

THE EUCHARIST & GOD'S MYSTERIOUS PRESENCE

For the tradition I received from the Lord and also handed on to you is that on the night he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread, and after he had given thanks, he broke it saying 'This is my body which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way with the cup after supper, he said, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Whenever you drink it, does this as a memorial of me.' Whenever, you eat this bread and drink this cup you are proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

'This is my body! This is my blood!' These are very familiar, very central, words in the Christian tradition but to what do they refer and how? Attempting to begin to answer this will touch on the theme of presence, some of the ways God is present to us and hopefully begin to cast light on why the Eucharist is called 'the Mystery of Faith'.

The Word that makes itself present in material form

In a way Jesus refers to his own flesh and blood – his own human identity, taken from Mary, that first spoke these words in front of the apostles and who could see, hear and touch him (cf 1 John 1). He is also referring to the bread and wine. In some sense they too are, as a result of these words being spoken, the body and blood of Jesus. This is what the Greek says and this is what the early Christians understood it to mean. It is also evident from the charges of cannibalism and related accusations made against the Church that these opponents knew that Christians believed Jesus to be really present and thus really 'consumed' with the bread and wine. The early Church never sought to take the heat out of these accusations by denying the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Clearly their opponents did not really understand how God was present and consumed – and the early Church writers such as St Justin Martyr (d. 165 AD) attempted to respond to all this.

We are inclined to protest that creating such a presence exceeds the power of human words. It is important to remember that these were words of the Word of God – the same Word that existed before all time and through whom the world was created. A word so powerful as to bring into being and make present what did not exist can surely make himself present under the appearance of something he has already created from nothing.

Transformed into what we eat, God becomes present within us

When we eat the bread and drink the wine, when we eat his body and drink his blood what are we? What do we become? Normally food and drink become part of us because in a sense they have been created and prepared for us. But we have been created and prepared for God – for Jesus – and so we become part of him! We become the body of Christ. Thus Jesus can say of us, individually and collectively, "This – you – are my body. You are my blood." This is nearly the same language that Adam used to address his bride Eve, "You are flesh of my flesh." The two of them became one. Similarly, Christ and the Church are one. We are his body and his bride. He is present in us and in our flesh. Holy Communion is union with Christ. This also makes us one with each other, as many grains make one loaf, as living stones in one spiritual yet human temple.

It is these ideas that Paul draws out in 1 Corinthians 12. He is not just drawing an analogy with a human body and its various biological organs and functions. He is also drawing on a reality he had experienced in Christian liturgy, from celebrating the tradition that he and the

other apostles had received from the Lord and passed on (1 Corinthians 11:23). In fact, Paul was probably stimulated to take up the biological analogy that he develops in 1 Corinthians 12 precisely because he knew the community was the Body of Christ and was this because of the Eucharist (1 Corinthians 10:16). 1 Corinthians 12 follows very closely on from his words to the Corinthians about the Eucharist which in turn follow on from a discussion of other bodily matters (sex and food). He returns to still other bodily matters later too when he teaches and reflects on the resurrection of the body (1 Corinthians 15). Being (in) the body of Christ is the key to resolving all these issues at Corinth.

A present presence that looks back and looks forward

The Eucharist is full of symbols. Broken bread is his body broken on the cross. Poured wine is his blood poured out for us. They are given to us like he was given for us. But these are not just a reminder but act as a memorial, like the Jewish liturgies it fulfils. Memorials make the commemorated event and its grace present, renewing it in and for us. Christ is *the* event and he is made present. To die again? No! Sin and death have no more power over him. He has died and is risen and can die no more – but we receive its fruits. It is as much a union with his Risen Presence too. Where is this now? In heaven! Thus it is a share in his glorified life too. In fact this is what makes it all possible. The Son of God being present now means a bodily dimension is present too since he has united human nature to his divine person forever. This is what the Incarnation and Resurrection mean. Thus what we eat is truly the Bread of Heaven (John 6:51). We are caught up into the worship of Heaven (cf Hebrews 9), participating in the work of our great High priest there, receiving its benefits. The fullness of all this will only be seen when he comes again in glory, raising up our bodies, which have been nourished by his glorious body, to be like his own in a still more glorious way. We now receive his life so that we can, on that final day, receive it fully. Thus as Paul says (1 Corinthians 11:26) we celebrate the Eucharist looking back to and proclaiming the meaning of the Cross and what that opened up and looking forward in hope to its fulfilment when he comes again. Until then, we are fed in hope, fed with the Bread of Heaven that is a foretaste of what is to come and food for the journey. There may well be a reference to this in the Lord's Prayer, especially if we take a literal reading of the Greek: "Give us today ['each day' in Luke] our *bread of the morrow*" (Matthew 6:11, Luke 11:3).

It is the Spirit that gives life – making the Divine present

All this is part of the New Covenant, celebrated in the Eucharist. Baptism opens the door to this living in and feeding on Jesus' saving presence. We die, leaving the nature of the Old Adam behind, to emerge from the waters of baptism, and rise to new life in the New Adam, incorporated into his body which gives us his life. All this happens in and through matter but it is the Spirit that brings life (John 6:63). The flesh of itself has nothing to offer but the Spirit works through it (John 6:53 ff.).

It is the action of the Holy Spirit who is called down upon the Eucharistic gifts. As the priest's hands overshadow them in this gesture of invoking the presence and power of the Spirit, they recall the same Spirit hovering over the watery chaos at creation and the same Spirit overshadowing Mary at the moment of the Incarnation. So too, he hovers over the baptismal water when Christ is born in us, when we are born again 'from above' in him.

The Eucharist expresses so much of the richness of Divine presence and thus declares and proclaims the core of the gospel. It also has the power to make us effective evangelists since it is God's presence that saves us and that we are to announce and bring to others. Thus we are

sent out with the words “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord!” The Lord goes with us,
present as he promised (Matthew 28:20).

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