



Discerning the Body

A Pastoral Letter to the Teulu Asaph from Bishop Gregory
Thursday, 11th June, 2020, the Feast of Corpus Christi

I was torn this week about the focus of my pastoral letter. I so much wanted to write to you about the Holy Trinity, yet today is an often overlooked feast day in the Church's calendar, Corpus Christi, or as we Anglicans in Wales like to call it, Thanksgiving for Holy Communion. So the Trinity will have to wait a week.

When St Paul wrote to the Corinthian Church about their celebrations of the Eucharist, he spoke very directly and sternly about what was going on. "Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgement on himself." (1 Cor 11.28,29) What is this about "discerning the Body"? I believe that Paul meant two things.

First, although Communion feeds those who receive it, it is not intended as an individual thing. In some church denominations, the wine of Communion is distributed in tiny individual cups, and in the early days of coronavirus, it was suggested that perhaps Anglicans should share the Eucharist in such a way. I resisted that suggestion, because for me, the symbolism of us coming together and sharing from one cup emphasises that we have the one Lord and Saviour, that we drink from the same fountain of salvation that he opened for us on Calvary, and that Communion is shared not just with God, but with each other. We are bound together into one Body as we receive Communion. To discern the Body is therefore to recognise this fact, to recognise that once we take Communion together our own relationship is changed; in the Lord, we are sister and brother, irrevocably and eternally, because we are bought by Christ. This is one of the reasons why, although I am sure that we miss Communion sorely, I do not think it right to parcel it out, or place our own bread and wine in front of the screen. To eat and drink as if it is a private thing, a gift for us alone, is to fail to discern the corporate aspect of what we are doing.

Secondly, Paul is quite clear that partaking of the bread and wine of the Eucharist is not just a sharing of ordinary bread and wine. "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Cor 10.16) Christians have argued for centuries, and blood has been spilt, about the nature of the change that undergoes the bread and wine of the Communion in the Eucharist, and many of us may have learned the little poem of Queen Elizabeth I that tried to short-circuit the debate: "His was the word that spake it, he took the bread and brake it, and what his word doth make it, that I believe and take it." For me, the answer is in Dr Who's tardis, which I think most people will know is bigger on the inside. Outwardly, we see no change in the bread and the wine. By Christ's word and command, however, on the inside, the whole treasury of God's grace becomes present to be offered to us as God's gift. To fail to discern the Body is to fail to recognise that God is really present in the eucharistic elements.

Catholic Christians tend to describe the Eucharist as the summit of Christian worship. This is not just because when we celebrate the Eucharist we are obeying Christ's explicit command, but because this is the great sacrament by which the Christian is nourished by the gift of God's grace. Some churches see themselves primarily Churches of the Word, where the Bible is faithfully preached; others describe themselves as sacramental churches, where the entire emphasis is on the frequent celebration of the Eucharist. Anglicans, classically, place themselves in the middle as a Church of Word and Sacrament. Originally, the Latin word "sacramentum" meant something that was dedicated to God, and entirely surrendered to the divine. However, like many things, Christians nudged the meaning of the word, so that a Sacrament is an action set apart for God, but through which God gives himself to us. We give bread and wine to God; God transforms it, and gives it back to us, to feed us with his grace and strength, to enable us to live in faith. I look forward to the day when we may share in the Eucharist once again.

However, the concept of sacrament goes further. God's love is eternal and generous, and his grace, the powerful, passionate, loving attitude he has towards us, flows through creation. To be a sacramental Christian is to see God's grace surrounding us, channelled to us and through us in a myriad ways. As we remember today how Christ gives himself to us in the "wonderful sacrament of the body and blood of Christ", let us open ourselves to be a channel of his love – to a neighbour, to a friend, to a family member – even within the restrictions of social distancing, and discern that God at work in more ways than we could suspect.