

# Addresses on the Liturgy

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## Part 1

*John 6. 24-35*

You already have some idea about what to expect this morning. I have said that I will try, today and on the next two Sundays, to say something about what we do here week by week. After all, what we do in church is fundamental to our faith: it expresses who we are as people of faith; it expresses how we understand that faith. When Christians gather, regularly and rhythmically, to rehearse the faith, receptive to the Word and standing around the Table of the Lord with open and empty hands to receive Christ's gift of himself, we are reminded who and whose we are. It is, therefore, important for us to have some understanding of what we do when we come to church, and of the way we do it. In other words, it is important for us to have some understanding of the Liturgy.

The word 'liturgy' comes from a Greek word that means "the life (work) of people". So, it refers to our 'daily life'—the work and the ordinary things we do every day. But there also developed for this word a more specific reference, namely, to our 'cultic/ritual life'—the things we do and the way we do them when we come to worship. So, the word 'liturgy' has these two references: our daily life and our ritual life. And therefore the word itself reminds us that we cannot understand one without the other. Ritual life and daily life interact, and we can tell whether our ritual life is healthy by the quality of our daily life.

Ritual life consists in repetitive patterns of symbolic actions that enact a way of understanding the world, that are expressive of a community's story—expressive of that part of a community's history that gives that community its identity, that determines who or what that community is. [You might think of the ritual of Anzac Day re the Australian community]. So, our ritual life as Christians consists in repetitive patterns of symbolic actions that enact our way of understanding the world, that are expressive of our story—the Good News of Jesus, in whose name we meet, because we are his people—people renewed, refreshed, redeemed, by his life.

Our liturgical life, therefore, has to be such as to express these truths; but it also has to be such as to communicate these truths, to make sure that we who participate in the actions do not miss, or mistake, the truths being expressed and to make sure that those truths of faith are passed on.

At the centre of our ritual life—expressing the essence of our faith—is a meal, a symbolic meal. This is so because of the prominence of meals in the story of Jesus.

Frequently in the gospels we hear of Jesus associating with, befriending, caring for, marginalised people, and those occasions are often associated with meals. And when we read those stories, we cannot miss the scandal Jesus caused in that 1st century Middle Eastern society by mixing socially with such people.

Also meals feature prominently in the parables of Jesus as images of the reign of God. Clearly, Jesus attached great importance to such festive gatherings. The Last Supper

surely was just the last of many such suppers. After his death his followers kept up his memory by continuing to break bread together. This is how he had wished to be remembered—in the context of a festive meal: “Do this in memory of me”.

That is why his followers have continued to do so across the centuries. Of course, over time (although a comparatively short time), the gathering to break bread together developed certain ritual forms, and the eating and drinking became symbolic rather than proper meals, although the sense of festive occasion was maintained and developed through the use of music and colour and symbols and movement. So, in continuity with Christians through the centuries, coming together to celebrate the Eucharist, to break bread together, is what we do. The Eucharist is at the centre of our tradition, and has the central place in the experience of worship of the vast majority of Christians. Indeed, inspired by the ecumenical movement, there has been significant convergence among Christians about the basic content of worship, primarily, that the norm for worship on Sunday is the Eucharist.

The gospel passage today is again from John 6. It begins with the crowd searching for Jesus, and Jesus pointing out to them the real reason why they are looking—because they had had their fill of bread. But is this the bread that gives real life. This is a question about where we find God? In wonders? In some mighty achievements of our own or of others? John reduces the options to one: we find God in relationship. This is what Jesus brings: a relationship of love and acceptance. That relationship is the source of real life. That is why he is the true bread. Christian faith is accepting Jesus as the one who offers that relationship—believing that Jesus is the message and the messenger from God. That is the work to which God calls us, which God offers us.

Week by week we express that work—our faith—in the work of the liturgy.

The framework in which we do our liturgy is the framework of community—of relationship: we belong together, we care for each other, we talk with each other about our concerns, we explore with each other matters concerning our faith. We are a community, family, gathering together.

As in any gathering, the first thing we do in our liturgy is to greet one another—in the name of the Lord. The joyousness of the occasion has first been expressed by singing a hymn, often one of praise. So we gather!

As I said a moment ago, there is wide agreement amongst the churches that the norm for worship on Sunday is the celebration of the Eucharist—the norm is in both Word and Sacrament. This gives us the shape of the liturgy: it is in two main (essential) parts, Word and Sacrament.

But when we look at the whole structure or order of the liturgy, we see that each of those parts is dressed-up a little, they are enclosed by an introduction (or preparation) and a response. Thus, the agreed order is *Ministry of the Word*, with an introduction and response, followed by *Ministry of the Sacrament*, with an introduction and response.

### **Ministry of the Word—Introduction**

So, after we have gathered—sung a hymn and greeted each other—we come to the introduction to the Ministry of the Word. Here we do five things:

1. We hear a **sentence of scripture**, chosen for the purpose of expressing a thought relevant to the theme of the day.
2. We say the **Prayer of Preparation**, which reminds us of what we need to be in our relationship with God—a relationship to which we are giving expression in worship. In acknowledging that we are open to, not hidden from, God, we are really praying that we may be actively open to God, to the inspiration of God's Spirit, that we might hear and respond to the Word of God that is there to be perceived.
3. We come then to a moment of **penitence**, being reminded of the two great commands that shape our conduct. In the light of that reminder, we say the Kyries, a prayer for mercy. We have the option then of making our confession (or later, where it can be a response to the whole ministry of the Word). Either way, we do it in preparing to share a meal. It would be impossible to overestimate the impact the meals must have had on those with whom Jesus shared them. By accepting them as friends and equals Jesus had taken away their shame and guilt. By showing them that they mattered to him as people he gave them a sense of dignity and released them from whatever held them captive. As we come to worship in the context of a meal, here we are acknowledging before God our brokenness, our capacity for evil; we face it; we bear our reality, we open ourselves to that condition in which we can receive grace and healing.
4. We then say (sometimes sing) the **Hymn of Praise**. It is a response to the assurance of forgiveness, and again helps to create the context and atmosphere for what we are doing.
5. The **Prayer (Collect) for the day** is prayed. It has two parts: a description of something we understand about God, and a brief intercession. And together they capture some part of the theme of the day.

## **The Ministry of the Word**

So we come to the essential aspect of the first part of the liturgy—the reading of Scripture. We are who we are because of our past: we are products of our past; our past gives us our identity. This is true of any individual, family, community. The same is true of the Christian community. Our past is what gives us our identity, makes us who we are. We need to know and understand our past, our story. And what is crucial, of course, is the formative stages in that story—and that is the part of our story that the Bible contains. And so we hear it read, the story told, the Word proclaimed. We hear three readings—the Hebrew Scriptures (OT) followed by the singing of a psalm, a NT reading and the Gospel. The selection of readings has an important ecumenical dimension—chosen from a common lectionary that is followed by several denominations around the world. And as we hear that story, we are reminded that it is only through us that it can be passed on to others. The gospel procession symbolises our responsibility to take the story out to others.

Immediately, we come to the sermon—an opportunity for that Word to be expounded—hopefully relating the story of the gospel to our story as the people of God today.

And we say the creed. It is a product of the 4th century Church—another formative time in our story. Full of concepts from that Greek and Roman world, the creed comes as a summary of the faith.

So we have the Ministry of the Word—recalling our faith story—Readings, sermon, creed.

### **Ministry of the Word—Response**

Our response to the Word is our prayer—our prayer for the world and for the church. It is our attempt to reflect in our own lives and concerns the conviction that God loves and cares for everyone and the whole creation.

Worship is the action of a community. It should be something in which everyone present seems able to participate (not just be passive spectators); it needs to be marked by a sense of celebration, reminding us of our participation in the renewing, refreshing, redeeming life of the Risen Christ. It needs to speak to us where we are and inspire us.

Our Liturgy, especially the Ministry of the Word, is to help us to learn Christ, to be nourished by his teaching. As a result, we are deepened in our faith, and strengthened for a way of living that witnesses to our faith understanding, that witnesses to our new life in Christ—the Bread of Life.

### **Part 2**

*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.

### **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.

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.

### **Part 3**

#### *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.