

LITURGY OF THE SACRAMENT

Lent III 2018 – St Michael & All Angels, Barnes

TAKING, BLESSING, BREAKING, SHARING

How to describe the liturgy of the sacrament – the central act and drama of our faith?

Whatever we call it: The Mass, the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, the Holy Communion – it is the worship that Jesus gave to us to remember him and in which he is mystically present in bread and wine.

We can only use the shape Jesus himself gave us:

*'When he was at the table with them, he **took** bread, **blessed** and **broke** it, and **gave** it to them.*

This is the four-fold action at the heart of the four-fold drama:

- Taking
- Blessing
- Breaking
- Sharing

It is by enacting what Jesus did that he is present to us once again.

THE PEACE

But before we can do this, there is something else we must do.

Jesus tells us *'leave your gifts at the altar – first, go and be reconciled'*.

So the liturgy of the Sacrament begins with the peace, we cannot continue until we have shown that we have forgiven each other.

Properly, this is called 'The kiss of peace'.

Throughout the epistles St Paul is always saying, *'Greet one another with a holy kiss'*.

To this day, kissing is the usual greeting among both men and women in the middle east and Mediterranean. My family being Greek and French, I remember family gatherings which seemed to involve endless exchanges of kisses!

We might hug or kiss a family member beside us – but most of us shake hands. We greet not just our family and friends, but also those around us - because our love extends beyond our own loved ones, even to those we don't know or even really like.

If we cannot do this then we are not united with our brothers and sisters and cannot – we should not - receive communion.

THE OFFERTORY

Reconciled, we go to offer our gifts at the offertory.

In the early Church, people brought bread and wine from their own homes. Today, the gifts of bread and wine still come from and through the people in procession from the nave to the sanctuary – this movement is the pilgrimage of our homecoming, our movement towards God.

We offer these gifts because all life is gift.

We offer back to God what he has given to us, only to receive it back again from him with love.

We offer the ordinary things of life – bread and wine – for blessing and transformation.

We offer our money too.

For good or ill, in our culture money has become the symbol of what matters to us.

The collection is an expression of our gratitude for all that God has done for us. It symbolises the whole working week

Our strengths, talents, endurance all come from God and are ultimately for God.

By giving we are dying to self, and showing that our faith is ultimately in God and not in wealth.

God's grace makes us givers.

When the Altar is prepared, the gifts, altar and people are censed – all things are sanctified through the Eucharist. In Revelation, when God is present in his temple it says '*the house was filled with smoke*' so now, we fill this house with incense as a sign of his presence here.

SURSUM CORDA, PREFACE AND SANCTUS

The Eucharistic Prayer begins with a greeting,

and then we are invited to *'lift up our hearts'* - we set aside all earthly cares and anxieties and we lift ourselves up to the heavenly liturgy, and to the glory of God.

We are then asked to *'give thanks to the Lord our God'* because Eucharist means 'thanksgiving', and thanks and praise are the right response to the love he has shown us.

The preface, which changes with the liturgical season, leads into the Sanctus. We sing 'Holy! Holy! Holy! As we are being brought into the presence of the angels and saints around God's throne.

From here, we are led directly into the Benedictus, singing the words of St John who pointed to Christ – *'blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'* - for God's holiness is not separate from the world but in it and with it and through it.

As we prepare to come into the presence of God, we kneel.

Whereas sitting helps us listen, and standing to sing, so kneeling changes our level of attention and requires something more sacrificial from us. It speaks of adoration and humility as we move towards the consecration itself.

CONSECRATION, ANAMNESIS, EPICLESIS and AMEN

It is impossible to describe what we are doing in the Eucharist.

Millions of words have been written, to our shame wars have been fought and still Christians never quite agree – because it is a mystery – so what can we say?

Jesus took bread, and gave it to us as his body.

Perhaps only poetry can describe what this might mean.

St Thomas Aquinas wrote:

'What God's Son hath told me/take for true I do/truth himself speaks truly/or there's nothing true'.

All we can do is repeat the very words that Jesus used, and do the very things he did and take him at his word.

As the Eucharistic prayer continues, there is the *anamnesis*, the remembering of Christ's life and work of salvation. Not remembering Christ as something past, but bringing something to mind in order to make it present. God is not past but present tense: This IS my body. This IS my blood.

And we invoke the Holy Spirit upon both gifts and people in the *epiclesis*. A priest's hands hover over the bread and wine like the Holy Spirit hovering over the waters of creation in Genesis – a new creation is taking place.

At every Eucharist, we remember that Christ's blood was shed because of the human thirst for violence. Christ is not God's victim. He does not placate an angry God by standing in our place. Christ is the victim who stands in the place of our victims and scapegoats – to show us that God does not want victims. In the Mass we are not *repeating* the sacrifice of Christ – we are *participating* in it.

The Eucharistic Prayer ends with the doxology – the praises of the glory of God – and we all response with the great Amen.

If we have said this simple word all our lives it is easy to overlook its significance.

It means '*truly*'.

This is your signature as people of God.

How often are we asked online, '*Have you read and accepted the terms and conditions*'?

We are used to ticking boxes and signing documents without really reading them – but this should not be case with this word.

We should not say it weakly as if we are embarrassed but as if we really mean it.

We have read the terms and conditions revealed by the self-offering of Christ, and we assent with boldness and with joy.

LORD'S PRAYER, FRACTION, AGNUS AND INVITATION

Now a transition takes place, as we prepare to receive what we have offered, and what is given back to us in love.

This is marked by the Lord's Prayer. The Prayer given to the Church by Christ, who taught us to say '*give us this day our daily bread*'. We see that it means not just physical food but also spiritual nourishment.

The bread is broken, just as Christ's body was broken on the Cross – we must break in order to share, but this sharing demonstrates our unity despite the fractured nature of our lives.

And we pray the Agnus Dei, an ancient prayer addressed to Jesus himself as the Lamb of God, that leads into the invitation to communion.

When St John pointed to Christ he said, *'Behold the Lamb of God'* and so at this point, we should look up at Christ in form of bread and wine as they are held up for all to see. We might say silently at this point the prayer of St Thomas, who when he met the Risen Lord declared, *'My Lord and my God!'*

The table is prepared, the food is ready and you are invited to the table.
God comes to us whether we deserve it or not.
It is not our deserving but Christ's that matters.

COMMUNION

So we come.

We come to communion – the place where God shares his very self with us.
'Nothing in my hands I bring/safely to the cross I cling' says one of today's hymns.

We come with empty hands to receive God's gift to us.

The Wise men offered their gifts, and then their hands were empty to receive.
If our hands are full we cannot receive.

We discover our emptiness, and we ask God to fill us with his love.

This is the climax of the drama, and our personal encounter with Christ.

What are to make of this thin tasteless wafer and this little sip of wine?

Is it really the foretaste of the heavenly banquet?

Is this the best we can offer?

It is.

The Eucharist is the food that makes us hunger more for God.

It satisfies, but also increases our desire.

This fundamentally differs from consumerist culture, which cultivates our desire for things that never really satisfy, increasing our desire but without the hope of fulfilment.

The Eucharist is different, it looks to the day when we shall find complete fulfilment in God's presence.

If we accept this gift, we accept all it means for our lives.

That all is not lost.

That God is present.

That love wins.

RETURNING

After communion, we return to our places.

Not to stare around, I hope, at the people going up to communion or wonder what's for lunch - but to give thanks for the gift we have just received.

How do we receive this gift – not just at this Eucharist – but every day of our lives?

How and where do we encounter him in other places too?

Having received such a gift, it leads us inescapably to a conclusion. Not just of the service itself, but of a realisation – we cannot keep this to ourselves – so we prepare to be sent out into world, in the final act of the drama of the Eucharist, in the blessing and dismissal.