

Corpus Christi Homily 2024

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Today we give thanks that Jesus gave us the Eucharist; the Lord's Supper, the Mass.

The Eucharist is both immanent and transcendent. It brings us into the intimate personal presence of Jesus as friend and teacher, to a meal in a small room two thousand years ago.

It also brings us into the presence of the almighty God of the cosmos, beyond our comprehension, holy and glorious, before whom we would be moved to utter silence and awe.

Jesus is both God and man, truly divine and truly human. In his very person, Jesus is both beloved friend and numinous Lord. This is the paradox of the Eucharist, because this is what the incarnation is about; God among us; the Word made flesh; flesh that died on the cross and rose from the dead.

The eternal and unimaginable God taking a human body, speaking to us in words we can understand, making God's self available to us through bread we can eat and wine we can drink.

How then should we celebrate such a mysterious rite? How should we communicate both the Upper Room, with its ordinariness and fellowship *and* the strange, perhaps terrifying, reality of Jesus, the crucified and risen God-man?

So much Christian debate about the Eucharist seems to revolve around these questions. Some Christians emphasise the simplicity of the meal, the sharing of bread and wine with friends, the storytelling; others, now and throughout the ages, see the Eucharist through a much grander lens – as a mystery, a sacrifice, a ritual and a drama.

For some, the bread and wine are unspeakably holy, and for others they are powerful yet ordinary. Much ink – and sadly much blood – has been shed over the Eucharist. At least we can all agree that it matters profoundly.

This morning, I am not going to give you an exhaustive theology of the Eucharist, you'll be relieved to hear! I just want to draw your attention to two ways in which Anglican Christians, of our own Communion, have depicted the rite we celebrate.

You will find these printed on the back of your pewsheets.

Our first image is of a celebration of the Lord's Supper in a Church of England parish of the seventeenth century. This celebration is deeply influenced by the theology of the Reformation, a period in which Western European Christians radically changed their ideas about the Eucharist.

The image is a wood-cutting found in a *Catechism*, a text intended to instruct people in the truths of the faith.

I hope you will notice a couple of things about this image. First, notice the seating and table arrangements of this Eucharist. The priest and the person responding to him (a clerk, a deacon?) sit across from table at one another. The people are not “in the pew” but gathered around the table, kneeling. They appear to be from different social classes, but all equally kneeling in reverence.

It is a small space, and it is truly a dining room, not unlike the one Jesus and his followers shared on Maundy Thursday. The table is laid out as if for an ordinary meal.

This Reformed celebration emphasises one side of that Incarnational paradox I set out a few moments ago. It takes its participants back to the institution of the Eucharist, to the Supper Jesus shared with his friends the night before his death. It is homely, simple and quite democratic. I like it, (though whether or not this is how Communion was *actually* celebrated in most Church of England parishes is another topic).

We need this aspect of our Eucharistic spirituality – the kind that draws the link between Jesus and his followers, the kind that emphasises the humanity of Jesus, that links the Eucharist to the Jewish faith and to history.

Of course, this is not the tradition most of us are familiar with. *Our* approach to the Eucharist is influenced principally by two movements: the 19th century Tractarian or Catholic revival in the CofE, and the liturgical movement of the 20th century.

The Tractarian movement caused *our* church, mostly constructed in the later 19th century, to reflect a different theology of the Eucharist. Our chancel and sanctuary are not constructed for an intimate fellowship meal around a dining table, but rather for the offering of a rite of Communion upon an altar, a table set “altar-wise” (that is, facing East) and with much singing and symbol.

Our nave altar is inspired by the liturgical movement – above all an academic and clerical exercise based in studying early sources – which brought the Eucharist into the nave so that people could get closer to what happens in that rite. The liturgical movement also created a situation in which all the main Christian traditions of the West – Anglican, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist – celebrated very similar Eucharists.

As Anglicans sympathetic to these movements, we may not immediately like the theologies of the Reformation. That’s because the reform put an end, for a while, to many of the things that we love and hold dear about the Eucharist, especially devotions to the Eucharistic bread and wine. Article 28 of the Church of England’s most reformed confession, *The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* states:

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper was not by Christ's ordinance reserved, carried about, lifted up, or worshipped.

Oh dear! We do all these things now and take them for granted. We may wince at the Reformation's attempt to prune back popular love and devotion to Jesus as present in the Eucharist. I personally love the tales of medieval piety and devotion, my favourite being the story of the bees that built a miniature cathedral to house a host (the Eucharistic bread) that had somehow found its way into the forest. I love the miracles of the Eucharist, and the ritual surrounding it, so as to emphasise the grandeur and yet mystical presence of Christ.

But *perhaps* the reforms were necessary. Perhaps, for a season, the Christian world needed to rein in its complex theology of the Eucharist and have its attention focussed anew on Jesus and his Supper. Once people could read the Scriptures, they could imagine anew what it was like to be with Jesus, not just through religious rites, but in a directly personal way. And while our wood-cutting does *emphasise* the human ordinariness of the Last Supper, it does not ignore the transcendent dimension altogether. The faithful still kneel, order and quiet is kept; the reformed still expect to meet the heavenly Jesus.

Our second image is from a very different time and place. Allan Roland Crite was a 20th century African-American artist and devout Anglican. He was a regular communicant at Trinity Church Boston until he died in 2007.

Like our first image, Crite's work is democratic. He wants to bring the Eucharist to the people. He said:

I've only done one piece of work in my whole life and I am still at it. I wanted to paint people of color as normal humans. I tell the story of man through the black figure.

In our image, it is a black priest offering the Eucharist. We are seeing the holiest moment, the elevation of the consecrated elements, bread and wine that have been sanctified to become for us Christ's body and blood. The priest is surrounded by angels, the Holy Spirit broods over the bread and wine, and the priest is turned East; behind him is Christ on Calvary, but also in heaven; Christ wears a stole indicating that he is true and great High Priest.

The symbolism of Crite's work is much more familiar to most of us. We see a priest raising the Eucharistic bread and wine in worship and adoration, inviting us to encounter a transcendent Christ. The altar, vestments and candles remind us of our own church. And yet, for all its splendid awe, for all that it takes us to *heaven*, Crite's image is also an ordinary one. The angels have human faces and, when all is said and done, are not too different from the reformed Christians knelt in piety.

For Christians of a more reformed tradition, ritual practices can seem strange, even off-putting, without proper context. But we do these things to draw our attention to the real transformation that takes place in the Eucharist; ordinary things into holy – bread and wine

into holy mysteries of Christ's body and blood; men, women and children into a royal priesthood.

Christians have been on a journey, these past hundred years, to come to a closer shared understanding of the Eucharist. Catholic Christians have become more attentive to the fellowship-dimension of Jesus' actions in the upper room, and more democratic – Communion is now received in both kinds by all. Reformed Christians have become more attentive to the sanctity and reverence of Eucharistic celebrations, and more willing to cautiously adopt symbols, rituals and acts of loving devotion to Christ.

This is good. For we need to hold together both pictures of the Eucharist, because God in *Christ is both entirely other from us and intimately near us.*

Whatever our tradition may be, our celebrations of the Eucharist must speak of the paradox of the incarnation. They must be homely encounters with our Jesus, who called us friends; and they must acknowledge him as Word and High Priest, as King and as Judge, with power to change the world beyond Sunday morning.

This morning we attempt to hold both together in our *Corpus Christi* devotions. We will hold fast to Jesus' words in the upper room to his friends: *take, eat/drink this all of you.* When we make our Communion, receive bread and wine transformed by the Spirit, we will know ourselves to be deeply connected to Jesus, abiding in Him; we will be present and attentive to the Upper Room and to Calvary, where he offered his body and blood for us.

At the end of this service, we will take the bread that has been set apart and made holy by Jesus' words, and carry it out of our building into the churchyard. We will offer Jesus' blessing to our local area and to the world at large. Here, we will know a God of the cosmos who can and will transform all things. We will go in the knowledge that we are surrounded by angels, imbued by the Holy Spirit, and lifted up into a love and presence that we can barely understand.

This Eucharistic faith, which holds together intimacy and splendour – meal, mystery and sacrifice – is always a work in progress. In our own age, in our own walk with Christ, may we grow more deeply in our appreciation of the Eucharist and so be made holy as Jesus Christ is holy.

Blessed, praised and hallowed be Jesus Christ on his throne of glory; and in the most holy Sacrament of the altar.



Figure 1 Eniautos. Or, A Course of Catechizing (London, 1674), p. 276. Anon. Part of a series of woodcuts illustrating the various rites and rituals of the Established Church in seventeenth-century England.



Figure 2 All Glory: Brush Drawings Meditations on the Prayer of Consecration, p.23. Allan Roland Crite (1947)

For the full work follow this link: <http://anglicanhistory.org/ssje/crite1947.pdf>