

Thursday was the feast of Corpus Christi, otherwise known as the Day of Thanksgiving for the Gift of Holy Communion. Because we were unable to have a celebration of the Eucharist on that day, we have transferred the celebration to today. So today we give thanks for and celebrate the mystery of the Eucharist, God's ongoing gift of Jesus Christ in the Sacrament.

But, this year, our celebration for the gift of Holy Communion feels very different. As we are unable to gather as one physical community to physically share in this precious gift, we find ourselves uniting around the Eucharist in a very different way, but even though we may be at a distance its power to transform and feed our souls and unite us as one body in Christ is as potent as ever, maybe even more so.

The Eucharist reminds us that the Church is not constituted by community as though it were any other social club anymore than it is constituted by its buildings. The Sacrament of Holy Communion reminds us that the Church is made by, through and in Christ alone. It is he who flows into every aspect of its life and gives it its purpose for being.

Did you know that there are those who suggest that the first Eucharist can be found in the Old Testament, not being offered by Jesus, but by The Priest King of Salem, Melchizedek.<sup>1</sup> Following Abram's victory over king Chedorlaomer, Melchizedek brought bread and wine as a sacrificial offering and then blessed Abram. Melchizedek is the first priest mentioned in the Old Testament. Throughout scripture we see him referred back to as the most uncorrupted example of priesthood. His blessing is important to Abraham as he begins a journey to become the father of God's people and the great holy nation. Interestingly this is the only time Melchizedek is mentioned in person in the entire Old Testament. We see him nowhere else. On this one occasion, this really

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 14

important occasion, what do we see him doing? Offering bread and wine as a sacrifice and thanksgiving.

In a similar way, Jesus blesses and shares bread and wine as he prepares to leave his disciples at the Last Supper. It is interesting how, of all the different forms of Jewish sacrifice Jesus could use at this significant moment, he chooses to model Melchizedek in the first and most simple act of sharing bread and wine. After this Jesus declares God's eternal kingdom that is not subject to the deterioration and destruction of the earthly realm. A kingdom where rust and moth do not decay.<sup>2</sup> Jesus clearly offers the Eucharist as a ritual act to keep us in touch with this eternal kingdom.

But he doesn't just do it the once. Christ blesses and shares bread and wine with his disciples again on the road to Emmaus following his resurrection. He intentionally associates this sharing of bread and wine with the resurrected life – in fact, before he does this the disciples do not recognise who he is in his resurrected form, it is only in the breaking of bread that we can see him for who he truly is... and the disciples rejoice.<sup>3</sup>

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews also plays up the association between Melchizedek and Jesus. The writer uses this to underpin his argument that Jesus is the Messiah, by drawing upon the Psalmist's earlier prediction that 'he is a priest forever after the order or Melchizedek'.<sup>4</sup>

But there is more. Throughout the book of Revelation, we hear that worshipful feasting in God's presence is a fundamental part of the heavenly life. In the Eucharist we get fleeting glimpses of this eternal banquet as it opens our eyes to the heavenly life we are called to.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-38; 1 Cor. 11:17-34

<sup>3</sup> Luke 24:31

<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 7:17

It is understandable then, that from the beginning the Early Church practised blessing and sharing bread and wine in Jesus' name as a spiritual ritual, just as he had instructed them to do. Christians have continued to practice this as a central aspect of faith ever since. In fact, the Eucharist has been celebrated across the world every day since Christ ascended to his Father in heaven. For two thousand years Christians have had their souls fed in this mystical way.

Every Sunday as we gather around God's altar, we join with billions of other Christians the world over, all sharing the Eucharist, spanning all languages, cultures and time-zones.

These past few weeks, we have been reminded of just how divided our world can be. And rightly this can cause us great alarm. In a divided world, there can be no stronger statement of unity than sharing in the Holy Eucharist.

As we receive this most precious gift, we are forced to recognise that all are equal in the eyes of God - the haughty are made low and the humble lifted up. In God's kingdom there is no rich or poor, male or female, black or white, just individual human beings all with an equal dignity. This is God's economy where all are welcomed and loved, saint and sinner, young and old. Earthly power has no dominion here.

And so, we must be wary of reducing the Eucharist down to our own comfortable level. It is too mysterious and profound for that. This Blessed Sacrament is as old as faith itself – mysteriously offered as the first recorded spiritual sacrifice in the wildlands by the first priest of God, Melchizedek, to the Father of faith, Abraham. Offered as a mysterious Passover celebration by the Son of God before his death and Resurrection. Offered by the risen Christ as a symbol by which his followers would recognise his presence with them for all eternity. And subsequently offered by the Christian Church from its origin to this very day where it draws us into this timeless narrative, again and again.

God gave us the Eucharist as the one thing we shouldn't fight over. Words can be interpreted in many different ways, actions can be misinterpreted, but at the Last Supper Christ gave us bread and wine as the one thing that should unite us as his friends – “do this in remembrance of me”, he says, “for my body is true food and my blood is true drink”.

I'll leave you with a story, a story that will resonate with many.

Very occasionally, a priest can walk into a church to take a Holy Communion service but there is no-one present. It can be very disheartening.

One day, in just this way, a priest arrived for the morning Eucharist to find only the assistant server present. The disheartened priest contemplated locking the church and going home, but he felt a duty to continue.

As he approached the Altar and began the Eucharistic prayer, suddenly the church filled up. Every chair was taken. Out of the corner of his eye, as he recited the holy words of our Lord, he felt that everyone present was in some way familiar to him. So good did the gathered body make him feel, that as he elevated the bread and chalice one final time, he could see Christ's radiance glowing from them. He felt lighter than air and luminous with joy. He was so very glad that he hadn't followed his earlier impulse to go home early.

Then as he distributed communion, the building emptied. By the time that the Giving of Communion was over, only he and the server remained. It was only then that he realised that they had been joined by a heavenly host, all those people he had prayed with and for throughout his life, all the saints who had gone before, every loved one he had ever lost and every person he would ever meet in the future.

At every Eucharist we join with all who stand in heaven's timeless splendour surrounded by the sweet-smelling savour of heavenly praise and eternal feasting in God's presence. In these holy mysteries, we are joined by all those we have loved and will ever love, all our ancestors and every faithful person past, present and future as we look to receive divine mercy through this most blessed of meals. All we have to do is gaze upon these blessed gifts and our hearts are fed.

As I stand here joined by God's faithful people, together with God's blessed gifts, something deep down inside me knows that all this is true!

Amen

*R. T. Parker-McGee SR 2020*