

S E N D U S O U T I N T O
T H E W O R L D

Worship with Political and Social Action

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1. Introduction

It is not unreasonable, at the outset of this lecture, to make the claim that there has been no greater gain in pastoral and parochial policy in the past sixty years than our fuller realisation of the implications of the fact that we would state categorically that the Eucharist is the 'type' of Christian worship.

It is a fundamental realisation which has further profound effects. It has an important ecumenical significance. Nikos Nissiotis, one of the Moderators of the Faith and Order Commission, has written that it is now a fact that,

we agree on the Eucharist as the centre not

only of Church life but also of world history and as the foretaste of the Kingdom. This discloses our common roots in the one faith of the ecclesia and its visible, concrete manifestation as we gather together to break the communion bread in our particular communion.

It is also an insight which must have a deep influence on the way in which the Church understands its social and political witness. It is this which is explored here. * * *

2. The Doctrine of the Incarnation and the Eucharist

Christianity can be described, with a good deal of theological justification, as the most un-spiritual of all the world's religions, for Christianity is based upon the statement that God became man in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Although it can be asserted that the idea that God or the gods have made themselves present in human form is one of three basic strands in the religious experience of mankind, along with the numinous and mystical strands, it is basic to Christianity that its doctrine of the Incarnation² represents this particular strand in the most highly developed form.

If then this world and the human form did not prove to be "above the dignity" of the Son of God and that he "did not abhor" or "spurn" the Virgin's womb but humbly chose to be born of a human mother³, then this world and human nature have acquired a dignity if not a divinity. Thus Christians rather than being "world-denying" should be "world-affirming", highly sensitive to the matters of human affairs and continually concerned about the world in which God chose to speak his most audible and significant Word, which effected the most profound change on the human race.

*Yea, angels tremble when they see
How changed is our humanity;
For flesh hath purged what flesh had stained,
And God, the flesh of God hath reigned.*⁴

Further, it must be of particular significance that the Incarnate Lord chose to inaugurate a continuing anamnesis of himself not by any vague or

1 Nikos A Nissiotis, in Max Thurian ed., Ecumenical Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, Faith and Order Paper 166, WCC., 1983, p.x.

2 Cf Brian Hebblethwaite, "Incarnation" in Alan Richardson and John Bowden eds A New Dictionary of Christian Theology, 1983, p.289 ff.

3 For debate on the best way to translate the Latin horruisti see Prayers We Have in Common, ICET Texts, 2nd revised edition, 1975, p.23 and the forthcoming report of The English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC)

4 Latin c5th century tr. JM Neale, New English Hymnal, 1986, no 128 v.3

esoteric religious ritual but by using the very basic this-world materials of bread and wine. And notice that it was "bread" and "wine" not "grain" and "grapes", manufactured goods, the product of man's labour that he employed, making the additional point that the work of man's hands does not of necessity taint or corrupt the gift of God's creation. Then using these material objects the Lord on earth declared that they would be means of his continuing presence in this world. The man-baked loaf and cup of humanly prepared wine would be he guaranteed by his own promise, his body and his blood when he was no longer visibly present.

This connection between the Eucharistic gifts and the continuing presence of their Lord was also learnt by the early church as it imminently awaited the Parousia. They were confident that Jesus had promised to return and reflected this in their early writings (eg Phil 3:20,21; 4:6) and the New Testament ends with what is both a promise and a prayer "Yes, I am coming soon !' Amen. Come Lord Jesus !" (Rev 22:20). However, the Lord Jesus did not come soon and the disappointment could have been catastrophic for the infant Church had it not been that they came to understand that his return was realised each time they broke bread and shared the cup, for then he did indeed return and was present in all his power. There was a very real presence.

3. The Doctrine of One Body of Christ and its Eucharistic Implications

Alongside this was the development of the doctrine of the Body of Christ as being the company of the faithful. It was a truth which Saul of Tarsus learnt painfully on the Damascus Road. For in the blinding flash of comprehension he realised that his determination to strike at the followers of The Way was fuelled by a passionate desire to wound their Christ. In that moment of inspiration Saul understood that by persecuting the Church he was in fact attempting to deal a blow at Jesus of Nazareth.

For Paul the concept of the body forms the keystone of his theology. As JAT Robinson pointed out in his study The Body:

It is from the body of sin and death we are delivered; it is through the body of Christ on the Cross that we are saved; it is into His body the Church that we are incorporated; it is by this body in the Eucharist that this Community is sustained; it is in our body that its new life has to be manifested; it is to a resurrection of this body to the likeness of His glorious body that we are destined. 5

It was out of his Damascus Road experience that Paul gained his first insight into this deep truth. Robinson in the same essay quotes Emile Mersch:

Since that day, when he saw Christ in the Church he was

persecuting, it seems that he can no longer look into the eyes of a Christian without meeting there the gaze of Christ. 6

Thus the Corpus Christi which is the Church of God is fed by the Corpus Christi which is the eucharistic gift of his body and blood, but not for its own sake, not for the personal delectation of the faithful, nor just for their comfort or reassurance, but in order to empower and inspire them to be the Corpus Christi in the world. For the work of Christ today will not be accomplished by a heavenly hand reaching down from the clouds. Nor will his judgement be proclaimed by the divine intervention of a thunderbolt. It will not be angelic voices or an ethereal presence which will speak the words the world needs to hear, rather will they be spoken by the very physical flesh and blood presence of the Church. The problems of this world will not be solved by mystical levitation but they could begin to be cured by the sensitive and even sacrificial action of those of us who are the Body of Christ today, that Body which is sustained and nourished by the Body and Blood of Christ in the Holy Eucharist.

4. The Eucharist as an extension of the Incarnation

The Church and its sacraments have been spoken of as "the extension of the Incarnation". Bishop Jeremy Taylor, the Anglican divine (1613-67), who is now commemorated in the Calendar of The Alternative Service Book, claimed that it was an expression derived from the Fathers. In a passage in The Worthy Communicant Taylor sums up "what it is we receive in the Sacrament" in this way:

The sum is this. - Christ's body, His flesh and His blood, are therefore called our meat and our drink, because by His incarnation and manifestation in the flesh He became life unto us: so that it is mysterious indeed in the expression, but very proper and intelligible in the event, to say that we eat His flesh and drink His blood, since by these it is that we have and preserve life. But because what Christ began on the cross, and all the whole progression of mysteries in His body was still an operatory of life and spiritual being to us; the sacrament of the Lord's supper being a commemoration and exhibition of this death which was the consummation of our redemption by His body and blood, does contain in it a 'visible word', the word in symbol and visibility, and special manifestation. Consonant to which doctrine, the fathers by an elegant expression called the blessed sacrament 'the extension of the incarnation'. 7

6 Ibid., p.58 quoting Emile Mersch, The Whole Christ, p.104

7 The Whole Works of the Rt Revd Jeremy Taylor, DD, With a life of the Author by Heber, revised CP Eden, vol8, "The Worthy Communicant", ch1, sec2.4, 1854, p23 (Originally published 1660)

Christ's body here on earth is strengthened by the holy gifts in order that it may "extend the incarnation" by its own loving, caring action in that same world in which Jesus became incarnate at the beginning of Christian time. Although that Christ no longer walks the earth and reaches out his hands in blessing the Body of Christ, which is the church, perpetuates his presence. St Teresa of Avila very strikingly put it this way:

*Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
No hands but yours,
No feet but yours;
Yours are the eyes through which is to look
on Christ's compassion to the world;
Yours are the feet with which he is to go
about doing good;
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless men now.*

Therefore, the Eucharist is not just a ceremony in which the faithful gather round the table of the Lord to enhance their own fellowship and deepen their own faith and commitment, but is the occasion, the special trusting place to which they come to receive the "stirrup cup to battle", as Conrad Noel, the outspoken Christian Socialist of the 1920s called it. ⁸ For it is in the battle for righteousness and justice that the Christian man and woman is called to fight.

5. Sacramental Socialism and the Parish Communion

In the Church of England there has been a long and honoured tradition of what has been called "sacramental socialists". They were High Churchmen who did not allow themselves to be trapped in a part which believed "Catholicism" could only mean a policy of apeing and imitating current (mainly continental) Roman Catholic fashions. On the contrary, sacramental socialists were convinced that they must witness to the fact that the Eucharist contains a command to serve the needs of people and nations. One of the earliest of the organisations which followed this line was founded by Stewart Duckworth Headlam in 1877 in Bethnal Green. ⁹ Preaching at the 12th Annual Festival of this Guild of St Matthew, FM Garrett recalled the work already done by high churchmen since the Oxford Movement to restore the Eucharist to its rightful place in the life of the Church. But, Garrett said, that first battle had been won and now it was for the Guild to carry abroad the witness to the fact that the Eucharist was not just for the strengthening of the individual.

If the unity of Humanity is shown at the altar to be a truth, it must influence business, society, politics. The class divisions into which Society is split up are no longer tolerable when they are seen to contradict that unity which is the ground of all real Communion in Christ.

⁸ Reg Groves, Conrad Noel and the Thaxted Movement, 1968, p 195

⁹ FG Bettany, Stewart Headlam. A Biography, 1926, pp79-96. For the most recent discussion of Headlam and other Christian Socialists see Appendix A.

Socialism.....is founded on the very truth the Holy Communion has borne witness to through eighteen centuries - however deaf we have been to its message. Socialism asks us to deal not with isolated individuals but with a community. 10

There were, however, many High Churchmen (or Anglo-Catholics - the designation is inter-changeable) who were still only interested in the maintenance of ceremonial and the niceties of rubrics and ritual. For them Headlam reserved his most barbed criticisms:

Let them postpone the question as to the exact spot by the Altar at which the Gospel should be said until each of their dearly beloved brethren has a comfortable home and a moderate amount of healthy food. These are the real questions of church order and discipline. 11

It was out of this tradition, as I have shown elsewhere, that came the inspiration which invigorated the Church of England's equivalent of the continental Roman Catholic liturgical movement.¹² It was a home-grown bloom not a transplant from Germany, Belgium or Austria. The rest was the widespread adoption of the Parish Communion - a Communion Service held around 9.30 am on a Sunday with a maximum amount of congregational participation and general Communion. Although the roots of the Parish Communion Movement, as it is called, can be traced back into the nineteenth century to the work of men such as Headlam and which was continued into the twentieth through priests like Henry Scott Holland¹³, Percy Widdrington¹⁴ and Conrad Noel there is no doubt that the Movement received a tremendous boost from the publication in

10 'The Witness of the Eucharist to the True Social Life', Sermon preached in the Church of St Mary the Virgin, Soho, at the 12th Annual Festival of the Guild of St Matthew by the Revd FM Garrett. The Church Reformer, vol viii, No 11, November 1889, p.252

11 The Optimist, vol xi, No 1, 15 April 1916, p.49

12 Donald Gray, Earth and Altar, The Evolution of the Parish Communion Movement in the Church of England to 1945, Alcuin Club Collections No 68, 1986.

13 Stephen Paget, ed., Henry Scott Holland : Memoirs and Letters, 1921

14 Maurice B Reckitt, PET Widdrington, A Study in Vocation and Versatility, 1961.

1937 of Fr Gabriel Hebert's appropriately titled Liturgy and Society.¹⁶ Hebert was convinced of the centrality of the doctrine of the Incarnation to his advocacy of a new design for the worship of the Church. Without question that doctrine must be the starting point, he believed.

The Incarnation of the Son of God claims the Kingdom of God over the whole of human life. It is the manifestation of God's goodness in the flesh; it involves the redemption of the body, and therefore also of the life lived in the body, and of the whole social, economic and political structure. God has established His Kingdom, a kingdom not of this world, but very much in this world.

6. Further Development

This understanding of the church's incarnational role was further developed in the 1950s and 1960s. We have already referred to John Robinson's work as a distinguished biblical scholar. Too often he is only remembered as the author of Honest to God.¹⁸ In the recently published biography of John Robinson, Canon Eric James describes Robinson's book Liturgy Coming to Life¹⁹ as one of his most effective books.²⁰

*The Holy Communion is the great workshop of the new world, where "we who are many" are recreated as the true, the new community in Christ...We are not called to "bring in" the Kingdom of God, but to bring it out from where we have known it...The Communion is social dynamite.*²¹

In a lecture given about the same time Robinson says that liturgy is at its

16 AG Hebert Liturgy and Society : The Function of the Church in the Modern World, 1937

17 Hebert, op.cit., p.191

18 JAT Robinson, Honest to God, 1963

19 JAT Robinson, Liturgy Coming to Life, 1960

20 Eric James, A Life of Bishop John AT Robinson, Scholar, Pastor, Prophet, 1987, p.54.

21 Robinson, Liturgy, op.cit., p.37

heart social action, it is the point at which this world is taken and consecrated, broken and restored for God and his Kingdom, "and where the Church itself is renewed as the agent of the Christian revolution".²²

However, it would be highly inaccurate to suggest that this is by any means an insight which has only been appreciated by Anglicans. George Macleod made the point often in the early days of the Iona Community, no more effectively than in Only One Way Left.

*To speak of the social significance of holy communion is no longer novel. But it is time we claimed it as the central significance. Indeed it is the feast of everlasting life, but "hereby do we know that we have passed from life unto death, because we love the brethren". It is not true that any of us will be changed into this most glorious Body as an individual transaction. We can only fully be changed together into that most glorious body of His humanity as we are concerned together with our neighbour, body and soul.*²³

In more recent times there have been those for whom the Eucharist has been seen as having a special significance for any who seek liberation from the constrictions of economic or political bondage. Fr. Tissa Balasuriya is an Asian Roman Catholic priest who is Director of the Centre for Society and Religion in Colombo. Fr. Balasuriya would wish to emphasise the eschatological significance of the Eucharist in relation to the eventual liberation in the Kingdom. Balasuriya underlines the fact that Jesus gave a challenging meaning to the festive meal of the Jews which commemorated their liberation from slavery in Egypt.

*The Eucharist, therefore, has eschatological significance in relating to the ultimate liberation in the Kingdom: Just as manna related to the liberation of Jews in Jerusalem... To Jesus' mind the Eucharist was essentially action-orientated. It was prayer and an offering in the midst of his public life at the height of his involvement in the political and social issues of the time.*²⁴

There is no doubt that for many Christians this Eucharistic emphasis cannot but be of day-to-day importance.

22 James, op. cit., p.55

23 George Macleod, Only One Way Left. Church Prospect, 2nd ed., 1958, p.112. (The italics are Lord Macleod's)

24 Tissa Balasuriya, OMI., The Eucharist and Human Liberation, 1979, p.17

7. Conclusion and Challenge

However, what ought to be the consequence for others of us of the incarnational extension eucharistic principle ? The Eucharist has a number of high spots, each of which could perhaps be thought to be the moment of supreme importance. For instance, is it the proclamation of the Gospel and its exposition in the sermon; or the moment when we join the countless number of the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven to sing, Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus; or is it the Eucharistic Prayer in which we recall again the wonderful occasion on which Our lord inaugurated the sacrament and shared it with his disciples ? Could it be the moment when we receive into our hands a gift more precious than anything else we shall ever handle in this world ? Are any of these the supreme moment, the occasion of the profoundest sacramental significance ?

None of these is the sacramental moment par excellence if we are to take seriously the social and political dimensions of the Eucharist. That comes when the president says "Go forth" and the people of God go out into the world. For the Ite Missa Est is not a dismissal but a command. We are not "sent away" but "sent forth".²⁵

The Corpus christi which is the Church of God, having been corporately fed by the Corpus Christi which is our eucharistic sharing of the Bread and Wine, are sent forth to be the hands, feet, eyes of Christ, to be the Corpus Christi "out there". And this engagement in the world will not be confined to any holy huddle or pious party but where the battle rages thickest, within the political, social and cultural ferment of the age. So it is no wonder that we need the very Bread of Heaven as our food, we will not survive with anything less.²⁶

In The Alternative Service Book of the Church of England we pray at the end of the Eucharist:

Almighty God,
we thank you for feeding us
with the body and blood of your Son Jesus Christ.
through him we offer you our souls and bodies
to be a living sacrifice.
Send us out in the power of your Spirit
to live and work to your praise and glory. Amen.

Then, as we stand, the priest says, "Go in peace and serve the Lord". ²⁷ The congregation replies, "In the name of Christ. Amen" - and then goes !

25 'Ite Missa Est and Catholic Action', Orate Fratres, March 1937, pp206-208.

26 John 6:55-58

27 The Alternative Service Book 1980, Holy Communion Rite A, paras.53-56, p145