not recognised. The Resurrection body apparently has sufficient differences that he was not immediately recognised yet in other ways it was the same. Paul says the relationship of our resurrection bodies to these current bodies is like the relationship of a plant to the seed. It is the same organism far more glorious.

When he speaks to them – "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"¹

Do you recognise that effect? Have you known God speak to you through scripture or prophecy and felt the burning of your heart within you? It is a classic witness of God speaking to us.

It is perfectly possible for God to speak to us and for us not to feel anything. When I was praying about marrying Helen, I was in a homegroup meeting and a prophecy was given. It sounded relevant but I had no witness it was for me. I thought how I wished I knew that was intended for me because it would be so helpful. A couple of months later, as I was reading a book which I had already read, a passage stood out to me which was effectively the same as that prophecy. This time I had the witness in my heart that God was

¹ Lk 24:32

speaking to me – that burning inside – and now those words did apply and gave me confidence about God’s will for us.

It is in the breaking of the bread that they recognise him. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them.² This is the classic description of communion: take bread, give thanks, break it, give it out. As he shares food with them, they recognise him. If you must have a naturalistic explanation, maybe they recognised him through some familiar mannerism. But isn’t the reasonable inference of the expression, “their eyes were opened,” that revelation was given to them. Obviously this was intentionally the climax of their time together and once they had recognised them, he disappeared only to reappear with them when they had hurried back to Jerusalem and were telling the others what they had seen.

There is an implication here that Jesus will be made known to us as we celebrate Communion. Obviously, he was physically present for the disciples at Emmaus. When we take communion we are more particularly in the presence of God.

After I was confirmed, I found communion was a great encouragement to me. Often when I took it, I would experience a warmth or a glow inside me. It wasn’t the effect of the wine; it was different from when I took wine or sherry at home. It didn’t always happen; but it strengthened when I gave thanks. For the early stage of my walk, that was a big encouragement for me to keep believing. My heart burned within me. Now God deals with us all differently and there is no right or wrong experience to have. It was the way he encouraged me then.

I wonder if you have had any such experiences? Maybe you have but have not dared to believe them and pushed them aside. Or maybe the experience was too precious to expose to the scrutiny of ridicule.

Covenant Meals

Why then should communion be a meal – albeit somewhat stylised as it is? To eat with others is an important part of fellowship. That is true in all cultures. As you probably know, the Alpha course includes a meal for this reason. It is one of the best ways to express hospitality and to build friendships. I heard that when Alpha was introduced to a rural part of an African nation, a local chief said that the Alpha Course was perfectly suited to his culture. He was amazed that they got it right because he didn’t think it suited British culture very well. What was the good fit? Having a meal together. Really eating together is of universal appeal – even for those of British stock like many of us!

It is not just in communion that we see this. The passage from Exodus we heard described another time of eating before God. It was a covenant feast part of sealing the covenant. Moses has just been given the 10 commandments and the people have accepted the covenant. At that point he, his brother Aaron (the chief priest), Aaron’s sons and the 70 elders are commanded to go up the mountain. There they have an experience of seeing God. Now that is shocking and surprising. They saw God and they did not die! It was well known to them that no one sees God and lives.

A bit later, Moses was allowed to see God’s back but told he could not see his face lest he die³. Some commentators think that the 70 elders saw feet on a pavement rather than the whole form of an image of God. That would explain how they could survive. However, the important thing is that they are confirming a covenant with God by eating and drinking in his presence.

Indeed as we turn back to the passage from 1 Corinthians 11, we see that in the Last Supper meal Jesus was making a new covenant. “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.”⁴ Once again a meal serves to confirm the covenant. Once again, the disciples are in the presence of God the Son.

² Lk 24:30

³ Ex 33:20

⁴ 1 Cor 11:25

How do we understand “the Body and Blood of Christ”?

So what are we to understand when we take communion about the bread and wine, the body and the blood? This is dangerous ground: the source of many disputes in Church history. So let me try to say what Anglicans think and if you don't agree you don't have to be too troubled because different parts of the wider church have different views.

Jesus took bread and said, “This is my body which is for you.” He took a cup of wine and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, do this whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”⁵

People have struggled to understand what to make of those words. Arguments came to a head at the time of the Reformation, when a range of beliefs was expressed:

Orthodox and Roman Catholics believe that in the Eucharist the bread and wine are objectively transformed and become in a real sense the Body and Blood of Christ; and that after consecration they are no longer bread and wine. The consecrated elements retain the appearance and attributes of bread and wine but really are the body and blood of Christ.

Lutherans believe that the body and blood of Christ are "truly and substantially present in, with and under the forms" of the consecrated bread and wine, so that communicants orally eat and drink the holy body and blood of Christ Himself as well as the bread and wine.

These two views come under the heading of “Real Presence.” There is a real physical presence of Christ's body and blood.

Calvin and the Reformed churches took the view that there is a real spiritual presence of Christ with the physical bread and wine (the elements), although they remain as they were. They are symbols with power.

The Swiss Reformer, Zwingli, took the view adopted by Baptists and other denominations that Communion is simply a memorial meal – Christ is not present in the elements. This has been nicknamed the “Real Absence” position!

So where do we fit into this spectrum of ideas? Well, of course, it is not clear cut – we are a broad Church. We can say, the Anglican Church holds that the sacraments (baptism and communion) are outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace.”

The Catechism states that the outward part of the Lord's Supper is the bread and wine while the inward part or thing signified is the Body and Blood of Christ, which are truly taken and received by the faithful in the Lord's Supper.

The 39 Articles form one of the foundational documents of the Anglican Church. The key points made about the Lord's Supper in article 28⁶ are:

- The Lord's Supper is a sign of the love Christians have among themselves.
- It is a sacrament of our redemption by Christ's death.
- When we rightly receive it in faith, we partake of Christ's body and blood.
- Transubstantiation is rejected.
- We receive the body spiritually by faith.

⁵ 1 Cor 11:24-25

⁶ *The Supper of the Lord is not only a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves, one to another, but rather it is a sacrament of our redemption by Christ's death: insomuch that to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith receive the same, the bread which we break is a partaking of the body of Christ, and likewise the cup of blessing is a partaking of the blood of Christ. Transubstantiation (or the change of the substance of bread and wine) in the Supper of the Lord, cannot be proved by Holy Writ, but is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, overthroweth the nature of a Sacrament, and hath given occasion to many superstitions. The body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner. And the mean whereby the body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is Faith.*

From these statements it is clear that Cranmer, the Anglican reformer, held a position close to Calvin's that there is a spiritual presence of Christ associated with the elements.

Now because of the breadth in Anglicanism, we pretty well cover the whole spectrum. Anglo-catholics often embrace transubstantiation and evangelicals will tend to hold a spiritual presence position. Probably some would say it is just a memorial.

Perhaps the Anglican position is most clearly expressed in the words of administration from *The Book of Common Prayer*: "Take and eat this is remembrance that Christ died for you and feed on him in your heart by faith with thanksgiving."

The elements help us remember, and we feed on Christ in our hearts when we receive them. And we do that by faith.

We have looked back to see covenants confirmed by eating a meal. We know that it was at the Last Supper that Jesus announced the New Covenant. We celebrate that when we take communion. We remind ourselves of that commitment he has made to us and asks of us. The other dimension is the future: Communion points forward to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. That feast described in the gospels and in Revelation is the destination, if you will. There redeemed mankind will have perfect fellowship with God.

So we can say that Communion looks backward as a memorial of Christ's sacrifice, forward as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet and to the present as an incarnation of Christ in the lives of the community and of individual believers.

Whether past, present or future it speaks of God's presence with us in the person of Jesus. And it reassures us that he is committed to save us, to hear us, to bless us. We, for our part, are to follow and obey him.

Different views of the elements:

Real ie Physical Presence		
Medieval & R.C.	Transubstantiation	Change of substance
Luther	Sacramental Union	With the physical bread/wine
Spiritual Presence		
Calvinist / Presbyterian	A spiritual not physical presence	Symbols with power
Cranmer	Spiritual presence mediated through the bread & wine in the heart of the believer. <i>Feed on him in your hearts by faith with thanksgiving.</i>	"True" or spiritual presence
"Real Absence"		
Zwingli / Baptist etc	No presence	Just a memorial meal

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