

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

16/8/15

“This is my body broken for you ...”

I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

A few years ago, just before I was ordained as a Deacon in the Cathedral, I was busy preparing my invitation list. As an ordinand I was permitted to invite ten special guests who would have seating set aside for them fairly close to the front of the church. I decided to invite one of the parents at the school that I teach at, as Fuzail and I had developed a good friendship as I taught his two sons over the years. Fuzail was a committed Muslim and yet we shared much in common in terms of our daily struggles, life goals and values. Fuzail and his two sons duly attended my ordination, although in the rush of the moment, I never had a chance to speak to him personally. I then chatted to one of his sons a few weeks later when the new school term commenced. The report came back that both Fuzail and his sons enjoyed the service and were appreciative of the invite. What his son also said was that when it came to sharing the peace in the service, they had a strong sense that this was now obviously the end of the service. They had no idea that the communion was to follow, or in fact what it was.

This started me thinking ... I was quite surprised. I had naively thought that everyone knew what the communion was, even if you were of another religion. It then began to dawn on me that perhaps even I was at fault here. Over all the years of receiving communion, and perhaps more recently, being the presider, perhaps I had become complacent about our communion. I had begun to take it for granted...

When the John readings came up in the lectionary, I knew that this would be a perfect opportunity to revisit the importance of communion in our faith.

How did the theology of communion develop?

What are we actually doing and saying when we participate in communion?

How do we communicate properly?

So, how did the institution of the Eucharist develop?

The meals which Jesus is recorded as sharing during His earthly ministry proclaim and enact the nearness of the Kingdom, of which the feeding of the multitudes is a sign. In His last meal, the fellowship of the Kingdom was connected with the imminence of Jesus' suffering. After His resurrection, the Lord made His presence known to His disciples in the breaking of the bread. Thus the Eucharist continues these meals of Jesus during His earthly life and after His resurrection, always as a sign of the Kingdom. It is the new paschal meal of the church, the meal of the New Covenant, which Christ gave to His disciples as the anamnesis of His death and resurrection. Christ commanded His disciples thus to remember and encounter Him in this sacramental meal, as the continuing people of God, until His return. The last meal celebrated by Jesus was a liturgical meal employing symbolic words and actions. Consequently the Eucharist is a sacramental meal which by visible signs communicates to us God's love in Jesus Christ, the love by which Jesus loved His own to the end.

It has acquired many names, for example, the Lord's Supper, the breaking of the bread, the Holy Communion, the Divine Liturgy, the mass. Its celebration continues as the central act of the Church's worship.

What then is the meaning of the Eucharist?

The Eucharist is essentially the sacrament of the gift which God makes to us in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Every Christian receives this gift of salvation through communion in the body and blood of Christ. In the Eucharistic meal, in the eating and drinking of the bread and the wine, Christ grants communion with Himself. God Himself acts, giving life to the body of Christ and renewing each member. In accordance with Christ's promise, each baptised member of the body of Christ receives in the Eucharist the assurance of the forgiveness of sins and the pledge of eternal life.

- The Eucharist is also the great thanksgiving to the Father for everything accomplished in creation, redemption and sanctification.
- The Eucharist thus signifies what the world is to become: an offering and hymn of praise to the Creator, a universal communion in the body of Christ, a kingdom of justice, love and peace in the Holy Spirit.

- The Eucharist is also the memorial of the crucified and risen Christ.
- In the Eucharist, Christ empowers us to live with Him, to suffer with Him and to pray through Him as justified sinners, joyfully and freely fulfilling His will.
- The church confesses Christ's real, living and active presence in the Eucharist.
- The Holy Spirit through the Eucharist gives a foretaste of the Kingdom of God: the church receives the life of the new creation and the assurance of the Lord's return.
- The Eucharistic celebration demands reconciliation and sharing among all those regarded as brothers and sisters in the family of God.
- In the celebration of the Eucharist, Christ gathers, teaches and nourishes the church. It is Christ who invites to the meal and who presides at it. He is the shepherd who leads the people of God, the prophet who announces the Word of God, the priest who celebrates the mystery of God.

So what is good practice when it comes to participating in the Eucharist?

- Do your best to receive communion at least once a week as a practicing Christian. It is important that we continually affirm our faith in Christ through communion. He feeds us, nurtures us and loves us when we partake of His body and blood.
- Do your best to work at reconciling with those relationships in your life where there is conflict. We all go through times of conflict. This is part of being a human being. If you are unable to resolve the issue, at least hand it over to God in prayer. Be proactive in your life, as opposed to reactive. Grow in your relationships. Move on in your relationships if they are detrimental to your spiritual and emotional development.
- Go to confession. If you feel awkward about confessing to a Priest, then at least confess your sins to God in prayer. This is very important. Yes, I did go to confession very recently and it felt as if the world was lifted off my shoulders.

- When it comes to the actual participation in the Eucharist, be reverend and humble in your physical actions. Help the aged to the altar rail, assist the Mum struggling with three small children. Wait your turn with patience.
- It is always good practice to genuflect at the altar rail both before and after communicating if at all possible. If your knees are not up to a full genuflection, at least take a moment and give a reverend bow or nod of the head to the altar and the consecrated host and wine.
- It is preferable for the priest to place the host directly onto your tongue. If you feel uncomfortable doing this, then by all means receive the host in your hands, but then place the host directly into your mouth. Some people prefer to keep the host until they are offered the wine and then proceed to dip the host into the wine. This is known as tinkling. It is not forbidden, but should only be done as a last resort if you are really uncomfortable with sharing a chalice. I am not aware of anyone to date who has died from a communicable disease from sharing a chalice!
- It is good practice to make a sign of the cross both before receiving the host and the wine.
- It is also good practice to say Amen once you have received both the host and the wine.
- Should you drop the host out of your hands by accident, it is imperative that you pick it up immediately and consume it. If you are very uncomfortable about doing this, please inform the priest immediately and he or she will then personally consume the host and issue you with a new one. I once witnessed my previous rector pick up a half chewed host that had been spat out by a parishioner. He immediately placed it into his mouth and consumed it. When I queried the action in the vestry after mass, he explained to me that the only other correct action according to the traditional canons was to burn down the church!
- By all means go and light a candle after the Eucharist. This is a lovely symbolic way of both saying thank you to God for what you have just received and to pray for yourself and others. Do it with reverence.

- Once you return to your pew, spend some time in prayer thanking God for His gifts and pray for the week ahead.
- If you are aware of a friend or parishioner who is ill and unable to attend church for the Eucharist, please inform the priest or lay minister so that they can arrange the Eucharist to be taken to them. The Eucharist is for everyone, including the sick and the poor.

I am reminded of the beautiful words found in John:

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, so that whosoever shall believeth in Him, shall not perish, but have life everlasting.

God bless you in the Eucharist that you are about to participate in.

Amen.