

Addresses on the Liturgy: part 2

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John 6. 35, 41-51

I am the Bread of Life. It is a vivid metaphor John gives us to ponder the mystery of Christ. Just as bread, food, is life-giving, so here 'bread' is a metaphor for life in its fullness, eternal life, fullness of life that is realised through the grace and love of God that we encounter in Christ. But across the centuries, in Christian life and worship, the power of this metaphor has been known in bread and wine. Yes, it is about eating and drinking. But it is an image also of receiving, taking into ourselves—into our inner being—the divine love and grace offered us in Christ.

So, let us return to that consideration of the structure / order of our liturgy of the Eucharist that we commenced last week.

Just to recap briefly:

1. we noted first of all that the word 'liturgy' suggests that our ritual life and our daily life interact, and
2. we then noticed that our liturgy falls into two main parts: the Ministry of the Word and the Ministry of the Sacrament (Lord's Supper), and that both are filled out with an introduction/preparation and response.

Last week we looked at the first part. Now, to the second part !

Ministry of the Sacrament—Preparation

We stand to declare that we are the Body of Christ and that his Spirit is with us. It is a declaration that we are a community, and that celebrating the Eucharist is not a privatised thing but something we do as community—the Body of Christ.

And then we exchange God's peace with one another: we are taking the love, forgiveness and grace, which we have been granted, and sharing it with each other. The ancient custom of passing on God's peace—by a handshake/embrace—has thankfully been restored to our Western liturgies. But we have to be careful not to misunderstand or misuse it. It is not saying 'hello' or catching up on last week's news. It is a liturgical action, in which we bring God's peace to each other—God's peace, which we have been granted, and so we can bring it.

Thus, we, as the Body of Christ, are constituted as a reconciled community, a redeemed people of forgiveness and peace. It is, then, in this context that we can begin the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

The Ministry of the Sacrament

This celebration consists of a 4-fold action: Taking, Thanking, Breaking, Sharing. Here, the fundamental model is the Last Supper: *While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body". Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it.* But the same pattern is found in other gospel stories: the Feeding of the 5,000 (John 6), the Emmaus Road (Luke 24). And this is the pattern for us in our celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Again, for a few centuries, in Western liturgies this pattern was hard to find—it was there only in a fairly mangled form. But now these four actions are there clearly, and together they constitute our celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Taking

The bread and the wine are taken. This action needs to have a place of proper significance: it is the offertory procession. On behalf of the whole congregation, the gifts of the people are

brought. These are gifts that symbolise our life: products of the earth, products of human labour, means of sustenance, signs of our common humanity—the need for food, drink, labour. And these signs are taken as symbols of human life; taken in preparation for becoming signs of God's gift of grace and love to us and to the world. And in a form of that familiar daily thank-you prayer, that we call 'grace' (*Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation*) we thank God for them.

Thanking

Then we offer the Great Prayer. It is a particular kind of prayer—one which might be regarded as the characteristic prayer of all Christian worship. It is about thanksgiving. It is a simply translation of the Greek word for 'thanks': as a friend of mine has written, it's what you say when handed an iced coffee in Thessaloniki on a blazing summer's day: *Eucharistò*.

It is, of course, more than that. This prayer is a prayer of thanking God for the great divine saving acts in history—creating, guiding, redeeming, renewing; thanking God that that saving, liberating action has been focussed for us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And at its heart, this Prayer gives thanks over bread and wine for all the loving, saving acts of God. It tells of the history of salvation from the beginning, to its climax in Christ, to its culmination in Christian hope. We are saying why we believe this to be the most important of all the world's stories, as well as having the most life-giving connection with our own stories now, teaching us to live in faith, hope and love.

Of course, this Great Prayer has a structure—one that reflects recent research into the origins of all Christian worship—going back to ancient times. We are inheritors of a long and rich tradition of faith. For me, in our Prayer Book, the Great Prayer that reflects that tradition in a rich, contemporary form is the one that begins on page 130. I will now consider this prayer in its several parts

Opening dialogue

All the Great Prayers of Thanksgiving open with the same words. They are words that have come down to all churches from the past.

The opening words are more than a mere greeting. They are a mutual affirmation of the roles of Presider and people. *The Lord be with you*, says the one who presides, looking to the holy people of God. The people reciprocate, expressing a solemn mutuality.

Then the Presider calls the people to prayer: *Lift up your hearts*. So we symbolically fix our gaze on high. This is the spirit that should infuse our worship as the Christian community leaps to its feet, and stands with hearts uplifted to begin the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving.

Let us give thanks: The purpose of this gathering is now stated. The people assent by repeating the invitation. It is *thanks and praise* that we are about to offer—offer in gratitude to God for a story. It is a story that stirs us, claims us. We tell it again to rehearse our relationship with God. So indeed our hearts are on high!

Preface

Then the prayer begins, with the Preface—so called, because it is indeed only the first part, because the whole prayer is a single continuous prayer.

The opening lines are really elaborations of the last response of the opening dialogue. A mood is set. God is named—the One who is the origin of all things, the source of all life—the One to whom we give our thanks and praise. These lines remind us too that we are engaged in worship. To worship God is to acknowledge that God alone is worthy. This prayer places God first. It speaks of the radical oneness of God.

Then we begin to recount those things for which we offer our thanks and praise—firstly for creation. Our contemporary world is much taken up with the theme of creation, with deep

concern about the future of the planet. But it is not new in our faith tradition. Ancient Eucharistic Prayers elaborated on this theme in amazing length and detail.

But it is thanksgiving not only for creation in general; it is also for the creation of humankind. Man and woman were placed at the heart of creation—and so our story of life with God begins.

Here is the gift: what is the response? So the prayer continues—*we turned away from you*. There are many ways of telling this story, of accounting for the alienation of humankind from God. The mystery of this fact has been probed for as long as human beings have thought about themselves. But as our prayers of Confession are always followed by an assurance of forgiveness, so here we acknowledge thankfully God's everlasting mercy that comes to meet us—God's long-suffering grace: *God did not abandon us*. God has continued to reach out to us.

God has reached to us by raising up men and women in every generation down to our own, to speak God's authentic word in every age. Sometimes it is a word that may guide—the Law—setting forth the way of life, the conditions for godly life. Without it, we live in chaos.

Sometimes it is a challenging word spoken by the prophets—those who spoke a challenging word to the people of their time—and in ours—calling people to turn to the ways of justice and of peace.

Sanctus and Benedictus

This great act of thanksgiving leads us to the ancient hymn of praise/worship, "Holy, holy, holy". It is something to sing about! That is why it has been set to some of the most glorious music ever written.

But we are led into this hymn by a line that is a reminder of who might be termed 'our prayer companions'. The church of God is a profoundly inclusive community. It stretches its scope back in time, and out to the uttermost points of the compass. We worship with the faithful, those who have gone before us in the faith, those whose memorials adorn the walls of our older churches, and the many who have no memorial.

Like many liturgical hymns, the Sanctus is made up of bits and pieces of several biblical sources. It first and foremost invokes the vision of Isaiah in the temple (Isaiah 6). There is some evidence it was being sung by the Christians of Rome in the 2nd century.

The Sanctus has also normally had a companion piece, known again by the Latin, Benedictus. This is a quotation from scripture, too—Psalm 118, which also became very important in early Christian praise, and in association with Christ—e.g. the Palm Sunday story. So the gospel context of the Benedictus may well be Jesus going to his agony and cross. Blessed indeed is the one who thus comes.

Second Part of the Thanksgiving

The focus of the Prayer now becomes the Christ. We arrive at the Christological core of the Prayer. The incarnation happened 'in the fullness' of God's merciful dealings with humankind. Now the history of salvation comes to its climax. So the life of Jesus is summarised—born, lived, died, and was raised.

Institution narrative

The prayer then continues by recalling and affirming that the meaning of Jesus' life has been captured in the story of the Last Supper—a story of bread broken and wine poured out—symbolising a life given, shared in love in order to bring renewal, hope, new life.

***Anamnesis* (remembrance)**

We have offered our thanks and praise for all God's mighty acts for the salvation of the world. The way we have done this is not of our own choosing. It is obedience to the command of Christ.

This section is what is known technically as the *anamnesis*—the Greek word for 'remembrance'. This is our lively remembrance, which we do according to Christ's command. It is not done in the abstract: it is done here and now, with this congregation of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, with *this* bread and *this* cup.

In the Eucharist, we remember the death of Jesus. We take bread and say "the body of Christ", and the cup, "the blood of Christ". Our anamnesis holds it continually before us, deepening our sense of thanksgiving and praise, and evoking lives lived in gratitude and service. And the memory of the cross, rightly seen, may be one of our profoundest connections with a suffering world.

So we have a summary of the whole, wonderful, worshipful event of the first Easter. It is a mystery, because it is beyond our comprehension, and calls forth from us not knowledge or understanding but awe and thanksgiving. So here is the Easter Mystery (*Christ has died ...*). It is the Church's faith. It is a tiny creed, but not small in what it affirms.

Invocation of the Spirit

After hearing the story from the work of creation to the work of Christ, you now might expect to hear the story of Pentecost, but it is not there. That is because the story takes a different turn at this point: no longer a history, it is transformed into a present reality. The Spirit is not to be talked about, but is to be invoked (in Greek, *epiclesis*, 'calling down'). We invite the Spirit to come and make these stories, these mere words, alive in our time, in our hearing. If all we have and are as human beings has been taken up into Christ, the Spirit now gives us all his grace that we may be Christ's for others. The implications are staggering.

The Spirit is invoked on 'us' first, and our celebration, in order that we might share, be *strengthened by, Christ's body and blood*. The intention of the prayer is that through the means of grace which Christ has ordained, earthly things may signify God's activity in human lives. That is what a sacrament does.

And why? What do we ask for? Unity in service—that we might be one in our ministry in the world. That is the heart of the ecumenical movement that seeks the unity of all humankind, the unity of the churches being a sign and fist-fruit of the expressed will of God.

Doxology

That the end of this Great Prayer should be praise is obvious. It ends with a great doxology ('giving glory' to God), which begins with Christ because of the long tradition that all our prayers are offered in his name. It affirms that the community that is called to give God glory is the church that he calls into being, and it is that community—all of us together—that brings the doxology to its climax: "Blessing and honour...", ending with the great 'Amen' by which the church assents to all that has been said. That's what 'Amen' means.

It is an appropriate moment to raise the bread and the cup to focus our attention, to help us recognise that through these elements we receive the life of Christ, the grace and love of God that is for us. It is this for which we now wait.