

Addresses on the Liturgy: part 3

Revd Dr Ray Williamson
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, 16 August 2009

John 6. 24-35

We come today to the third and final look at the nature and structure of our liturgy. So, again, let me take a couple of minutes to recap:

First of all we thought about the meaning of the word, 'liturgy', and noted that it suggests the inter-connectedness between our worship and our daily / ordinary life. We then noted that the basic structure of our liturgy is two main parts—the Ministry of the Word and the Ministry of the Sacrament—both with an Introduction (Preparation) and a response. Two weeks ago, we went on to think about the first part: the five things we hear and say as the Preparation, then The Ministry of the Word (4 Bible passages, sermon and creed), with the response being our prayers for the world. Then, last week we went on the Ministry of the Sacrament, for which we prepare by standing to declare that we are the Body of Christ and exchanging God's peace with one another; thus we 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—a celebration that consists of a 4-fold action: Taking, Thanking, Breaking, and Sharing.

The first action—the *Taking*—we express in the offertory procession and the preparing of the Table. We bring our gifts that symbolise our life: products of the earth, products of human labour, means of sustenance, signs of our common humanity.

We spent the remainder of the time last week considering the second action, the *Thanking*: the great Thanksgiving Prayer—a prayer of thanking (blessing) 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, the meaning of which 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.

As we come to the climax of this Great Eucharistic Prayer, we again break out into praise – "Blessing and honour and glory and power...". It is also the 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.

The Lord's Prayer

Then there is the Lord's Prayer. Although, in fact, there are two places where it can be used. Several lines of the prayer are intercessory, and therefore it can be used at the end of our prayers of intercession as a way to gather together all our petitions. But used here, at the end of the Great Prayer, we are saying it as our special family prayer (The 'Our Father')—affirming, at this central moment that what we do we do as a community.

So we come to the third and fourth actions.

Breaking

The bread is broken—in readiness for us to share it, and as a sign of two things. First of our unity, as Paul said, *because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all share in the same loaf* (1 Cor 10.17). We are one because we have our unity in the sharing of Christ's life. And the breaking is also a sign of our calling as Christians, that as the body of

the Christ was broken, so we, who are the Christ's Body today, are called to give ourselves to one another and to the world in that same self-giving / self-breaking love.

Sharing

Our unity with one another is symbolised in our sharing common bread and a common cup. When we receive the bread and wine at the communion, we are nearest to the very heart of what it is to be a Christian and to be the Church. When we receive the bread and wine, those things that were taken and offered as symbols of our human life are given back to us as effective signs of the radiant action and power of God—the divine love and grace that we have seen in Christ. And so this is also a very personal act of communion, and you/I can be absolutely certain that the giving of God's grace and love is for you/me.

That is quite a simple, yet beautiful, way of thinking about that moment of communion. Over the centuries, various theories, explanations, have been developed. They became very complicated and then, consequently, divisive. They were fought over in the western church, especially in the 16th century; and it is only through ecumenical dialogue throughout the 20th century that has brought a great deal of consensus. For example, Anglican-RC and Lutheran-RC dialogues have concluded that differences in our understandings about the presence of Christ we encounter in our sharing the communion are no longer church divisive. Again, such consensus is brought about by returning together to our common sources of faith, especially the New Testament.

In the gospel reading today, we have continued to hear from the 6th chapter of John. In it, the drama continues as John unfolds the meaning of Jesus as the bread of life. The verse that concluded last week's reading is the one that commences this week's: *I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.* In this verse the focus shifts from what Jesus offers as a person, in himself, to what he offers through his death. There is fundamentally no difference. For John, Jesus' death is the climax and fulfilment of his life. The whole event, life and death, is a self giving. For John, the good news is the fundamental truth that the Word became flesh—in the man, Jesus. But John also declares another, consequent, truth: that this 'flesh and blood man' is our nourishment in a special way.

For those in the drama who think only on the physical level, such an idea is preposterously cannibalistic. But for the audience, who are hearing the drama of John's gospel unfold, the riddle is obvious—and the irony. They eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood in their holy meal of bread and wine. This meal will have had a special place in the community as a means of communing with Christ.

Similarly, in other places in the NT! Paul, in his proclamation of the Risen Christ, gives some clear directions about where to go to find the Body of Christ. It is to be found in two places, which are really the same place: Paul clearly says that the Body of Christ is to be found on the table of community gathering and in the community gathered around it. *The bread which we break, is it not a sharing of the Body of Christ.* And he goes on to say that the Church itself of which we are members, which shares the bread, is the Body of Christ.

To understand what Paul is getting at, we have to understand the sense in which he is speaking of the 'body'. It is through the presence of a person's body that we have access to that person; the removal of a person's body, overseas or wherever, means that the person is no longer available to us. Likewise the breaking and sharing of the bread of the Eucharist is the medium through which Christ becomes available to us, present to us, and we ourselves become the Body of Christ through which Christ in turn is made available in the world.

This is why we can affirm again that when we receive the bread and wine at the communion, we are nearest to the very heart of what it is to be a Christian and to be the Church.

Ministry of the Sacrament—Response

Our response to all this is to hear a sentence of scripture which in some way is designed to express something of the theme of our worship, and then we have a short prayer and dismissal, where the accent is on the fact that we are to be apostolic—a sent people, people sent with a message and a mission, to be God's people in God's world, people who bring the message and hope of forgiveness and peace, liberation and new life to that world.

The very nature of the mission on which we are sent can be discerned from what we have done and what we have received in our liturgy, our Eucharistic celebration.

Throughout this section of his gospel, John has been developing the theme of Jesus as the Bread of Life—the source of life, fullness of life. And from the text of the gospel, we see that the Eucharist is clearly being understood as a means of opening oneself to this life. But there is also a sense in which if we cannot connect the motif of Jesus, the bread of life, to contemporary issues of poverty and hunger, something is missing. Ultimately all hunger cries out for satisfaction; and other gospels report the promise and agenda of the kingdom: "Blessed are you who hunger; for you shall be satisfied" (Luke 6:21); so will those "who hunger and thirst for justice" (Matt 5:6). The two must not be divorced, because in the bread of life we are being nourished by the one whose being is love and compassion.

It is when we bring with us a deep concern for our troubled, secularised world, in which so many people are alienated from one another and traumatised by fear; it is when we bring with us a deep concern for all the many ways in which people hunger today, that here in our liturgy we come face to face in a living encounter with the presence of the love of Christ, audibly and visibly, in Word and Sacrament, as the only real ground of hope we have. The miracle of our Easter faith is that we are here, wrestling to discern Christ's will for us as people who break bread in memory of him and who know we ourselves are in the process of becoming the Body of Christ. This alone is what re-ignites our hope: the love of Christ—the hope of the world.

So our liturgy—our celebration of the Eucharist—ends! But whenever we do it, may it be for us a living, vital expression of a living, vital faith that is refreshing and life-giving.

I hope these thoughts have helped a little to increase our appreciation of the liturgy so that it can be a living, and life-giving, celebration for us.