

20151213Advent3Sermon

'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.' I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.

Are you worthy to untie Jesus' sandals? Well, if John the Baptist considers himself unworthy then surely we can't be worthy. On the other hand, we have been baptised in the name of God, the Holy Trinity – as John the Baptist goes on to say, 'He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.' We have also been confirmed and when the bishop laid hands on us, he said, 'Lord confirm and strengthen with your Holy Spirit, this your child.' Furthermore we have received the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist, a remembrance of Christ's death upon the cross for the forgiveness of our sin. Does this count for anything? Are we still unworthy? That maybe the case but can we judge others for being even more unworthy than we are and so prevent them from receiving Communion?

Today we are admitting to Holy Communion Seth Bowers. When Seth was baptised we welcomed him into the congregation with the words: *We welcome you into the Lord's family. We are **members together** of the body of Christ, **we are children of the same heavenly father**; we are **inheritors together** of the Kingdom of God. We welcome you.* Then we spend the next 16 years not being very welcoming to Seth or any of the other children who are baptised. We tell them they can't receive Communion like we do, that they are only 'good enough' to receive a blessing. Only when they are old enough to be confirmed do we start begrudgingly welcoming them into the body.

Baptism then confirmation then partaking of Holy Communion. That is the practice. But how did that practice come about? It is a forgotten fact, but true, that children – including infants – received Communion for about the first 1200 years of the church's existence. In the Orthodox Church the newly baptised babies receive Holy Communion via a special spoon, but us Anglicans used to insist on no communion until confirmation.

The Changes of practice from all receiving to only adult confirmed Christians receiving happened gradually, as a result of circumstances. Baptism and confirmation became separated because the bishops, who originally did both, hadn't the time to go around to all parish to assist those needing these sacraments. It became accepted that baptism should be carried out by the local parish priest. Then we had to wait for a visit from the Bishop. And what was changed for practical reasons gradually came to be justified theologically. In fact many theologians say that Confirmation is a sacrament looking for a theology.

After controversy about the Eucharistic presence in the eleventh century, the Western Catholic church withdrew the bread from children. In the next century it decided to withhold the cup from all lay people, mainly to distinguish itself from the Eastern orthodox church. Thus children had no way at all of receiving Communion.

When, in the sixteenth century, the Western church split into Roman Catholic and Protestant, children remained excluded from Communion. This was because the Protestant emphasis was on biblical knowledge and personal commitment and so this led to the establishment of pre-confirmation catechism classes – which were not offered to younger children.

Anglicans inherited the belief that children could not be admitted to communion until they had been instructed and confirmed. This assumption is today seriously questioned and in most Anglican churches it is a thing of the past.

Last Saturday, Seth and I spent just over an hour talking about and learning about Eucharist, Covenant, Body and Blood, and Prayer. I am now happy that Seth has a relatively good understanding of what the Eucharist is and the benefits he receives by partaking of this sacrament. Not that we will every fully understand, it is very much a sort of a gut feeling about the good it does for and to us. But it is something we need to prepare for, to think about. Jesus in all his teaching always asked questions in order to make the people think. In fact in quite a few places he actually says to his disciples: "What do you think?" Have you thought about how we treat our baptised members – particularly children?

But there is something else I want you to think about. Some people have asked me why I hardly ever say the Prayer of Humble Access when I preside at the Eucharist. For many Anglicans this prayer is very special. In fact one could say that it is quintessentially Anglican because doesn't occur in the Roman Catholic or Lutheran liturgies of the Eucharist. This prayer is Thomas Cranmer's supreme culmination of creative liturgical writing.

In our APB 1989 Prayer Book, this magnificent prayer is placed in brackets – meaning that it may be omitted. And that is what I do... but why? Why is it in brackets and why do I omit it? Well, my immediate response to anyone who asks me is, 'The opening words... "We do not presume to come to this your table..." are harping back to our sinful state in which we first came to church. But in the opening page of our service we called to mind and confessed our sins. And the presider prayed that Almighty God who forgives all who truly repent; would pardon our sins. This we believe and acknowledge as part of our preparation. But now, moments before being called forward to receive the unearned grace of the sacrament of the body and Blood of Christ, we fall to our knees again and say we do not **presume** to come to the Lord's table and not **worthy** to gather up the crumbs under the Lord's table.

Now, I wondered if there were perhaps other reasons that certain clergy omit this Prayer of Humble Access, so I googled *Reasons for omitting the Prayer of Humble Access*. Wow! Did I open up a can of worms! Those of you who know the Anglican Church well will know that there is a broad spectrum of beliefs among us Anglicans. I have heard it described as being a 'Big Tent' Church, meaning that in our big tent we will find Christians of strongly protestant and evangelical variety and those of strict High Anglo-Catholic variety and from both these wings of the Church we get different reasons for omitting or including the Prayer of Humble Access. There is an old saying which goes that Anglican Church has three parts which can be described as "High and crazy; broad and hazy; low and lazy". This saying although it rhymes beautifully is not that accurate these days. Yes, some high Anglo-Catholic churches do appear a bit crazy in their fanaticism on each and every action and motion in their liturgy, and, yes, the broad church – which I suspect St Paul's would fall under – is a bit hazy in some of their theological understandings, however, the low church or Evangelical church is anything but Lazy these days. They are the most enthusiastic and active among Anglican Churches. So as I said, each of these branches have a different reason for omitting or including the Prayer of Humble Access.

Anglo-Catholic Anglicans often use the so-called Anglican Missal which is a re-working of the old Roman Catholic liturgy of the Mass. Now, because the prayer of Humble Access was written by Cranmer especially for his Book of Common Prayer in England and in English, it is omitted by these Catholic oriented Anglicans because it is a Protestant addition Mass. A good point in favour of Anglo-Catholicism is the beauty of their worship. And the words of the Prayer of Humble Access are so beautiful that some other Anglo-Catholics included it enthusiastically.

Now many of you might remember the old BCP words for this prayer. Our APB version doesn't merely change the 'thys' in to 'yous', it also omits the last few lines which state: *that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body and our souls washed through his most precious blood*. This is where the more evangelicals Anglicans have a theological problem which causes them to omit this prayer completely. They claim that those lines: *that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body and our souls washed through his most precious blood* imply that by merely partaking of Communion we will have our sins washed away. This would therefore imply that it is by our own actions – i.e. us taking communion our sins are removed not by God's action.

Another area of concern is the whole grovelling before the altar of God. No, I'm not saying I **am** worthy to receive but aren't we over-emphasising our unworthiness? This prayer has led to many people coming to Communion and actually not receiving simply because this prayer keeps telling us how unworthy we really are. The Prayer of Humble Access comes at a point after we have already been assured that we are standing at God's table through the grace and love of God. Furthermore, this is the moment of consummation, not the moment to step back and protest our own humility. To say at this moment "we do not presume ..." poses the danger of being over-anxious to demonstrate our own righteousness and to protest our own humility. We might appear to be saying something like: "Oh, you may think you're very merciful, God, but you clearly don't understand how seriously humble I am ..."

Finally, we can blame the good old Protestant Reformation for many people disliking this prayer. I want to use some psychological reasoning here. I know you all love the old Book of Common Prayer and the wonderful Elizabethan language and prose. But to quote Jesus again: "What do you think?" Have you thought about the actual words we use from our Prayer Book? Can you say 'Amen' –So be it - to the prayers that are prayed here? Some Children are brought up by parents who use shame and guilt to get their children to do what they want them to do. Instead of critiquing the behaviour of the child, parents shame the child himself ("YOU are bad! You are no good! You don't deserve my love!"). Shamed persons learn to see themselves as unworthy, inadequate, undeserving, not because of **what they did** but because of **who they are**. Later, the child internalises those voices, and they become a part of the child's internal dialogue, their script for life, the child's own self-shaming messengers. The voices of shame-inducing parents are no longer needed. They have been incorporated into the child's psyche and can only be extricated when

replaced with self-affirming messages. What we say about ourselves matters. If we have been trained to tell ourselves just how unworthy and unlovable we are, we can only recover by changing the message.

The language of prayers and the rituals in our worship can have the effect of increasing one's sense of personal shame. In the Prayer of Humble Access we admit that "we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your Table." Why should we be shameful and fearful of partaking in something Jesus told, no instructed, us to do in memory of him?

The Liturgy we use is mostly derived from the sixteenth century and that period in England was influenced by the theology of John Calvin, but our liturgy continues to influence how present day Christians understand themselves. The shaming of church members is a time honoured technique of all Christian denominations. A central tenet of John Calvin's theology is "the total depravity of humankind". The assumption that there is something inherently wrong with **all** human beings, something dark and evil that exists even at birth and that can only be "fixed" by obedience to God, adds coals to shame-based fires first lit by parents in homes where behaviour was controlled by being shamed-based.

The scary thing in all this is that the church seems to like this shamed-based control of people's lives because shamed parishioners, like shame-based children, are more easily controlled by church leaders. Children shamed as children by authority figures like parents and teachers will respond submissively to religious authority figures as well. Furthermore, all institutions have sadistic tendencies, including the church.

So that is why I do not use the Prayer of Humble Access at each and every service. You might be sitting there and saying, "Oh what a lot hogwash, what rubbish!" It may be to you, but what about the person sitting next to you? What about Seth Bowers, about to receive communion for the first time?

If you **have** thought about these words, as Jesus said, *What do you think*, and **you** have no problem using them, feel free to use the Prayer of Humble Access as a personal preparation before the service or before you walk up to the altar but also allow those who don't accept its theology the right to avoid it.