

ST. BARTHOLOMEW’S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

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Scripture: Various

“Why the Holy Eucharist?” (part 2)

THE ANGLICAN LITURGY

We have been doing a series on Anglican worship. Specifically looking at why we do what we do in the context of Sunday worship. As Anglicans we are part of the Catholic and Liturgical tradition (see previous sermon). As Anglicans the focal point of our liturgy is the Holy Eucharist. Every Holy Eucharist service consists of two main halves. The first, being the “Ministry of the Word,” and the second, the “Holy Communion.”

Recall that after Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Church was birthed and believers were devoted to four things: **Acts 2:42: “*And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostle’s teaching, and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.*”** While all four are continued in our liturgy, it is the apostle’s teaching (the Bible) and the breaking of bread (holy communion) that form the foundation of our Holy Eucharist liturgy.

Last week we looked at in some detail the various components of the Ministry of the Word portion of the service. Today I would like us to look at the Holy Communion part of our liturgy. In doing so, there are three areas we will address pertaining to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper: the Scripture, the Theology (why there are differences among churches as it pertains to what happens to the bread and the wine) and finally the manual acts and gestures that we use during the context of the service.

THE VIEW FROM HOLY SCRIPTURE

There are five main passages in the Bible that specifically deal with the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. In the first three Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), we are given the words that Jesus said on the night before He died during a Passover meal He had with His disciples (i.e. “the Last Supper”). During Passover, Jews celebrated the time that the Lord “passed over” the first born Israelites as He sent the angel of death upon the first born of Egypt due to the Pharaoh’s refusal to let the children of Israel depart Egypt. Each family was to sprinkle the blood of a sacrificed lamb upon the doorpost and mantles of their homes and they would be spared. Therefore, the Passover was a meal to celebrate God’s deliverance of His people from their bondage and slavery to Egypt. However, when Jesus celebrated it for the last time, He redefined its meaning. We read from **Luke 22:19-20, “*And when He had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup which is poured out for you is the New Covenant in My blood.”*”**

In other words, Jesus established a new covenant in which His body and blood would now be the means of our salvation and the basis for our forgiveness of our sins. No longer would the sacrifice of

animals be necessary because of His death on the cross. And now as a result of what Jesus did, we can have an eternal relationship with His Father!

As the writer of **Hebrews 10:11-14** tells us: *“Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He (Christ), having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet. For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.”*

Not only did Jesus redefine the Passover, but He said we are to celebrate this New Covenant meal in remembrance of what He has done. Now let's look at the words of Christ found in **John 6:48-63**. Whereas Matthew, Mark and Luke give us the words Jesus said on the night before He died, the Apostle John includes Jesus' actual teaching on the meaning behind those words.

“I am the bread of life. “Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. “This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. “I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh.”

Then the Jews began to argue with one another, saying, “How can this man give us His flesh to eat?” So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. “For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. “As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me, he also will live because of Me. “This is the bread which came down out of heaven; not as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever.”

These things He said in the synagogue as He taught in Capernaum.

Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this said, “This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?” But Jesus, conscious that His disciples grumbled at this, said to them, “Does this cause you to stumble? “What then if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before? “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.”

In the above passage, Jesus not only identifies Himself as the “Bread of Life,” He speaks of His body and blood as the means of eternal life and the actual eating of His body and the drinking of His blood as a way to demonstrate this spiritual reality. To His Jewish listeners this must have not only been hard to “stomach” but blasphemous, as well. Who does He think He is? would have been a question going through their minds. Even His disciples had a problem with it. But Jesus responds by saying, “What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before?” (i.e. heaven) and that the words He has spoken are

spirit and life. In other words, He is not only telling them the truth, He is letting the world know that He is our source of everything that gives life. Our flesh profits nothing, but His flesh? It profits everything.

Some Protestant groups and denominations argue that Jesus is merely speaking of His body and blood symbolically, that there is no spiritual transformation of the bread and the wine. The problem with this interpretation is that Jesus not only declares that the bread of the Passover meal is His body, and the wine, His blood, but in his teaching set forth above in John’s Gospel He speaks of literally eating His body and drinking His blood. Why else did he say such things unless He was referring to the celebration of Holy Communion? In other words, the bread and the wine become the holy food God.

The Apostle Paul affirms such an understanding when he writes in **1 Cor. 11:23-27**:

“For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, “This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes. Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord.”

Here, the Apostle Paul directly correlates the bread and wine of Holy Communion to the body and blood of Jesus Christ. In fact, he writes that if anyone eats the bread or drinks the cup in an unworthy manner, he shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord! Notice that if one eats the bread *or* drinks the cup it pertains to both the body *and* the blood of Jesus. This is why in the Catholic tradition, if you partake of one and not the other it is the same as partaking both elements (body and blood) of the sacrament.

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

As you might suspect, across Christendom there are a variety of understandings as it relates to what exactly happens to the bread and the wine when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Before we look at the various denominational views, it is important to note that the early Church believed that the bread and the wine became the body and blood of Christ during the celebration of the liturgy. This shouldn’t surprise us in light of the Scriptures already cited.

Listen for a moment to the following quotes from a couple of our early Church fathers. A letter written by St. Iganitius of Antioch to the Romans in 106 AD, says, “*I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ.*” Writing to the Christians of Smyrna around the same time, St. Iganitius warned them to “*stand aloof from such heretics,*” because, among other reasons, “*they abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins, and which the Father, of His goodness, raised up again.*” A final example comes from Justin Martyr, who in about 150 AD, wrote concerning the Eucharist: “*Not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Savior, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the*

food which is blessed by the prayer of His Word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.”

It wasn't until about the 11-12th century that what became known as the doctrine of *transubstantiation* took root in the church. This is the idea that the substance of the bread and wine literally become the same flesh and blood that Jesus had on the cross after the church prays over the elements. This is the belief held by the Roman Catholic Church and accepted, though not promoted, by the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

One of the abuses that developed over the ensuing centuries in relation to this belief was the adoration and worship of the sacrament (term for the bread and wine after it becomes the body and blood of Jesus) itself. As a result, during the Protestant Reformation, the reformers argued against this literal transformation citing **Hebrews 10:12** (see above). They argued that Jesus cannot be sacrificed again and again. In light of the Reformation, the Anglican Church adopted the position of “real presence” which is also held by the Eastern Orthodox Church. This is the belief that there is a spiritual transformation that takes place in the elements of bread and wine. In other words, they spiritually rather than literally become the body and blood of Christ. Lutherans held to a similar position, called *consubstantiation*, which is the idea that the presence of Christ comes in, with, above, and around the elements during the consecration prayer but there is not a total spiritual transformation of the bread and wine, itself. Presbyterians and later Methodists believe Christ's spiritual presence comes among believers during the Holy Communion but it is not related directly to the actual bread and wine. Finally, Baptists, Pentecostals, non-denominational churches, and others believe it is simply a memorial service in which nothing happens to the bread or grape juice (as they use in their tradition) and there is no special presence of Christ during that part of the service except that which is already in the life of the believer who is present. So as you can see, one can find the whole spectrum of belief in the Christian Church when it comes to the Holy Eucharist.

Of course, how we believe, affects how we act. If you believe that there is a supernatural change in the bread and wine to be the body and blood of Christ as we Anglicans (ie. Catholic tradition) believe, then there will be a special reverence and care conducted towards this part of the liturgy. Furthermore, we believe it is such an integral aspect of the faith that we celebrate it every Sunday. However, on the other hand, if you believe that it is just a memorial service then it will probably not be quite as an important aspect of your worship. Hence in most Protestant Churches, Holy Communion is celebrated only once a month and in some cases once a quarter.

So who is right? Obviously, as an Anglican priest, I believe the Anglican position is most balanced. However, at the end of the day, such differences of opinion should not separate fellow believers and Christians. What is most important is do we believe that Jesus Christ is Lord, that He died, rose again, ascended into heaven, and is coming back again? And do we celebrate Holy Communion as a way to demonstrate these truths? The truth is such matters should serve as the basis of our unity as Christians.

MANUAL ACTS AND GESTURES

One of the things you will find in an Anglican liturgy is what are called manual acts and gestures (e.g. making the sign of the cross, genuflecting, bowing, kneeling, etc). While not all Anglican Churches include these in their liturgies, the tradition at St. Bartholomew’s has been to engage in such gestures of devotion.

For example, you will note that the clergy, lay ministers, and acolytes bow before the altar. This is not an act of worship for a material object. Rather it is to let the world know that table/altar of the Lord within the sanctuary is the most sacred place in the Church. Similarly, when people or the clergy make the sign of the cross, it is an outward demonstration that all our spiritual blessings come through Jesus Christ (the cross – His death). It is also the practice of the clergy and lay ministers to genuflect (a fancy term for kneeling on one knee) during parts of the Holy Communion prayer. This is done after we pray over the bread and the wine, three times each. Why three? To remind us that we worship One God in Three Persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We lift up the host (large wafer of bread) and the chalice not as a form of worship of the sacrament but to let the world that they now have become the body and blood of our Lord. We also bow or genuflect at the name of Jesus as a reminder that one day every knee will bow at the name of Jesus (**Philp. 2:10**).

Clearly, the Anglican liturgy is rooted in Holy Scripture, Catholic tradition, and Christian faith. It reflects the intention to hear the Apostle’s Teaching (God’s Word) and to celebrate the Breaking of Bread every Sunday. It seeks to do so in a reverent and graceful manner that lifts up the name of Jesus as well as the grace, love and power of God – forever the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is why I am an Anglican.