

## Evening Celebrations of Holy Communion

IN all branches of the Church and throughout its history the hour generally chosen for the celebration of the Lord's Supper has been between midnight and high noon. There have been some departures from this time, but they are exceptions, and few in number<sup>(1)</sup>. The central tradition is unmistakable. Why is the morning hour to be preferred? This article attempts briefly to answer that question.

The Lord's Supper was instituted 'on the night in which He was betrayed'. On that night what had previously been a meal of fellowship, prayer, and pious conversation<sup>(2)</sup>, was given a new significance and a new purpose. These altered both the nature of the meal and its time of celebration.

Our Lord indicated its new meaning when He said of the bread and wine, 'This is my body . . . this is my blood'; and the disciples' apprehension of these words was clarified by the cataclysmic events of the next few days and in particular by the astounding fact of the Resurrection.

The Resurrection became determinative. At the Eucharist the Lord's death was shown forth, but the Church never forgot that the Lord had risen from the dead. The Eucharist was not conceived as a mere memorial to one who had lived and died and was to be remembered as a great and good man. It was worship offered in and through and to a Living Lord, whom death could not hold, and who was alive for evermore. Thus the Lord's Supper was not a sad meal of remembrance commemorating one who had

<sup>(1)</sup> The only exception in the Western Church (I know of none in the East) in early times was in some places to have a second celebration—of the liturgy of the faithful only—in the evening on Maundy Thursday, the normal full celebration having taken place in the morning; but the practice was discontinued. In the early 19th century, some Evangelicals in the Church of England began celebrating Holy Communion in the evening, and many still do this. During the 19th century, it was not unknown in Scotland, although it usually followed a morning celebration on the same day; to have evening celebrations standing by themselves is a practice comparatively rare and recent in Scotland. A 'Second Table' of course, in the afternoon, has long been customary; but this is an extension of the morning celebration, and even this is contrary to classical Reformed practice, where 'the Service was not expected to last beyond the hour of Noon' (W. McMillan, *The Worship of the Scottish Reformed Church*, p. 190). Evening celebrations are common in nonconformist Churches in England.

<sup>(2)</sup> See my *Outline of Christian Worship*, pp. 5-7, for a brief discussion of the nature of these meals, and references to further works.

walked with us for a little here and had departed, but a festival of glad thanksgiving and fellowship with the risen Lord and Redeemer. It was solemn because of the tremendous events commemorated, but it was never sad. 'Lift up your hearts!' was the call to prayer—one of the earliest fragments of the Eucharist to have come down to us.

The Church's unanimity of practice from primitive times reflected this doctrinal fact. The day and the hour alike of celebration were related to the Resurrection, not to our Lord's death or to His institution of the holy Supper. The Eucharist was not celebrated on Thursday night<sup>(1)</sup>, although it was instituted then. It was not celebrated on Friday, although on that day our Lord died upon the cross<sup>(2)</sup>—crucified on the very day that the lambs were slaughtered for the Passover. The time of celebration which soon became universal was at an early hour on Sunday, on the morning of the first day of the week called the Lord's day because it was His day of resurrection. Thus the fact that the Eucharist commemorated not merely the Lord's death but also His resurrection was given telling symbolical emphasis. By His death He had destroyed death; He was Victor for evermore.

Nor was the morning chosen because it was more convenient for those who wished to receive fasting. That is a later and separate question. It was chosen because our Lord rose from the dead in the morning, in order by the very hour to show forth His triumph. The symbolism afforded by the dawn—the breaking of light upon the darkness and the re-birth of the day—we may believe, played its part also. The stupendous fact of the Resurrection dominated every aspect of the Eucharist, so that it became a glorious and triumphant act of thanksgiving, commemoration, consecration and fellowship offered by Christ's faithful people in praise, wonder, and adoration to the Lord of life, who had broken the bonds of death and was really and eternally present with them.

This tremendous fact is further underlined by the symbolical orientation of church-buildings, which began very early. The church-building was so situated that the celebrant, standing behind the Holy Table, faced the East;

(1) I use the modern reckoning of course; the Jewish day began at sundown, not at midnight as with us.

(2) In East and West alike the day when the Eucharist was *not* celebrated was Good Friday. In the East on that day the Liturgy of the Presanctified was said, and a similar service was used in the West. This is still the practice, except on the part of a few Anglicans.

and later, when the celebrant adopted the 'eastwards' position, standing between the Holy Table and the people, orientation of churches was altered so that all might face the East together. Orientation, of course, did not originate with nor is it confined to Christianity. That of itself is unimportant. What is important is the reason for the orientation of Christian churches, not the source from which it was borrowed, if it was borrowed. The reason was to enable Christians at worship to face the East (not in order to pray towards Jerusalem as the Mohammedans later prayed towards Mecca), the place of the sun-rising, symbolic of resurrection and re-birth.

I have been prompted to write this short article, because I fear that if the habit of evening celebrations—which seems to be gaining some vogue at present—were to grow unconsidered and unchecked, this symbolism with its fundamental doctrinal significance and emphasis might be jettisoned, and symbolism and practice set at variance, with a consequent change in doctrine so insidious as at first to be unperceived.

So many attractive reasons can be put forward in favour of evening celebrations of Holy Communion: they are at an hour when it is easy for many work-people and others to attend, and it need not interfere with their 'long lie' on Sunday mornings; mothers with household duties and with Sunday dinners to prepare can often attend church more easily in the evenings, and an evening celebration allows them to receive communion without additional effort; and the evening hour is in itself attractive to many, with its surrounding gloom and mystery, deepened by the effective and dramatic use of lights. The reasons might be multiplied. It is worth observing, however, that all these reasons are subjective, related to the worshippers' convenience and not to the glory of God. That is not to say that they are not worthy of some consideration; but there is to be set against them an almost universal tradition of 2,000 years, and the reasons that underlie it. These I have endeavoured briefly to elucidate here, in the hope that they will not be lost sight of or lightly abandoned, and indeed that they may be regarded as so fundamental as, save in the most exceptional circumstances, not to be put aside.

In conclusion, a word may be added about early Reformed practice. At Strasbourg and Geneva, the cradle of Calvinian practice, the services were held early in the morning, as early as 4 a.m., and Holy Communion was

celebrated at the normal hour of morning worship. The same was true of Scotland<sup>(1)</sup>. Indeed, Ninian Winzet taunted the Reformers on that very point: 'Why,' he asked, 'make ye your communion before dinner, since our Saviour instituted His holy Sacrament after Supper?' But in spite of such ridicule the Reformers held firm. Thus, at Glasgow the service began at 4 a.m., and at Stirling it was half an hour earlier; in Elgin the first bell was to be rung at 2.30 a.m., the service beginning half an hour later. At Edinburgh, St Andrews, and Perth, 5 a.m. was the hour of the first service, a second one following at 8 or 9 o'clock. But whatever the hour of service, the evidence is that worship, when Holy Communion was celebrated, was to conclude by noon. In Anstruther, for example, in 1592, we note that the Kirk-Session in making their pre-communion arrangements decided that only as many were to go forward to the Holy Table 'as we may easily serve before 12 hours, and the rest to communicate next day'; and frequently Holy Communion was celebrated on two successive Sundays where there were large numbers of communicants. Even when later the very early hours were abandoned, the celebrations still took place before noon.

WILLIAM D. MAXWELL

<sup>(1)</sup> On the question of Scottish practice, see Dr McMillan's *The Worship of the Scottish Reformed Church*, especially his informative chapter 'Hours and seasons of Communion' pp. 190 *sqq.*, to which I am indebted in framing the above paragraph.