

Communion: Beyond Common Order

by Roddy Hamilton, Minister at Abbotsford Church, Clydebank

Communion comes from underneath:

Traditionally communion liturgy has become a formal setting. It is a set piece, prescriptive and stands on its own. It's like cooking a dish, you get all the pieces in place and hey presto, you have communion. And we have a book that we imagine offers us a formalised recipe. But Common Order it is not a recipe book but a book of images of liturgy, forms that are ideas and illustrations or as the preface says, 'patterns of prayer and devotion which can be used as models to emulate or starting points for development'.

But in the life of congregations it is a set piece that descends from heaven almost. It's like the queen coming to visit. The town is painted and we all put on our best clothes. But I'd say communion rises rather than descends.

Let me introduce you to another communion service we did just two days ago. A small table with chairs round the table facing outwards. On each chair was an image of someone, in a different emotional state or clearly. The congregation sat in a much larger circle round these chairs. We reflected on those folk, imagining their stories and then during a retelling of the parable of the banquet where the guests were those from the streets, the chairs with the images were moved away from the table and placed in among the larger circle of those gathered that night.

The space changes and the liturgy becomes physical because we are not just retelling the story of the Last Supper. We are recognising the cost of salvation and the way of love. Communion rises up from Jesus' living in this world rather than descending on us from above. In a reflection about the communion a couple of nights ago one person said that in a quarterly communion the sense is people come to be cleansed but in a creative communion it's about getting your hands dirty.

Creative communion is bottom up, earthy, amongst the event or story we explore, a statement of faith, sits in the stoor of the world, and comes from that and not heaven.

Secondly, communion is not an event in itself but is part of every other event:

In creative communion we don't start anywhere near communion. There's no great entrance. Communion is just the most natural response in every event. In fact communion may be the last thing on our minds and a surprise to people when it happens. Communion comes out of what is happening in the story we explore that day, or in an event in the world like Darfur, trade injustice, or a celebration of neighbourhood. That can't work if it is always placed at the beginning of every three months regardless of what else is happening. Instead we find a place to break bread in every story, for every story is a meeting place as it always was with Jesus. It's not an event in itself but part of every event.

In communion, Jesus is incarnated, not in bread and wine but in the event itself. Each event on the underside of history is holy because there we meet with a broken Christ who breaks bread, and shares the life of those he sits with. For example at the communion of purple cloth people sat at various stations reminding themselves of some of the gentile saints of the church like Dorcas, like Cornelius, and removed a red cross from the bread to share with all those folk, and then replace it again.

When communion rises out of a story, the growing-edge of the early church, bread and wine are found in every fold of purple. Salvation becomes not a future event of glory, but becomes part of the way, the low road, walking with Jesus. This is salvation, this is glory: broken bread and spilled wine with the hungry.

It is the eschatological event: the daring to see hope in this banquet where all are gathered from the roadway, particularly the fools and the uninvited. Communion is part of every event.

Thirdly, communion is a place of instinct:

We are a revealed religion. We are a church that believes in revelation yet we are still fiercely influenced by the Enlightenment where belief is based on clear and rational thinking rather than instinct and wonder.

And instinct is an interesting thing. When we repeat set forms every time we celebrate communion, what have we let go? What instinctive and creative encounters do we pass over? What risks are we unable to take?

Beyond set forms we dare to live instead with instinct, the people of God, can be allowed to discover, and be surprised by the instinct to break bread with Jesus. Someone who comes to our creative communion said: you see the bread and wine rather than hear the words. At a station of bread and wine in a labyrinth at a Church Without Walls event a 25 minute queue clogged up the labyrinth such was the instinct to break bread. God's people themselves break bread with Christ because they need to. That is a risky place to be. It's instinctive.

In communion there is a place for creativity because we cannot contain God:

Clearly God's engagement with the world cannot be reduced to understanding. God overwhelms our understanding, thus we need poetry as the language of faith. Liturgy should be that poetry. Yet whatever we say is overwhelmed by God.

And so more creative forms are being used that engage more of the senses and offer a far more robust sensual experience in worship. That's a repeated comment from the people who come to our wee communion. But here also, while greater creativity may help, God can be no more contained in experience than in language. Pete Rollins says, 'in the aftermath of God, all our being cries out in response'.

And so people are asked to respond in action as well as word and prayer. This last Sunday, for example, the images of faces on the chairs became the surface for the bread and wine. But God won't be captured on a table.

If the table was just a piece of church furniture, you could buy God in IKEA. Maybe you can. Maybe that is the conspiracy of God that you can just pick up heaven anywhere. But maybe the greater collusion is that it is those who have burdens, lives that are crushed, memories that bring fear, create a table of lives all laid out on the surface of heaven, the perfect surface on which to break bread and share wine....

Acknowledging God is uncontainable on a table, in a liturgy, has led folk to be continually creative in seeking ways to express God revealed in Jesus. Creativity is in response to God and through Common Order we have been given permission to go beyond its forms finding creativity that allow us to express that uncontainability of God.

And finally, inevitably The Eucharist

The eucharist to me is heavy on trying to justify the presence of God. Living beyond common order (which interestingly doesn't have an eucharist in the second form) has grown for us an instinct to say simply 'This is my body'. By virtue of saying that, you have set the bread and wine apart and filled it with more of heaven than you can ever handle.

The power to set apart is in the People of God by virtue of what they are doing there. It is in that one instant in time when the participant breaks and eats and shares, that sets the bread apart. It is the action rather than the words.

And I'd argue you don't even need to say 'This is my body' but do anything or say anything that sets the time and place and elements apart that recognises heaven in the moment. We fenced off the communion table once with police cones and tape as if it was a crime scene and then told the story of Christians persecuted for their faith, breaking this bread and sharing this wine. We had to barge through the cones to break bread ourselves. We knew this bread was clearly like no other bread in that moment recognising 'This is my body' as the eucharist.

In going beyond common order the event becomes the epiclesis. This bread contains three stories: the story of ourselves, the story of the event we engage with or happen to be in, and the story of salvation, and they all break open in communion.

So my points are in experimenting with creative communion we have discovered:

- communion comes up from underneath
- it is part of every event and not an event in itself
- in is a place for instinct
- in is a place of creativity because your whole being cried out
- and the epiclesis is the event itself

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