

'OUR EYES FIXED ON JESUS'

Notes of a sermon preached by the President, at the celebration of Holy Communion in the Kirk of the Greyfriars, Edinburgh, at the Society's Conference on 21 October 1975.

... With all these witnesses to faith around us like a cloud, we must throw off every encumbrance, every sin to which we cling, and run with resolution the race for which we are entered, our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom faith depends from start to finish: Jesus who, for the sake of the joy that lay ahead of him, endured the cross, making light of its disgrace, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1-2, NEB.)

Consider this vivid picture of a race in a stadium whose terraces are crowded by previous contestants, with the Leader and Lord already supreme Victor both presiding and actively participating. The author thus suggestively presents the heart of our Christian faith and experience in which Christ as man has fully shared and in which we share his sufferings and his exaltation. Our Holy Communion enshrines this faith and experience here and now. As Jesus preached in the synagogue service in Nazareth, 'Today, in your very hearing this text has come true'. (Luke 4:21.)

This text exhorts us to become completely involved in Christian faith and life, '*our eyes fixed on Jesus . . .*' Jesus Christ, the God-man, is here present by his Spirit in our worship, in all our life. This is something that happens in no other form of religion. It is the actual experience of every committed Christian. In my life, in your life, there is a profound consciousness of the real presence of Jesus Christ by his Holy Spirit, and specially now in Word and Sacrament. Let us fix our eyes, concentrate our whole attention, upon him: this of course means that he runs with us, leading the race all the way round and receiving us at the winning post with the victor's crown – Jesus, 'on whom faith depends from start to finish'.

This indeed comes true now in our sacramental worship. In the reading and hearing of the Word of God in lesson and sermon Jesus rises up and stands before us. I've just been reading a story to a little granddaughter from her book in which the characters rise and stand up with the opening of a page. With how much greater reality does Jesus now reveal himself. In Holy Communion Jesus not only rises before us but he re-enters and re-occupies our hearts and lives. May I adapt the famous metaphor of the Rev. Robert Bruce and declare that in Holy Communion Christ gets a better grasp of us.

But this passage itself gives us a wider grasp of reality. Our eyes are fixed on Jesus, *'with all these witnesses around us like a cloud'*. The terraces are crowded with the saints and martyrs, with the humble folk of all past ages who have themselves run the Christian race through stress and strain. Hebrews indeed in deathless prose declaims a resounding roll of honour: to this we add God's faithful of every age, including our own forebears. I recall that when I went to my first parish, Scotstoun East, Glasgow, my mother told me that my late father had once conducted worship in that very church and had come home with a glowing description of a beautiful new sanctuary and a responsive congregation. Having some personal experience of lingering spiritual presence, I was not surprised when after a service an old elder who remembered my father's visit said, 'I saw your father standing behind you today.' The whole Body of Christ is here because Christ is here, worshipped and worshipper, inspiring our worship by his Holy Spirit, bearing it to the Father, creating the communion he commands. I have sometimes felt constrained when preaching at Holy Communion to point to the congregation and declare, 'I believe that Christ is looking at you, at us all, and saying, "This is my Body".'

Christ is indeed actively present here in his Body to such a degree that the writer to the Hebrews speaks of God's *'better plan, that only in company with us should they reach their perfection'*. (Heb. 11:40.) When our eyes are 'fixed on Jesus' we realize that for those on the terraces the contest is incomplete; only when all races have been run is their involvement consummated and Christ's victory in them and in us consummated and celebrated. But at Holy Communion we can look forward and repeat with fuller meaning, 'Today, in your very hearing this text has come true.' At Holy Communion we can be most poignantly aware that we not only enter into the death and resurrection of Christ but that in faith and hope we in some form anticipate the consummation. After resurrection, Jesus showed himself in what has been termed 'a glorified body' which I believe pre-figures our own condition in the 'new earth' promised beyond the Last Things. So far as our human situation allows, we here anticipate this glory together with Christ. This should also serve to re-unite all Christians round his Table.

But such belief can be daunted when we allow our eyes to stray towards outward appearances. So it is finally reassuring to note that our eyes are fixed on the Jesus who *'has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God'*. We see our Lord enthroned in majesty. It is to this that Holy Communion points: 'that day when I drink it new with you in the kingdom of my Father'. (Matt. 26:29.) The Jesus Christ on whom our eyes are fixed, who by his Spirit is really present in his Body, the whole company of the faithful in all ages, having 'for the

sake of the joy that lay ahead of him, endured the cross’, is the risen, triumphant, exalted divine and human Lord who unites us to himself and reconciles us to God and to one another. He is also as Mediator ‘reconciling the world to himself’ (II Cor. 5: 19). So surely it is with the utmost joy, with thanksgiving of body, mind and spirit, that we ‘throw off every encumbrance, every sin to which we cling, and run with resolution the race for which we are entered’.

Let us take as doxology part of the Exhortation to Communion from Knox’s Liturgy, which comes mainly from Calvin’s Genevan Liturgy: ‘the only way to dispose our souls to receive nourishment, relief, and quickening of his substance is to lift up our minds by faith above all things worldly and sensible, and thereby to enter into heaven, that we may find and receive Christ, where he dwelleth very God and very Man in the incomprehensible glory of the Father, to whom be all praise, honour, and glory, now and ever. Amen.’

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