

Fourth Sunday in Lent - 2017

Our Lenten study this past week invited us to consider meeting Jesus in Holy Communion. It generated a lively discussion as we considered what exactly it is that occurs when we gather for Eucharistic worship. Why the ritual, the words, the solemnity, the actions, the dress, the postures. The commentators in our course were asked to describe memorable acts of Eucharistic worship and what it was that made them memorable or inspiring.

When I thought of memorable acts of Eucharistic worship a number came to mind, including the first time I stood at the altar. But I also thought of two services, one that I had attended and the other I'd heard about, that seemed to represent two poles, extremes. I once attended a particular church as a visitor, and there were lots of people there. Most of us were visiting, I think it was a baptism or something similar. Anyway after the prayer of thanksgiving the priest turned to the people and said, obviously for the benefit of us visitors, 'everyone is now welcome to come to the altar rail to receive some bread and wine...' Bread and Wine! I can assure you that if it was bread and wine I was after I would have stayed at home, a sip of port and a piece of broken wafer is hardly the stuff of heady invitations to bread and wine. I think the Church of Baker's Delight and St Dan Murphy would have been my preferred choice for bread and wine!

The other example relates to the Eucharist in Westminster Abbey. I am told that if you attend there you may notice that on the altar in addition to the usual vessels, such as the Chalices and the Ciboria, there are two extra items: a long handled silver spoon and a small matching saucer. I was told once of a priest who was invited to preside at the Eucharist in the Abbey and while the deacon was preparing the altar he noticed these two items on the altar. Not wanting to embarrass himself he quietly asked one of the Canons whilst the offertory hymn was being sung what they were for. The Canon was a wise and venerable man, 'the spoon' he explained 'is for the removal of tired blow flies which may fall into the chalice from the chandelier above the altar. The wine soaked insects are to be retained on the saucer while the people communicate, and afterwards, in accordance with the rubric in the Book of Common Prayer, are reverently consumed by the celebrant!' These of course are extreme examples; we here at St Philips' do not consume bread and wine...no. Neither do I consume dead blowflies, but everything we do in the Eucharist assumes that something actually happens at the altar, and we receive much, much more than the bread and the wine. Indeed we meet Jesus and are fed with his Body and the Blood under the *forms* of wine and bread; Jesus is sacramentally present to us.

But what does this mean? Just that small question has created more discussion than just about anything else in Christendom, much ink has been spilt! I am not

going to spill anymore! But I would suggest that another small statement, one which we all use gives us a clue: Do you see what I mean? (repeat). How often have we said that when we are trying to explain something. Words are never really enough, Jesus had been telling his disciples about his impending arrest and execution for some time; and then at the Last Supper he says 'This is my Body, this is my Blood...that is for you.' I want Jesus to say... 'Do you see what I mean?' Of course John in his gospel goes one step further and has Jesus demonstrate this 'for you' by describing the washing of the disciples feet.

When I have the opportunity to teach confirmation classes I endeavour to help candidates understand the nature of sacrament. Now a sacrament is a sign, but it is more. I will often use a five dollar note to explain myself. I might ask, what is this? Of course I get the natural response...it's a five dollar note (stupid). So I ask again what is it? Eventually I get the response I want 'it's a piece of very thin plastic'...exactly! But it is a worthless piece of very thin plastic that promises something. In days gone by our paper money used to state "I promise to pay the bearer on demand the sum of five [ten/twenty/fifty] pounds." A sacrament is like that, it is sign that promises something.

Sacraments are signs yes but they are not static, the 'for you' like the 'I will' in the Marriage service speaks into being something new, the words point beyond themselves to something else...they promise something. As words of the catechism say in the BCP (I'll use a modern version), to the question: 'What are the sacraments?' The Candidates respond: 'The sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace.' They are the sign of a pledge, a promise.

St Augustine in the 4th century tells us that the story of Jesus and the blind man is a sacramental account. The act of miraculous healing pointed to the man's renewed sense of insight. He was able to see anew! Jesus anoints him with mud and spittle and sends him off to the pool of Siloam to wash. For Augustine the man had been baptized and was therefore able to see! But that was a sign of something greater; true sight, insight comes after his realization of who exactly has healed him and his declaration of faith. Sacraments are crucial parts of understanding our worship, they say 'do you see what I mean.' There are many scholars who point to a sacramental reading of John's gospel. John didn't call these acts miracles, he called them signs, because they point to something greater. We here at St Philip's at our best are a sacramental community. Our role is to constantly point away from ourselves to something greater, something more, to God. We do that through Jesus, who is the foundational sacrament, and through *us* is a living sign of God's presence. This is our calling, to be sacramental, we see sacramentally, we live sacramentally and in doing so we find that we are indeed in the presence of God; 'do you see what I mean!' Amen.