

## STREAMING THE SUNDAY SERVICE 2

From Participation to Reality -  
online worship in the ongoing life of the Church

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*This is an adapted and expanded essay on Dr. Shields' presentation at the Study Day in February.*

### Introduction - Medium

I am using the word 'medium' here to express not just the mechanics of communication, but the whole atmosphere and reality in and through which we converse. As embodied spirits, our interactions will always, consciously, or otherwise, involve the whole person. We shall always 'be there' in body, mind, feeling, and spirit, though the degree to which we attend with our differing faculties will vary according to the precise manner of communication, and the way we are in terms of our physical, mental, and emotional health.

Looking back, it may be difficult now for many of us to remember just how we were during those first days and weeks of the COVID-19 Pandemic: dealing with the celebration of liturgy in an empty church (if we were permitted); the scramble to get something online, or in some other way, to those who were no longer physically present; the mild panic that it was all going to get away from us; and all this on top of our own personal fears and the uncertainty of what was to happen.

I wonder, too, how much the digital presence of the Church, which was such a central consideration through 2020-2021, is now a priority for many clergy and congregations. A recent issue of the *Theology in Scotland* Journal (see under 'Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading'), in which most of the contributions focused on the experience of online worship, had a somewhat disappointing reception, at least according to the downloads from the open access site. I and others thought this would have been a timely piece of work, and I was personally enriched by my reading of the articles in the issue. My own recent attempts to engage clergy in conversations about their experience have proven largely fruitless. It seems that we have 'moved on' from those intense days when we scrambled to reach out to our congregations, and beyond, using technology with which many of us were largely unfamiliar, and perhaps anxious that if we didn't do something, somehow our congregations would never come back!

For those of us who still enable access to our services and events online, while the quality of transmission and reception might still vary, and technical problems still abound, we have accepted that this is part and parcel of our mission and ministry. Those who have joined us online are frequently appreciative of our efforts. Others, because of temperament or finance, or some other reason, have decided to largely go back to the 'way things were'. New preoccupations dominate the political and social agenda, which, whether they have their roots partially in the COVID-19 pandemic or not, are indicative of a much deeper malaise in society and in the church. It would seem that, along with the clerical sexual abuse scandal, the disputes over the relationship between science and religion, and the growing secularism of our British society, the COVID 19 pandemic of 2020-2022 provided just another gust of wind blowing further out to sea the ships already leaving the port. Be that as it may, our attempts at online worship in its various forms during the height of lockdowns and restrictions did articulate for the believer the need to connect with God and the Church in whatever circumstance. Now, as then, how 'real' our devotion is, relies on the level of our participation in the life of God; in the return we make, individually and collectively, for the giving of God's self. In other words, how far we appreciate that all is gift. This connection has often been intermittent, and not just through the internet.

### **Presence and Absence in Scripture and the Liturgy**

The resurrection narratives are as full of the disappearances of Christ as they are of his appearances. Not only does Christ vanish at the end of some of the narratives but even when he is present, he is often not recognised, at least not immediately. Jesus' plea to Mary Magdalen not to 'hold on to him' (John 20,17) is his clear indication to her and the disciples that the way they must relate to him has changed: he is the same, yet different; their relationship will have some of the old qualities but also be transformed. Absence as well as presence will be a part of their understanding of this 'connection.' At the heart of these experiences is the breaking of the bread (Luke 24), and the impulse to share and proclaim the message that Christ is risen (see both the actions of Mary and of the two disciples in the Emmaus story). From the very beginning, being transformed and being sent is at the heart of what is considered a real relationship with the crucified and risen Christ and with his Church. Central to this experience is worship in prayer and the breaking of bread.

Even if our churches vary in their emphasis upon the importance or otherwise of regular Eucharistic celebration, it is the Sacrament of Holy Communion which often brings into focus how ‘real’ our worship is. Given our human condition, whether we are physically present at liturgy, receiving the consecrated elements, participating actively online, or being more like spectators at an online liturgy, we are, to use the old phrase, sometimes neither here nor there. Yet, we choose to accept the unequivocal ‘being there’ of Christ, who is present as a gift, not as a possession. The minute we try to lay a hand on him, he disappears from our sight. How are we to understand this presence and absence in the Eucharist?

From the controversy surrounding Berengar of Tours in the Eleventh Century<sup>1</sup> to the present day, Christians have struggled to find a language to fully express the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. There has been a constant toing and froing between an overemphasis on the physical, the varying understandings of what symbolic means, and the rediscovery of the importance of relationship and the transformative power of the sacraments and worship, which is after all their purpose. Since the mid Twentieth Century, there has also been an increasing emphasis upon the Trinitarian dimension of liturgy. Christ comes to us as a person in relationship to his Father and to the Spirit and he makes

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- 1 Berengar of Tours (died 1088) appeared to deny that there was a real substantial change in the bread and wine after the consecration. He distinguished between the sign, the bread and wine, and that which was signified, the presence of Christ in his body and blood. He was forced to take an oath at the Council of Rome in 1059 before Pope Nicholas II in which he affirmed the reality of the Eucharistic change. The late American Jesuit theologian Edward Kilmartin, among others, maintained that with Berengar we see the first real attempt to describe the change using language that distinguished between appearance, physicality, and a different order of reality. In fact, it was not until the rediscovery of the works of Aristotle that gave theologians a (then) satisfactory language to describe the difference between substance and accident and thus to describe the Eucharistic change, adopting the term ‘transubstantiation.’ Controversy has continued throughout the history of the Church over how to describe what really happens at the consecration, though the Catholic Church still favours the word transubstantiation above all others. The belief, finally, is in the Eucharistic change, not any specific word used to give an account of the action of God and the Church. See Edward Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology*, edited Robert J Daly (Minnesota: Pueblo/Liturgical Press, 1998), pp. 97-102.

us children of God in relationship to a community of love, bringing us into the realm of his Father. Relationship implies commitment and space, with a deepening of the first and an openness to being moved to a better place.

**‘I’ve grown accustomed to your face.’**

Any successful human gathering involves a ‘gathering point’ in surroundings which are conducive, and as full a sensory experience as possible. During the lockdowns in 2020-2021, people did often go on a ‘world tour’ sampling differing liturgical experiences, but it was striking just how many wanted to ‘tune into’ their own church or parish, or even connect to a community and stay with them throughout. Internet platforms such as Zoom, Facebook, and YouTube, also enabled varying degrees of participation through chat or comment functions. The online liturgies, particularly those which provided some kind of means of interaction, did provide a point for human encounter.

This is still important for some who have ‘made their home’ with us in St Fillan’s, Crieff, where I serve as parish priest, particularly for those who are housebound. Some of the exchanges during online liturgies have been quite open and even intimate, and we are reminded at times both of the need for community and also of the double-edged sword that is social media.

Attending to the presence and the absence of others, members of our family, friends, congregations, was highlighted as never before during the height of the Pandemic. Did this engender a better appreciation of in-person attendance? While I have no proper studies to hand, there is little doubt from my own observation, and that of others, that some churches and congregations have suffered greatly since the pandemic in terms of numbers physically coming to services. For my own part, working in a small parish, one is very aware of who has returned and who has not. In the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, census figures taken in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Dunkeld showed that indeed congregations had dropped, but there is anecdotal evidence, as well as some statistical accounts, to suggest that many have recovered, and I would say for the most part my parish is, thankfully, one of them. There is also little doubt that many parishioners longed to return to the celebration of the Eucharist in person. It would be worthwhile, if something of a heavy undertaking, to examine the differences between parishes that did offer online worship and those that didn’t, and the numbers physically returning to worship.

Following my own personal reflection and conversations with others, I am also more aware of how our church buildings must be both welcoming and sacred places if they are to fulfil their function. Being concerned with the ‘front of house’, the notice board and porch, as well as the interior and atmosphere of the main part of the building, is something I have taken into account as much as, a couple of years ago, I was preoccupied with how our website looked to a first visitor.

### **Attending to the elements**

Under the scrutiny of the camera and the amplifying properties of the microphone, most celebrants are all too conscious of the need to attend to the particular and individual elements of worship. On the one hand, we have become very conscious of the need for authenticity in our intention and purpose, on the other, we are more aware of the preciousness and fragility of the physical. In other words, the bond not just between people, but between celebrant, elements, words, and people at worship is forged by attentiveness to the otherness of the bread, wine, word, hymn, oil, and water, as well as the recitation of prayer, the responses, and the moments of silence. I wonder if the need to rebuild and reinvigorate our ministries and volunteer base, something shared by so many organisations, is not just a matter of healing wounded hearts, but also addressing the reluctance of people to return to previous practices. This could be a result of the fracture with routine, and a new awareness, spoken or not, of the strangeness of what it is we do when we worship.

The feeling (in the strongest and perhaps more modern sense of that word) of presence and absence does not just refer to people or in-person attendance, it also embraces a new awareness of the weight and meaning carried by the elements of worship, and how they are not at our disposal. They communicate in their own turn this presence and absence of Christ himself.

### **Gift and Return**

Faced with this (newly found?) appreciation of the giftedness of other people and of the ‘ingredients’ of worship, we are forced to reflect on what kind of church we will be in the future. While the wider implications of this lie outside the purpose of this article, I do now look briefly at the implications for how we celebrate the divine revelation and our response in the liturgy. Christ is not our possession; people do not belong to us; the very things we use and words we speak in worship are not always our own, nor can we dictate

their specific use. Everything and everyone is gift. Everyone and everything is symbolic. The physicality of bread and wine, their simplicity and fragility are a reminder of why Christ chose them to communicate himself to us. They are easily broken, easily disposed of, all too readily consumable. Yet their inherent meaning stubbornly refuses to go away, and the history of their association with the life of Christ and his church is recalled every time we begin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

I would argue that this has political as well as theological implications for the Church and its worship. It is of no surprise to me that those of a particular theological persuasion and attitude towards power in the Church, who would seek to return to former ways, sometimes wish to forget the whole experience of 2020-2022. The rise of the number of people in the Roman Catholic Church who now receive Communion on the tongue is also of interest. Is this a new appreciation of the physical or a need to return to old certainties in the midst of a fast moving and precarious world?

It is debatable whether we have learned anything as a society from the Pandemic, but one thing is certain for us as believers: we can only return thanks for the gifts we have received.

The fundamental structure and purpose of worship has been reaffirmed. The need to participate has opened up for us how the death and resurrection of Christ, and the losing and finding of our lives in the most basic of Christian and human functions, reveals the reality of grace. If nothing else, the experience of online worship reaffirms this reality.

### **Sources and suggestions for further reading**

Heidi A Campbell and John Dyer, *Ecclesiology for a Digital Church*, Theological Reflections on a New Normal (London: SCM Press, 2021).

Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament, a Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (Minnesota: Pueblo/Liturgical Press, 1995).

Edward Kilmartin, *Christian Liturgy: Theology and Practice* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1988).

Edward Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology*, edited Robert J Daly (Minnesota: Pueblo/Liturgical Press, 1998).

Sarah Parvis, *Church Closure: Why we must mourn* (London: The Tablet, 30<sup>th</sup> April 2020).

Katherine G. Schmidt, *Virtual Communion: Theology of the Internet and the Catholic Sacramental Imagination* (London: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020).

Lina Toth (editor), *Theology in Scotland, Vol.29, Autumn 2022, Church, virtual and physical.*

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