

Sunday 5th March

Lent 1

St Mary's HH **Word and Sacrament**

The Prime Minister speaks on television, as a Christian, about the morality he believed lay behind his decision to take our country into war in Iraq. Bird 'flu with all its implications for human health, animal welfare and the rural economy hovers on our doorstep. Unemployment rises by seven and a half per cent in our town as a result of the Buncefield explosion, highlighting sharp issues about the wellbeing of our local community. And here we are in church.

Is there a real connection between our worship together in this ancient, hallowed place, week by week and the pains and dilemmas of the contemporary world in which we are caught up? Or are we here out of some desire to escape from these realities into another realm for which our religious faith and practice are preparing us?

I believe there is a real connection between the two and that the connection is established by the words and actions of this eucharist.

As you are sure to be aware, either from your observation of how the church looks this morning or from what you have read in the Lent leaflet, we are consciously focusing, for the next few Sunday mornings, on the eucharist and what it means for us.

And we are doing that because, for all of us at St Mary's, the eucharist is at the very heart of our common life together. If it were not central for each of us, we would not be here. We would have gone off elsewhere for worship to a church with a different tradition. If it were not central to all of us as a fellowship, we would by now have found some other way of worshipping.

Given the centrality of the eucharist for us, then, it is proper that we should take an opportunity from time to

time to reflect on what it means to us. It is right to consider if there are ways in which we celebrate the eucharist together that can highlight more effectively the most important aspects of it. And so the changes to the presentation of the eucharist today are designed to do just that – to highlight four vital features of our worship together.

Each such feature involves keeping a balance, it requires holding contrasts in tension – the word and the sacrament; the altar and the table; the priest and the people; the one and the many. And we are engaged in this consideration from a profound conviction that what doing here together every Sunday morning really matters. It really matters to the God who is the focus of our worship. It really matters to us who have in Christ glimpsed something of God's transforming power. And it really matters to the world, so shot through with grief and glory – a world in which

we are called to be the witnesses and instruments of the God of Jesus Christ.

So let us reflect for a few minutes on that first duality to be found in every eucharist – the duality of the Word and the Sacrament. As you will have noticed as we follow through the order of service, there are two main sections. The first is headed The Liturgy of the Word and the second the Liturgy of the Sacrament. In preparation for the first, there is a time of penitence; after the second, we are dismissed to serve God in his world.

Before we go any further, though, perhaps we should pause at the word Liturgy – a very churchy-sounding word unlikely to be used much nowadays outside the context of Christian worship. Yet when the Greek origins of the word were first formed, it had a much broader sense and referred to a public duty, a service to the state undertaken by a citizen. We should hold

onto that. The church's worship is not some secret, arcane ceremony for the benefit of insiders: it is a public act of service in God's name towards a world that so sorely needs to know of God's redeeming love. We should also hold onto the idea that liturgy is the work of the people; not just the clergy and a few others who like that kind of thing. No, it is the work of all God's people in which the energy of the laity (the laity) is harnessed.

So, then, we have the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Sacrament, the two main sections of the eucharist which are fused together by the sharing of the peace. It is characteristic of us as Anglicans to hold these two together. The more evangelical the tradition of a church, the more prominence the scriptures and their exposition will have; the more catholic (in its broadest sense), the more the emphasis on the mystery of the holy sacrifice enacted in the

bread and wine. As Anglicans, we hold the two together and give them equal weight.

So the Liturgy of the Word includes readings from the Bible which reach their climax in the Gospel – with a special book carried in procession and hailed, as the people stand, with an acclamation. I shall never forget from my visit to Brazil six years ago, the characteristic exuberance of the gospel acclamations there – with music and singing and dancing and brightly coloured streamers.

Although the gospel often speaks for itself, it does not always do so. It needs some form of exposition and so the liturgy of the word has room for a sermon, an offering of some insight into God's message for his people and its relevance for their lives, a modest contribution to the transformation God wills for them. And then, within the Liturgy of the Word, from the reading of the gospel and its exposition spring first an

affirmation of the faith that gospel has inspired and then, through the prayers of intercession, an expression of the love God's love for us engenders. They all flow from one another in a great outpouring, a cascade of heart and mind and soul. The Liturgy of the Word – of the Word of God.

That Word took human form, we believe, in the person of Jesus Christ. And Jesus, on the night before he died, instituted what has down the centuries become for us the Liturgy of the Sacrament. It is impossible to exaggerate how rich in meaning, how deep in significance, how awesome in holiness the sacrament of the eucharist has become for Christians over the years. *Words* cannot express it – not even the many words of the six eucharistic prayers now available to be used. Which is why the *actions* of the eucharist are so important. For these actions, like so many others, often speak louder than words.

Those actions are a spelling out of the words of Jesus at supper in the upper room the night before his execution. There was clearly something characteristic about his way of doing it, for the disciples on the road to Emmaus three days later at that first Easter recognized it. They had journeyed with the risen Jesus without recognizing him at first. They had listened to him interpret the scriptures (in a Liturgy of the Word, if you like) and now “when he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.” This was the Liturgy of the Sacrament in its earliest form. And through it “their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.”

Many of you I know are accustomed, when we reach the Liturgy of the Sacrament, to follow those four actions as they unfold. First there is the taking of the bread and wine once the table has been prepared; then there is the eucharistic prayer, through which the bread and wine are blessed; then the bread is broken

(and as it will be today) the wine is poured; and lastly there is the giving of communion. In those simple yet profound actions and the words that go with them, we are caught up with Jesus and his disciples in the upper room; with the whole life and death of Jesus and the new life he brings; and with the movement of God in our lives, too: taking, blessing, breaking, giving.

Here in the eucharist then word and sacrament are held together. In the way the eucharist is presented during Lent, maybe the elements of each will become more distinct and the connections between them will become clearer.

Through all this it is my prayer that our worship and our world will have an impact on one another; that the dilemmas we face as citizens (never as sharp as our brother-in-Christ Tony Blair, I guess); that the fears we have for our future on this planet; that the challenges we face within our own community; that all these will

be capable of some transformation in the light of our eucharist. May we, in Harvey Smith's words in the Lent leaflet, "find a little more of the wonder of heaven's golden light in earth's bread broken and wine outpoured."