

Sunday 2nd April 2006.
Passion Sunday
St Mary's

During Lent we have been reflecting on how we celebrate the eucharist together. We have been wondering how we can arrange that celebration so that we highlight the most important aspects of this central feature of our Christian worship.

In the past few weeks, as a result of our reflection, I have had a number of conversations with members of the congregation. Some people have welcomed the changes we are trying out; others have challenged them; yet others have been puzzled by them. What I have been at pains to say in all these conversations is that the changes have not been for change's sake. They have been made so that together we may experience something new of the promise and the challenge of the gospel of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

I have also wanted to suggest in my conversations that, in exploring change, we don't need to make life hard for ourselves as a congregation by creating false choices. It is not a case of saying that this aspect of our worship is important and that aspect is not. It is more a case of saying: this aspect is important **and so** is that. Usually, it is not a question of either/or but of both/and. This is what the sermons have been attempting to point to in the last few weeks. **Both** word **and** sacrament. **Both** altar **and** table. **Both** priest **and** people. Today our theme is **both** one **and** many.

Before we explore that theme, however, I would like to explain a little more what I meant by these changes not being for change's sake, but rather for the sake of experiencing in a fresh way the gospel of Christ.

Glance round this beautiful building for a moment. For some of you it will be very familiar. You may have been worshipping here all your life. For others it may be a strange place – this may be your first visit.

What you will notice, I guess, is that it is primarily a place of worship. The structure and the furnishings all endorse that. There are hints that it may be for social purposes – at the west end there is now a gathering area. Again, a small place has been created for children to play as well as pray. And there are a few clues that from time to time it is used for entertainment – concert programmes on the noticeboard, a piano (or two) as well as an organ (or two). But primarily it is for us a place of worship.

What is more, the structure and the furnishings suggest that it is primarily a place to worship of a particular kind of God. Built in the early middle ages, the structure of the building conveys something of the grandeur and power and remoteness of God. God as something of a feudal baron. If we enter through the west door (the best approach but not always practicable) our eye moves through the nave with its majestic arcades to the chancel and sanctuary and as we look further we realise

we are also looking upwards. The God to be worshipped in this place, the stones appear to say, is a God who is beyond – beyond our sight, beyond our imagination, quite other than us mortals.

Yet Christian faith in its fullness says that this God who is beyond is also in our midst. Both transcendent and immanent, to use the technical terms. The God beyond comes into our midst supremely in the person of Jesus Christ. Through his life and work, his death and resurrection we have the ultimate demonstration – the embodiment, indeed - of what God is like. In Jesus, God draws close to us and becomes our intimate. In Jesus God offers us an unconditional love and a path to our fulfilment as human beings. This intimate, vulnerable God is also the God we worship, as well as the majestic, powerful God. During the twentieth century, Christians came to appreciate more deeply how these two aspects of the divine needed to be held together. Somehow, if, through worship, we are to experience the gospel in all its fullness, we need, in

worship, to find ways of expressing this sense of God as “the-beyond-in-our-midst.” Gathering round the altar table, as we have been doing during Lent, is one way of expressing that – the ministers facing the rest of the assembly throughout, the choir incorporated more closely, receiving communion as far as is practicable around the altar-table.

It is as we gather to receive communion that some of the aspects of our theme today – the one and the many – are highlighted. Ideally, we would all be gathered round one altar-table sharing as one body in one bread and one cup. But here there are limitations. There is not room for all of us to gather at one time at the crossing. For some, the steps to the crossing are unmanageable and so, for the sake of inclusiveness, we create an opportunity to receive communion on the level. Again, some people have, deeply-felt, a preference for receiving communion kneeling. Their needs are met by a rail in the chapel. If some of the practical changes we have made during Lent, then, were in the future to

become permanent, we would need to consider what physical changes would facilitate this sense of being one family at God’s altar-table.

It is possible, of course, to overstate the extent to which communion is a corporate act. It is also for each of us an individual act. I am sure I have mentioned before the elderly woman who used to remove her spectacles whenever she came to church. When the vicar quizzed her about this, she replied that without her glasses she couldn’t see who the other people were in the congregation! That’s a caricature of how it is possible to exaggerate the individual aspect of communion.

There clearly needs to be both dimensions. However corporate an act we seek to make our eucharist, we need to be sure that everyone, whatever their particular preferences or eccentricities, is welcome at this central act of thanksgiving. At the moment of receiving communion, one form of words we use is

“The body (and the blood) of Christ keep *you* in eternal life.” The ‘you’ is singular (as it was unmistakably in the old Prayer Book – given for *thee*... shed for *thee*.) In the sacrament, Christ’s body and blood are given for each and every individual not just for the generality of those who are present.

Nonetheless, the eucharist is essentially a corporate act. The whole people of God come together and offer themselves as a corporate body, recognising that the strength and vitality of the church comes from Christians working together in the one body of Christ, complementing one another, supporting one another. As Michael Adie in his excellent little book “Held Together” says: “The eucharist is an occasion when the individual and the corporate find their completion in one another.”

And how do they find their completion? Partly of course by sharing together in the fellowship meal in which, blessed by God as it is, each worshipper enters into

communion with the others who are there. For this purpose the bread is broken and the wine is poured.

But not only that. For our communion is not simply with one another but with the God of Jesus Christ. We are sharing also – perhaps chiefly – with Christ in the eucharist. Through the broken bread and outpoured wine we are in a solemn, symbolic, real way taking part in his death and resurrection. Through this holy mystery of the sacrament of communion we are drawing his life of sacrificial love into ourselves. Severally and corporately, in this and every eucharist, having been counted worthy to stand in God’s presence, in our hearts, by faith with thanksgiving, we feed on Christ. No wonder then that we reflect from time to time on how we might renew our worship. It is a matter of life and death not only for each of us but for all of us in church and beyond.