

Reflections on Communion

These four reflections by Revd Dr Mark Butchers were part of the 10am Parish Communion service at St Peter's Wolvercote on 27th January 2008

Introduction

It is impossible to explore the meaning of communion in a few words or minutes. Debates about its meaning have raged down the centuries, spawning page upon page of theological reflection. All I can do in these brief reflections is offer some of my personal views. Inevitably that will mean that much will be omitted, some of which you may feel is important to *your* understanding of communion.

In the Church of England's Common Worship book, the service of Holy Communion is divided into four sections. I want to focus on each in turn.

- a) The Gathering: the beginning of the service up to the collect
- b) The Liturgy of the Word: the readings, sermon, creed and intercessions
- c) The Liturgy of the Sacrament: from the peace, through the offertory and eucharistic prayer to receiving communion
- d) The Dismissal: the blessing and sending out.

The Gathering

The Gathering says what it does on the tin. We come together from our different homes and gather in God's house to worship together. We gather together from a wide variety of backgrounds, from different jobs or study or retirement, from different situations in life with a huge range of life experiences. I imagine that if you looked down on St Peter's from a live satellite, you would see people making their way from all corners of the parish and beyond to the church building, some still using the ancient pathways which radiate out from and towards the church. It is a coming together of those who actively seek to be God's Church in this community in order to worship him together.

But there is a gathering in another sense as well – a gathering of our thoughts. The beginning of the service is a time to focus on what we're about to do, on where we are, and on God's presence with us. It's a chance to become present to him as he always is to us. So we gather also in the sense of pausing, being still, focussing.

Inevitably we bring a lot with us – all that has happened in the previous week; all we're looking forward to or anxious about in the next week. As we wait for the service to start or in the opening hymn or in the silence after the children have gone to their own worship, we have a chance to think about all that. There may be a lot to remember or anticipate, maybe too much all at once. So perhaps each week we could choose one or two things from the previous week to give thanks for, one or two things which we are sorry for, and one or two people or situations to pray for.

One aspect of the gathering is confessing our sins. There may be specific things we have said or done in the previous week which we want to bring before God. Or there may be a general sense that none of us are perfect. Or we may want to acknowledge the failings of the human race as a whole. Again focussing on one or two things whilst we say the prayer of confession avoids it becoming mere repetition.

Then follows the absolution, the declaration through the presiding priest of God's ever present forgiveness for those who are sorry for what they have done wrong. One of the key ideas in the communion service is that in it we are fed and through that we grow. But sin, which is a turning from God and a denial of our need of him, prevents us from growing as well as we might. So to acknowledge our failings and genuinely seek God's forgiveness at the beginning of the service opens us to the food he offers.

Absolution leads naturally into the gloria, an ancient hymn of praise and thanksgiving to God. Then comes the collect, a different one each week, often reflecting the theme of that Sunday/season (Christmas, Lent, Easter, Saints' Days) or of the readings. The collect literally collects together our prayers and offers them up to God, symbolised by the presiding priest lifting up their hands.

The Liturgy of the Word

In the Church of England, we believe that we are fed by both Word and Sacrament, and the two main parts of the service reflect this: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Sacrament. Liturgy is a Greek word meaning 'public service' or 'work of the people'. As such it reminds us that this service is not something where a few people up here do things and everyone else listens and watches. Rather everyone is in it together. We celebrate communion together, we pray and worship together, we all have a part to play.

The Liturgy of the Word is when we try to be attentive to what God is trying to say to us as individuals through his Word in the Bible and in the exposition of that Word in the sermon. The Bible is a living, lively Word, when we interact with it in this way. So our prime task at this point in the service is to listen as best we can with the question in mind: what is God saying to me in my particular circumstances through these readings and this sermon? What can I take away from them to apply to my life this week?

Perhaps we could aim to take one, possibly two thoughts away with us to reflect upon further after the service. That is important, because what happens in this service should continue to nourish us – to give us food for thought – in the coming week. We shouldn't leave this service as quite the same people who entered it, and that process of growing in God can continue on through the week. The silence after the sermon is a chance to ask: what do I want to take away with me from this service, which one or two thoughts from the readings or the sermon?

This is a whole process of encounter with God. It's not the academic study of Biblical texts, though that has its place. It's the meeting between me in my current situation with the God who created and sustains me. It's not the study of God, as if we could do that, nor the study of his words, but a way into a conversation with him. "This is the Word of the Lord" – spoken to me, heard by me. "Thanks be to God". It's an encounter with the living God: we listen to him and he listens to us. And that sense of encounter, a living encounter, is expressed in the words we say after the Gospel: "Praise to you, O Christ".

Having listened and hopefully been fed, having noted those one or two things to take away, we then respond. We respond first by affirming our faith in the words of the creed, which comes from the Latin *credo*, 'I believe'. Together with the rest of the Church worldwide and throughout time, we affirm our beliefs. Some people will interpret some of those words one way, others another way. Some will believe them literally, others will interpret some or all of them metaphorically. But the words unite us

as the people of God. Having listened as individuals within the Body of Christ, we respond corporately as that Body.

We also respond in prayer. The intercessions are a response to God's majesty, his goodness, his blessings showered upon us. They are a thanksgiving. But they also reflect the theme of the readings, the seasons of the Church's year, the concerns of the world, the local community and our own individual cares. We lift people we love and our concerns to God, often without specifically asking for anything, but simply placing them and us into his hands for his strengthening, guidance and healing. Again this is part of our living encounter with the living God. And often his response to our intercessions about some situation may be to inspire and embolden us to do something about it ourselves. Prayer and action go together.

The Liturgy of the Sacrament

As well as encountering God in his Word, we encounter him in Sacrament. A sacrament is something we can see (the bread and wine or the water of baptism), which conveys and signifies something we can't see: God's love, healing, strength and presence. It is "an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace".

There is much to say about the Liturgy of the Sacrament, too much really. At its heart is the great prayer of thanksgiving, when we thank God for creating the world, for giving us himself in Christ and for his gifts of salvation and resurrection. It is both a looking backward and a looking forward. We look back to Christ, to the Last Supper when he took bread and wine and told his disciples to "do this in remembrance of me"; to his death on the cross, when his body like the bread was broken, and his blood like the wine was poured out; to his resurrection when he was raised into new life, new possibilities, as we are little by little when we receive the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

We also look forward: to the heavenly banquet of which this bread and wine are a foretaste, a little glimpse of heaven on earth. There we will celebrate, give thanks and be one with God and one with another. In this communion, we do the same in a small way.

So we look back, we remember; and we look forward, we anticipate. But also we look to the present moment because God is present with us here and now and we commune with him in this service.

For me the Liturgy of the Sacrament is an offering up and a receiving back. In one sense we have nothing of our own to give to God. As we shall say in a moment, "all things come from you, and of your own do we give you". Nonetheless, even though we are only stewards not owners of God's creation, our offering up to God is important. For it reminds us of our need of him and our dependence upon him. What we are offering is essentially ourselves. That is symbolised in the bread and wine and the collection (the fruits of our labours), being carried down the aisle and lifted up to God. But it is really ourselves with all our skills and frailties, our hopes and concerns – us as we are – that we offer up to God. We do so for his healing, his feeding and to pledge ourselves anew in his service.

In doing so we are joining ourselves to Christ's offering of himself in Gethsemane and on the cross, his entrusting of himself into God's hands for the sake of his fellow human beings, his giving, his sacrifice. We not only remember it, but in our own small way, join ourselves to it. So the lifting up of the bread and wine at the end of the eucharistic prayer points us to Christ being lifted up and our own lifting of ourselves to God.

But communion is of course also a receiving back. We lift ourselves to God and when we eat of the bread and drink the wine, we receive ourselves back renewed, strengthened, nourished, fed by God's love and healing. We offer ourselves up and God fills us; and then we go from this service with renewed vision and energy to be his hands and feet in the world.

Most people when they receive communion in Anglican churches hold their hands up with one placed over the other. I see that as a symbol of both offering and receiving. When we hold our hands up, it's as though we are offering ourselves up to God. And when the bread is placed into our hands, we receive and are fed by God. It is again a means and a moment of encounter with God, of communion with him. We encounter him in the Word and then in the Sacrament through this movement of offering and receiving. He is present to us and we are present to him.

There's no time to go into the debates about what happens to the bread and wine of communion. Sometimes I think it's all rather dry and dusty anyway. The key thing for me is that in some mysterious way God in Christ is present with us in this service, not least through the Holy Spirit in the bread and wine, his body and blood. And so when we receive them, we are united with him in body, mind and spirit. We may consume the bread and wine, but in fact God is consuming us and converting us into his Body, the Church.

So for me the words I would want to use about the Liturgy of the Sacrament are these:

- thanksgiving
- remembering and anticipating
- offering and receiving
- consuming and being consumed

The Dismissal

The fourth and last of our reflections on the communion service is about the Dismissal. We have gathered and stilled ourselves at the beginning of the service. We have encountered God in Word and Sacrament and been changed by that encounter. Now we come to the Dismissal, the sending out.

As I've already suggested, this communion service is not over in a moment. It carries on into our lives this week. We have been strengthened and inspired by both Word and Sacrament for a purpose: to be the Body of Christ in the world, to be Christ's hands helping those in need, to be his eyes looking with love on all whom we meet. Every communion service has the world at its heart – the world we bring with us when we arrive at church, the world we have seen and heard about on the news. And every communion service has an outward focus. We come in to be fed and strengthened and we go out ready to serve. As someone said his vicar used to say: "next week's service will begin with the coffee after this service". His point was that living the Gospel, refreshed and inspired by hearing the Word and receiving communion, is integral to our worship. Our lives outside the church and our worship inside are completely interwoven.

So the blessing and the dismissal, "let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord", send us out into whatever this week holds for us. And then next Sunday we come back again with our thanks and our sorrows and our people to pray for and our desire to meet God and to be fed and healed and strengthened. We gather, we still ourselves, we encounter him afresh in Word and Sacrament, and then out we're sent again to live our faith in the world.