

A REFLECTION: ON THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CELEBRANT AND COMMUNITY WHEN CHILDREN ARE PRESENT AT COMMUNION

By Roddy Hamilton

Introduction: The Tradition

It seems one of the most difficult things the church has been asked to do, or maybe the church is simply reluctant or even confused as to how to do it, and that is to develop an attitude and liturgy that integrates children into the celebration of communion. It seems a great pity the church has not adequately resourced itself for this significant and deeply theological experience as its implications are broad in how we engage and relate to the sacrament of communion and organise our life as congregations.

In an all-adult communion service where there is no likelihood of children being present, a traditional format probably includes forms and rites those adults have grown up with. Familiar language and liturgy offers a sense of conformity with the past, present and future; the recognition of particular forms of ritual and method strengthens the attachment with the tradition; and, dare it be said, repetitive formal practise offers space for a connection with the rite that is both one of sentimentality and of unquestioning acceptance.

None of these things can ever be said to be wrong as such. It is right and proper that God's People own the sacrament and are part of the continuing story of bread and wine through each era, passing on the tradition, correctly, carefully and with integrity to each generation. Indeed it is through these traditions that the Eucharist is safely cared for and guarded from forms that could corrupt the theological understanding of communion.

If children are present, need it be that any of these things are lost? There may be certain implications for the celebrant and also the entire community, but these implications do not need to corrupt or break the tradition. Indeed, children present enrich the tradition laying down deeper roots in the community and uncovers a number of important theological truths that have been forgotten in the past.

Enriching the Tradition

The tradition of the Passover as we have it now, tells us that the youngest child asks the question "Why?" at the meal and turns the rite into a story so the whole narrative of the Exodus is retold.

If a Christian community is planning to have children present at communion, this same tradition can be applied, not necessarily during the service itself, but ought to be a voice in the head of the liturgist and celebrant: "Why do we do this?", "Why is it done this way?", "What does this mean?" It would never be a bad thing for a congregation, in age appropriate groups to revisit the traditions of the communion by asking these questions as preparation for each communion season.

There is a need to retell the story in a way that is both comprehensive and intelligible to all those present. Using language that can be grasped yet holds mystery is an important consideration to those who wish to celebrate with children present. For children most stories hold awe and the story of bread and wine and our very salvation is one such story that is full of wonder and mystery. A new telling that speaks through those things in a fresh way can engage both adults and children alike. But it is not just the story itself, the whole form of the rite needs to be thought about again so that the journey from Great Entrance to table and then to pew and the world becomes a living story for all those present.

Nothing is "a given" when children are present. It becomes a level playing field. If there are those "in the know", who understand the language and process without explanation or guidance, sitting beside those who are not "in the know" then the communion is surely corrupted. It becomes an incantation that is over the heads of some. Those will include children and adults who experience the traditions handed down without any thought to explanation or guidance.

Thus people are enabled to ask questions and if children are to be present, the questions may be ones others are scared to voice: "Why do you repeat things three times?" (Agnus Dei), "What is the 'Hosanna' bit in the middle of the big prayer?", "Why are the bread and wine brought in during the service?", "Why do the elders sit up the front?" By engaging such questions, and finding ways of explaining the traditions, the whole tradition is enriched and supported by a community that journeys through its understanding of what is going on, exploring where the rite has come from, and finding meaning in what is familiar each time it is done.

There may be by the implication that some traditions are no longer found to hold meaning and have been repeated simply because they have always been done that way. Such examples are elders serving

communion, the Great Entrance and including the institution within the Thanksgiving prayer. By revisiting these traditions through asking questions in preparation for communion the whole community can gather anew round the bread and wine, exploring by the rites in order to keep the tradition alive speaking to us in the here and now as much as offering us an image for the future of God's Realm.

Of course, the idea of children at communion is as ancient as the church itself. We have to give thanks and celebrate the Orthodox tradition of baptising, chrismation (sometimes known as confirmation) and sharing Eucharist within the one service with infants being carried from Baptism to the chalice. Culturally, there hasn't been the need to define the sacraments in the Eastern traditions as there has been in the West, nor as much enthusiasm for precise counting of the sacraments or a legal-minded approach to doctrine surrounding the Eucharist. It is a more philosophical and abstract approach where there is a greater emphasis on the practice and personal experience of truth. This allows children to be readily present, not because they are children, but because they are God's own, new creations in Baptism and made new in Jesus Christ. "If one does not receive the chrism one is not perfectly baptised," writes Symeon of Thessalonica.

Rewriting the Liturgy

What language shall we use? To expect any person who has not had a lifetime's experience of communion to relate to what is going on in the traditions is asking for the impossible. Recognising that children will be present offers the opportunity for those with the gift, to rewrite the liturgy in order to dynamically embrace children and adults in the whole tradition and experience of communion. Starting afresh with liturgy and process in order to include the broader, richer community that includes children leads to the creation of a liturgy that celebrates a living story. New words, rich in poetry and symbol, new retellings of the institution that do not turn it into a cartoon version of the narrative, alternative ways of serving the bread and wine that embrace the story can all be created and indeed alternative settings of the bread and wine can be offered over time to allow all of God's People to engage with the Eucharist (see appendix).

The implication of spending some significant time on speaking to people and writing the liturgy in community may be worth a try. Even if only one person has the task of adapting a traditional liturgy, time would need to be invested in the process of creating a service for all people that is worthy of the significance and importance we give communion in our tradition. In this way the liturgy would be recognisably a communion service where the symbols and traditions are adapted, not for the sake of it, but in order to enhance them for all present.

Grace and re-understanding

As children celebrate communion with adults the whole idea of grace is newly understood in the whole life of the congregation. Often a reason given for children not being integrated communion is because there is a lack of understanding. While there is some level of understanding rightly expected from those who are able to understand be it simply a comprehension of what is going on, it is not an entrance qualification. The sacrament is essentially about grace and what God has done for us through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, unconditionally. This is not something to be understood before it can be experienced. Symbol and rite and practice point to both the meaning and mystery of sharing bread and wine in community. How people understand communion comes from the experience of it, the growing up in the community of faith and the care given by that community in unfolding its mystery to those who share the bread and wine at various key stages in that persons life so that they can engage with it and comprehend what is going on. There is no minimum level of comprehension with grace. There is however the need to experience it.

One of the implications of celebrating communion with children present is to enable an ongoing strategy of care for those who share in the communion service as a community. Space ought to be given to help guide people through the mystery in practical ways as well as opening out the theology at appropriate ages or times in peoples lives. This is maybe something we should be doing anyway rather than relying on what people were given once at a particular moment in time such as a communicants class. As peoples lifestyles and circumstance change, the way they engage with the faith and the rites of that faith alter. On-going Christian education from childhood through adulthood is one way a community can care for those it loves.

Dismantling barriers

Many barriers can be broken when the faith community invests in their children by inviting them to share bread and wine yet a number of new barriers can equally grow up. As the language of the service is adapted and some of the liturgical moments slowed down in order to enable those present time to grasp some meaning as well as mystery, barriers of understanding, age and theology can be dismantled simply because people are offered a different entrance level into the liturgy. This doesn't mean dumbing down the richness or the poetry, but finding new forms in that richness that expresses the drama and promise of the sacrament. Children understand mystery well and in many ways find a dynamism within mystery that adults lack through a fear of misunderstanding the clues, or frightened of actually being confronted by what the mystery is

pointing to. Indeed, an equity can be brought back into the service where everyone gathered is recognised as worthy of receiving God's Grace.

When questions about who can distribute the elements are raised, then there is no reason not to have a mixture of adults (who are not elders) and children serving the congregation, for it is each person who serves their neighbour. Those who distribute do simply that: move the elements from the table to the pew. The people serve each other. That becomes very visual with children present – a symbol in itself of the equity found round the communion table.

Prejudice is opened up. There may be hygiene questions (“you don't know where their hands have been”) as bread is passed to be torn and shared. There may be questions about traditionalism as people hark back to something they are more familiar with when children were seen and not heard. So care, understanding and process of introduction to all-age communion take a role here as we move people from where they are now emotionally towards a renewed engagement with the sacrament within the whole community.

A place within the life of a congregation that allows a debate between familiarity and creativity, between continuity and new ideas, could bring a new dynamism to the life of the sacrament. In this way it becomes something living in the minds of people and space is created in order that people can recognise the symbols again, discover what is important, and invest fresh meaning in ritual and word. Of course it could cause something of a more heated discussion. Yet even this may bring life enabling the congregation to offer both styles to the community and broaden the richness the sacrament can bring. In this way, through debate, discussion and living with the tangle of tradition and new ideas, we enrich our living as a sacramental community.

Shaping the whole worshipping community

But maybe the biggest implication is how to enable the whole community of God's People to break bread together as a family. As a community becomes aware of all the ages that gather to seek God round the table and cares for those people in the sensitivity of words used and ritual practised, the meal shapes a Eucharistic Community not just on the day of communion but prophetically calls for the same level of community day by day and week by week.

If we believe all ages are to gather at the table, then how can that be shaped in the whole life of the congregation? If children break bread with adults, serving them and caring for them, in what other circumstances in our community's life can children teach the adults as much as adults serve children? In what other places can we offer all-ages new responsibilities to hold and care for the mysteries of the faith? In what other places can we enable all-ages to be part of the whole community in decision making, in learning and in teaching others? In what other places will we listen to the worth of children in the shaping and passing on of the community's traditions and life so that we live within the grace and worth God offers all people symbolised and radicalised in the gathering at the table?

This is possibly the most important question to reflect on as we invite children to sit with adults and adults with children round the table of our Lord. It is not asking for a sentimental moment where we gather together and “share with the group” but a way of living that engages children in the very heart of a community's living, investing in them a responsibility for living the faith, which we ought to presume they have already, and to see through their eyes, images of God adults have long forgotten. It brings life!

Practical Implications

In conclusion some of the implications for the celebrant but also the community are summed up here. All are possible to achieve and already are being achieved in a number of congregations who find they need children to be present round the table in order to recognise both the breadth of God's grace and God's shaping of the community. It is not about letting children into the service or even changing a few words to the more child-friendly variety. It is a whole process of integration into the whole community where the theology of what communion is for a community affects the whole life of that community. It is a challenge and an opportunity for the church to learn from and be influenced by the awe and reverence children bring to a community whose central mystery is the communion with the very God they are so certain loves them. It is a good and healthy place to be exploring this question and allowing the story of bread and wine to embrace a whole group of people the church reluctant or confused as to how to embrace in this central way of living that is Gods.

- Engaging the whole congregation in looking afresh at the communion rite through discussion and exploration in age-appropriate groups at particular times in the church year or life.
- Exploring traditions by asking questions about those traditions to understand afresh their meaning and purpose for a community. The stories are often forgotten with just the act left. Retell those stories for a new generation of people.

- Looking again at the local customs of communion such as elders serving bread and wine and allowing others (both adults and children) to take up that responsibility.
- Rewrite the liturgy so that it cares and guides all those who gather both children and stranger who may not be familiar with ancient customs. This means guiding people through the rite rather than getting rid of it.
- Consider the image of children and adults gathered round the table and explore how that image is an image for the whole life of the church where children are given shared access and responsibility for other areas of the church's life.
- Consider writing the liturgy in community reflecting on people's questions and weaving the story round those questions.
- Slow down the liturgy so particular moments can be lived in longer, using music, story, symbolic act that enable people to engage and wonder at a deeper level.

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An Original All-Age Communion Liturgy

At the beginning of this service everyone was invited to write their name on a slip of paper, or have someone else write it for those disabled, young children not able to write yet. These were collected and scribed onto a large 6 foot high by 12 foot across board that had been painted white and sat behind the communion table. Everyone's name was placed on the board. These were the people of that community that morning. Everyone was equal.

A traditional Communion Table was not used but a series of smaller tables covered in white cloth obviously children sized tables which took away some formality and enabled children to see Jesus wasn't too big to sit with them.

Invitation

Come everyone who wants to:
come if you can recite the creeds,
come if you can't remember the words to Jesus loves me;
come if you've been in the church since birth,
come if you've lost your way a few times but found your way here today;
come if you like to study theology,
come if you like to finger paint;
come if you like tradition and ritual and ceremony,
come if you like balloons and laughter and jumping in puddles.
Come if you like all these things
and find the wonder of heaven in them all.
Come as you are:
old and young.
Just as you are:
one family,
right now,
each of you,
every one of you,
and have a seat right here.

Hymn

Welcome

It looks like bread,
and it is bread.
But God is incredibly imaginative.
There is a surprise in this bread,
for within each crumb,
God has folded nothing less,
than heaven.

And when we break it,
and everyone has a piece,
what we are doing is saying,
"Let's share together the story of Jesus."

It looks like a goblet of wine,
and it is wine,
but God, being God,
didn't leave it there,
and has squeezed into each drop,
a promise for the whole world.

And when we pass it among us,
and everyone has a taste,
it sort of whispers to our souls,
and sort of tangles with memories,
telling us:
God loves us,
God loves us,
God loves us,
completely.

So lets break bread and listen to the story,
and share wine and hear the promise...

Institution

One night Jesus and the disciples were sitting in a room and the meal table was spread before them. There was lamb and herbs and bread and soon they had all had their fill.

They were all talking to each other about the days and months that had passed. One of the disciples, Peter, was telling them about how he felt when he stepped out of the boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee (do you remember that?) and wanted to walk toward Jesus over the surface and what it felt like when the water reached his knees and then his middle and then his neck.

Matthew was talking about the time before he was a disciple sitting in the sun counting out taxpayers money enjoying the chink, chink, chink of the coins (does anyone recall that story?) when a shadow blocked out his sun and he lost count. He looked up and the silhouette of Jesus filled his view and asked him to put down the money and follow him.

Andrew interrupted Matthew to tell about the time he found a wee boy with two fish and five barley loaves (we all remember that one), hardly enough for one meal, and presented the boy and his basket to Jesus in front of that huge crowd of 5000. He could hear the titter from the front few rows at the thought of feeding them all with a 12 year olds packed lunch. But he did.

And all the other disciples told their memories of what had happened to them while they were following Jesus when eventually Jesus himself interrupted them all and said, "Here's another story" and he lifted the bread lying on the table.

He paused as everyone fell silent and listened, and he said, "This bread, this is the most important reminder you have of me. More than all these stories. This bread is an image of my body. I break it **(BREAK)** to show you that my own body will break. I want you all to break this bread so you all know what's happening to me and I want you to do it regularly, reminding yourselves of me each time and what I have done for you: dying because I love you all so, so much."

All the disciples were speechless as Jesus passed the broken bread around. They didn't understand in the same way that none of us understand.

And while the bread was passed Jesus lifted up the goblet and held it there in front of him in midair for a moment while everyone fell silent again. "This wine," he said, "is another reminder of me. But it is a symbol of my blood that will be spilled when I die. But do not be afraid because tucked within this is a promise, a covenant, that I will be with you always wherever you go. I will never let you go. Friends I love you so, so much even death cannot separate us!"

And again Jesus passed the wine round them all. They all took a sip and still none of them understood just as none of us could with honesty say we understand.

And today we share the very same meal that Jesus did with his friends: the bread and the wine that remind us of **our** stories of Jesus and what he did for us because he loves **us** so much.

"This bread is my body," says Jesus. "Eat of it, all of you."

"This wine is my blood and within it is a promise. Drink of it, all of you."

A group of adults and children come forward from the congregation to take trays of bread and then wine to everyone. Adults always keeping an eye on the children to sensitively guide them to their serving places.

A formal liturgy when children are present

Invitation

This is God's Table
come all of you
you are invited to dine on the banquet of
heaven

You are God's People
come all of you
you are invited to sit with your Lord

Here is God's feast
come all of you
you are invited to share in the bread and
wine

The table is waiting for you
all of you
of every age
you are invited to be here

Great Entrance

***Simply have two people read this and
then process in with one loaf and one
goblet (the other elements are already
on the table)***

Voice 1:
I bring bread.
Those who are hungry for food
and those who are fed but hunger for
justice
this table is our meeting place,
this bread, our nourishment.
Come all who hunger.

Voice 2:
I bring wine.
Those who are thirsty for water
and those who are filled but thirst for
righteousness
this table is where God's justice is met,
this wine, the sign of blessing.
Come all who thirst.

Welcome

This is an open table
and all those who love God
and seek to love God more
are welcome

so come with your questions and your
doubts
come with your living done and undone
come with all that you are and all who you
are
for here we meet Jesus in bread and wine
around a table God has set
Your seat is waiting.

Institution

On the Thursday night
Jesus gathered with his friends in an
upper room.

They shared a meal together.
Then as darkness fell
Jesus broke some bread
and took some wine
and asked his friends
to remember him
every time they broke bread together.

And because we are his disciples today
we remember that story
and how the story continues in this place
today
and we remember Jesus
as we break this bread together
and share this wine with each other

We are doing as Jesus asked us to do
and we are glad to do so.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Great God
of all the things you have created
we take the simplest food
and find you among us
as we eat together

In the great story of Jesus
we hear your love for us
being retold
and we remember all Jesus has done for
us
because of that love

Through the Spirit
you set this bread and wine apart
to be used only as an image of you
and your love for us

For this gift of bread and wine
that reminds us of all those other gifts you
have given us
we sing with every person who has been
at this table
in every time and in every place

*Holy, holy, holy God
God of power and might
heaven and earth are full of your glory
Hosanna in the highest*

*Blessed is the one who comes in the
name of God
Hosanna in the highest*

And so we thank you
that you have called us your children
sharing with us a love
that is more powerful than the universe
and that you sit here with us
blessing us in bread and wine

Amen

Breaking of Bread

Jesus took bread
broke it saying:
'This is my body broken for you.
Remember me when you do this'

And Jesus to wine lifted it
saying:
'This cup is a symbol of my covenant with
you.
Remember me when you drink from it.