

## Christ is in our midst: First address

*Fifth Sunday of Easter 2021*

Here we are, celebrating the Eucharist together. It's something we do every Sunday, sometimes more frequently. It's a service that is familiar and comfortable. It makes us feel close to God and, in some special way, Jesus is present in a way that we take within ourselves. However, if I'm challenged to explain what actually happens - how is Jesus really present - well, that's a tricky one and, if we're being honest, I guess that most of us don't want to be pressed on that question. There was something about it in our confirmation prep (however many years ago that was) and maybe we haven't thought about it much since which, I think, is a pity because it's a really interesting question and exploring it tells us so much about who we are as a church and who we are in God and one another.

Over the next four weeks we're going to think about some aspects of what the Eucharist is about and how we are formed by it - not just individually but collectively as well. I hope that you enjoy these talks and that it leads you to think and pray about what it means to you to come to communion.

What is going on when we meet together to celebrate this central act of worship? What does it mean to share the communion of the body and blood of Christ? For those outside the church or on the fringe, it's a question that they really want to know the answer to and it is of course a question that we address very closely when we are preparing young people and adults for confirmation but I sometimes wonder if some of us who have been coming to receive Christ in word and sacrament week by week for many years, have much more than a hazy understanding of why it is that the Eucharist is the central act of worship of the Church of God in Christ Jesus.

It is always dangerously easy to take something that's as familiar as the Eucharist for granted and to do what we do and say what we say without always thinking about why we do it and why we say it. It's good that we should feel comfortable about taking part in this defining act of worship but not that we should feel complacent or even too safe about it because what we do in church when we come to worship God and celebrate our Christian life together is very important; it defines in important ways who we are and what we believe both individually and collectively. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*: the law of praying is the law of believing or how we pray governs what we believe.

Therefore, we are going to unpack a little about how and why the Eucharist is not just an arbitrary collection of liturgical bits and pieces thrown together to make a coherent service order but the liturgical means by which we are gathered, instructed, fed in mind, body and spirit, constituted as the body of Christ and commissioned to do Christ's work in the world. In each address, I'll focus on one of the four main sections of the service. Next time, we'll think about the Liturgy of the Word, then the Liturgy of the Sacrament and finally the Dismissal. Today we'll consider the beginning of the service, called the Gathering, that is, everything that happens from the opening greeting to the Collect.

First question: why do we need a rite of gathering? What does it entail? Isn't the fact that we're meeting together for worship self-explanatory? We're here, we're ready - let's get on with it. Here's another question: when you come to church, do you come primarily to make your individual personal act of devotion: to encounter Jesus in the word, in Holy Scripture and in the sacrament of bread and wine in order to refresh and resource you personally and individually so that you are equipped for your life of faith in the week ahead? Or do you think of it as something corporate: the coming together of the Body of Christ, the Eucharistic Community and, by coming together, actually to create and be formed as the Church, to make Christ present here, today, now, through what we say and hear and do in relation to one another so that we are equipped together as the Church in order to further the mission of the Church? Is it *my* personal encounter with God or is it *our* corporate experience? To put it more succinctly: do we come *to* Church or do we come *to be* the Church? Of course, it's actually both but in these addresses, I want to focus on the importance of the togetherness of our worship.

Therefore, we need to gather. We come here separately, as regulars or as occasional visitors. We come for all sorts of reasons and with all sorts of interior baggage. Things have happened in the past week. We've been shaped and changed by the experiences that we've had over the past seven days.

We're individuals with different preferences, different concerns, different priorities and so we need to gather together. Our culture is fixated on the individual; personal fulfilment and personal expression dominates every aspect of our lives. This spills over into a sense of autonomous separation about our religion but, here at the Eucharist, we surely gather as a body in order to put aside our individuality and autonomy, in order to become a unified body that focuses our individual gifts and abilities to a common purpose. To do that, we have to try to leave our private worlds behind and move beyond our personal preferences. In the gospel of today, Jesus speaks of the unity of his body - meaning us, the church - using the image of the true vine. No branch can survive apart from the vine and all the branches are connected to each other.

Accordingly, the gathering part of the liturgy moves from the opening in which we are gathered as the people of God and focuses our attention, through the greeting (*Grace mercy and peace be with you*) to the Collect, the prayer that collects together all our individual thoughts and prayers and begins to transform us from a group of individuals into a community gathered for worship, investing us with a new identity as the Body of Christ, Catholic in the universal sense, which remains gathered right through to the dismissal at the end of the service and beyond as we go out, back into the wider community. As gathered people, we should be more attentive to the word of God that we are about to hear because we hear it not only for ourselves individually but in relation to those around us and we should be attentive, too, to each other's needs so that everyone is welcomed and included as a real part of this Eucharistic gathering. All of this is not easy and, I dare say, not always successful. It involves thinking about what we do in different ways from those we're used to. It's a process that requires careful and attentive personal and corporate preparation. We begin with the statement that we meet in the name of God and we express the nature of God, corporately and relationally, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit: a community of three persons but still one God, present to us now through the action and grace of the Holy Spirit. Then, in the Prayer of Preparation, we ask God to cleanse the thoughts of our hearts and, through the Holy Spirit, bind us together because we can only express our love for him through our love for one another. Notice that the language is plural throughout the liturgy (*we* and *our*, not *I* and *mine*).

Of course, we're only too aware that we don't always succeed in giving perfect expression to our love for one another. This is something which involves us in letting go of our own concerns and preoccupations and that's often very hard to do. Therefore, it's appropriate to focus next on the ways in which we fall short of God's requirement that we love him and that we love one another. We join in a confession of failing that is corporate in the sense that we know that there are many ways in which we fail to express our identity as the Body of Christ and many ways in which we, as individuals, put our own concerns before those of others. Then, when God's forgiveness is proclaimed, we can move forward to join in a song of rejoicing and celebration of God's presence with us and in us: *Glory be to God on high*, before all these prayers and praises are gathered together, as we are gathered together, in the Collect for the day. There is a lot going on in this first part, this preliminary, this gathering but the important point to grasp is that we are being transformed from individual Christian believers into Christ's Church, constituted afresh, totally renewed every time we come together to celebrate the Eucharist.

It is easy to miss the significance of the Gathering. We come here as individuals and meet our friends, we want to greet one another and catch up, we are still separate, we are not yet gathered. That gathering up is what the first part of the liturgy is all about; it's what happens as we begin. And now, having expressed our coming together, not simply to come to Church but, like the disciples, to constitute the Church, *to be* the Church, we are now ready to do what the Church does and hear about the wonder of God in readings from the Old and New Testaments.

Next time, we'll think about the liturgy of the word.