

“This is my body; this is my blood.”

A sermon preached by the *Revd Dr Mark Butchers* at St Peter’s Wolvercote on 19th August 2012; also at All Saints’ Wytham and Wolvercote Baptist Church on 2nd September 2012.

John, 6, vv.56-7 *“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.... Whoever eats me will live because of me.”*

No wonder early Christians were accused of being cannibals. And no wonder that we’re told just after this passage that some disciples said: “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” Or a few verses later that “because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.”

It is difficult stuff, which takes us into the heart of Eucharistic theology. In what sense can the bread and wine of communion be the flesh and blood of Christ? Much ink has been spilt trying to answer that question; and sadly, at the Reformation, much blood was spilt trying to defend the answers people came up with.

There have been four main answers in the Western churches about what happens to the bread and wine. The Eastern Orthodox churches, perhaps rather more wisely, have said that the bread and wine become Christ’s body and blood, but that it is a mystery how they do so. But in Western Europe, answers were sought, debates initiated and battles waged. With fairly broad brush strokes, let me set out the four main answers in the West.

1) Transubstantiation

This idea grew up in the Middle Ages, not least through Thomas Aquinas who drew on Aristotelian philosophy. Aristotle believed that objects have both an outward appearance and an invisible inner essence. Taking this idea, Aquinas argued that in the Eucharist, the outward appearance of the bread and wine stay the same, but their inner essence changes into the actual body and blood of Christ. Christ is therefore *in* the bread and wine – the so-called Real Presence; and we join ourselves to Christ in a physical way by eating the consecrated bread and wine in church. This view was affirmed by the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent in the late 16th century, and many, but perhaps not all Roman Catholics would accept this understanding today.

2) Consubstantiation

This was Luther’s view. He believed that the bread and wine stay bread and wine in both their outward appearance and their inner essence; but that at the same time the body and blood of Christ are somehow present in the bread and wine. He likened this to a metal poker being heated in a fire until it glows; in that red-hot poker, both metal and heat are present at one and the same time. So again this view affirms the Real Presence of Christ, though perhaps there is a slight move away from the very literal, physical interpretation of transubstantiation. Interestingly though, Luther believed that after the service, the bread and wine revert to just being bread and wine, so it isn’t right to reserve them to take to the sick or to adore or reverence them.

3) Cranmer’s view

Thomas Cranmer thought that transubstantiation in particular was far too literal an understanding. He wanted something more spiritual. He argues in Article 28 of the 39

Articles in the Prayer Book that “Transubstantiation ...overthroweth the nature of a Sacrament and hath given occasion to many superstitions.”

A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace. Cranmer felt this meant that we should avoid thinking about inner physical transformations of the bread and wine. Instead he argued that the bread and wine stay bread and wine, but that when they are consecrated in the Eucharist, they become the holy means of a spiritual partaking of the body and blood of Christ. We are joined with him not physically, not literally, but spiritually. This is how we have communion with Christ, hence Cranmer’s preferred term for the service: Holy Communion.

There is thus no literal Real Presence of Christ in the bread and wine, yet they have become holy sacraments. By consuming them, we don’t just remember Christ; we actually have a real but spiritual communion with him. And because they have become holy things, we need to consume them reverently at the end of the service. It wouldn’t be right for instance, to feed any leftovers to your chickens.

4) Zwingli’s view

The 16th century reformer Zwingli believed that the bread and wine stay bread and wine. There is no change in them whatsoever. When we eat them, that simply encourages us to remember the Last Supper and Christ’s death and resurrection. But we don’t receive grace or spiritual communion with Christ through eating them; it’s just that remembering might make us more open to receive God’s grace in other ways. So for Zwingli, it was very much a memorial meal. There is certainly no Real Presence. The bread and wine aren’t changed into holy things – you could feed them to your chickens afterwards. And often the words used to describe the service are very neutral ones: the Lord’s Supper, the Breaking of the Bread.

The Church of England, being the Church of England, probably manages to embrace all four views from one extreme to the other, especially since the 19th century Oxford Movement gave rise to Anglo-Catholicism, which certainly back then would have accepted transubstantiation.

But the majority of Anglican churches would probably adopt either Cranmer or Luther’s views, avoiding too literal an understanding, but seeing Christ as either really or spiritually present in the bread and wine, and believing that the bread and wine become holy things – sacraments – the means of communion between us and God. It may well be best to follow Eastern Orthodoxy in avoiding trying to pin down the exact mechanisms, and instead say this is a holy mystery in which we somehow meet God and he meets us.

All of this may seem rather dry and academic, so let me also offer you three images which might say something in a different way about what is happening when we come to the altar rail.

The first image is that of an hour-glass – those old-fashioned glass containers with sand trickling through a narrow neck. We still sometimes use them as egg-timers. Preachers used to have them in pulpits to prevent them going on too long. Someone told me that back in the 1930s, the Revd Paul Rebbeck, the then vicar of St Peter’s

Wolvercote, was presented with an hour-glass by the wardens in an attempt to curtail his long sermons at Evensong!

Imagine that one half of the hour-glass denotes us and the other half denotes God.... And that the narrow neck is the moment of receiving the bread and wine of communion – where we meet God and he meets us. When we kneel at the altar rail and our part of the hour-glass is on top, we pour into that moment of receiving communion...

- all the thanksgivings we have inside us
- all our cares and burdens
- all our hopes and longings
- all our sins and failings
- all our fragilities and need for strengthening
- all our skills and talents, and desire to serve
- all our loves and passions
- really the essence of who we are.

Sometimes we do that consciously, with particular things in our thoughts. But very often we are doing it at a deeper level, without being aware of it.

Then, in that same moment of receiving communion, the hour-glass gets turned over, so God is at the top and we're at the bottom. Then it's his turn to pour into us all the good gifts he wants to give us: affirmation, encouragement, strength, forgiveness, hope, perseverance, healing, inspiration. And we leave the altar rail that bit different, because of what God has given us. We're not always conscious of what he has given us in that moment, but it will be in there at some deep level. The hour-glass represents this complementary act of pouring out/pouring into in the moment of receiving communion.

The second image I want to give you is that of God consuming us. When we come to the altar rail, we tend to think of it in terms of us coming to eat and drink, of us coming to consume. We are the active ones. And yet there is a very real sense in which we are offering ourselves to be consumed. We don't lose our identity or individuality through that. On the contrary we offer ourselves to receive ourselves back renewed and strengthened. God is the active one, joining us to himself through the bread and wine, consuming us into the Body of Christ in a mysterious, mystical way, at a deeper level than we can fathom. And through that 'being consumed' we become more fully the individuals God knows we can be, more fully ourselves. This is all very odd and paradoxical, I know, but then that's Christianity for you: "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16.25). So think less in terms of consuming the bread and wine, and more about being consumed by God through them.

The final image is that of a traditional squeeze-box, which you play by pushing in and pulling out to make the music. It's vital, I would say, to set receiving the bread and wine in the wider context of the world around us. We are not spiritually enriched by communion simply for our own internal health, but in order to go from this service to share that health with others in word and deed in whatever way we can. We are fed in order to feed. Communion therefore always looks outward to the communities we're

part of. We bring them with us to church in our hearts and we go back to them with willing hands and feet and ears.

So coming to church to receive the sacrament of bread and wine is a bit like a squeeze box. We come together to receive strength, healing, inspiration, ourselves renewed and invigorated, and then we go out to serve; and then back again to church the next Sunday, and then off out again. In and out, in and out – a holy rhythm. And of course, neither being always in, nor being always out, is healthy for us – we need the rhythm.

Three images then – an hour-glass, being consumed and a squeeze box – to set alongside some rather dryer, but very important, eucharistic theology.

Amen