

THE TRADITION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

By Peter Donald

What is the place of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in the church today? I would like to pose the question in a contextualised mode, i.e. with reference to the Church of Scotland in 2005. What does the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper hold out in promise and in practice?

Fix a picture of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in your minds. Which will it be? Of members of a congregation taking each a small cube of bread, drinking from a tiny glass, seated in pews covered in white cloths, with silence and planned formality? Of movement towards what might be the east end and different patterns of distribution? Of kneeling or standing? Of an informal circle, of certain pieces of music? Of a papal mass in the square of St Peter's? Of a San Salvadorean archbishop being gunned down during the Eucharistic prayer? Of gold and incense in abundance? Of children being present and receiving the elements? All of these and any come into my mind, but I would like in particular to describe Clachan Church (Lochbroom) – empty when I was last there, save for a few faithful souls on a Sunday afternoon who come together for a service without Communion. However, Clachan, near Ullapool, has an interior dominated by two long tables with benches which extend from front to back. The Communion memories therefore are both strong and highly visual, of invitations to come in around the table where bread would be passed round and wine drunk from large silver goblets, of an awe-inspiring action only for those who knew themselves to be well prepared over several days of preparation. The Communion season when it came affected the lives of everyone in that neighbourhood. Ordinary life was suspended in a sense, for all that it was also undoubtedly a precious time of family and friends gathering and of rest from hard labours. It was – it used to be – a time to remember and to be shaped by.

Over my lifetime, as far as I can tell, the Clachan Communion experience has almost died a death. I have no wish to over-romanticise it, since in a full analysis its history as well as the present would bear complex scrutiny, but it gives us a starting-point as good as any. What place does the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper hold in today's Scotland? As the nurturing experience of the dying and rising of Jesus Christ, the Sacrament is accorded by a Church like our own a central role in its establishment, but there are many current questions in and around that. To take Clachan in 2005 as our starting-point, have we for example, for all that we uphold an ordained ministry of word and sacrament, become rather inclined to emphasise word more than sacrament? Who all can participate in the Sacrament? How should it be administered? Such questions impinge not only upon local practice but are also of great significance in faith and order terms, i.e. alongside other churches, and furthermore in encounter with those who would challenge the rationale of Christian faith. Eucharistic understandings and questions of church identity are deeply connected. They matter in the rural Highlands of Scotland as much as anywhere else. And as well as questions inwardly focused, it might further be asked, how significant is the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper within the mission or witness of the church? To use modern terms, what is its interface with the world's agenda – or, in more traditional speak, how is it a converting ordinance?

I offer this paper, conscious that a wider process of reflection is getting under way on these very issues – and with a heavy caveat that this paper is very preliminary in its form and research. Decisions at the General Assembly to ask for comment on liturgical practice and, quite separately, to survey historic Communion plate, together with many discussions raising questions of ecclesiology, have underpinned a recent decision to prepare a major report on the place of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper within the Church of Scotland. I hope our discussions in Geneva will be helpful in the process.

I. The inheritance, from past to present

The Scriptural note of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper being a tradition "handed on" (cf. I Corinthians 11.23) encourages an initial engagement with local inheritance, not least to enable wisdom in our contemporary handling of the issues at stake. In broad terms these issues might be clustered under four headings, drawn out of that insightful chapter of the first letter to the Corinthians – namely the geography of liturgy, the social fabric, the dimension of witness and the theology and practice.

The geography of liturgy – "when you meet together as a group" (I Cor. 11.20)

The geography of liturgy encompasses the gathering of the people and the external ordering of the Sacrament. There are issues of where and when we come together for the Lord's Supper, including the design of church interiors and furnishings. There have been various shifts of greater and lesser significance through church history, and amongst these most prominently the institution of the Lord's Day on a Sunday, the day of resurrection, and church buildings. The scale of the meal being shared, the erection of stone altars and the modelling of building design also with reference to the Temple and/or architectural invention would give scope for comment, as would the history of vestments, of the use of music and incense and

icons. The tradition has been commented on and frequently argued over. The frequency of Eucharistic celebration has also fluctuated, and the related issues of who participates when and how.

For the Church of Scotland finding its identity as a particular “reformed” church, the geography of liturgy gave clear markers. The altar was abandoned in favour of the table, and the east end in favour of sitting around the long table (as at Clachan, although usually in a less permanent design). This obviously had its bearing on church architecture. Vocabulary changed and much else besides – the dress of the Minister and his centre of operation (the pulpit being now used for teaching as well as for the reading of the Word); the decoration of the church being altogether devalued; the music being simplified and popularised; the Communion plate changing in design; and the frequency of the Lord’s Supper generally settling down far away from every Lord’s Day, although when it did happen, it always implied the participation of the people as well as the one ordained to preside.

It matters to start here, since rhythms and externals are not without profound influence on people’s sensibilities. Wars may be readily fought over such matters. Nevertheless, in the present day Church of Scotland, diversity very much has become the order of the day. In some parts of the Church, there is a desire largely to keep with what has been handed down to us, but elsewhere a restlessness for change is an obvious feature. Whether with furniture or decoration, liturgical form and style, there are many experiments. Clachan Church witnesses to times when the geography was more fixed. If one of the rare general conclusions to be drawn is that worship in the Church of Scotland nowadays follows few agreed lines, and that variety and a borrowing from various traditions is very much in vogue, what asks to be pondered specifically here is how this affects celebrations of the Lord’s Supper. The geography – be it timings or location, dress or design, church furniture, the use of symbols and music and the pattern of the spoken word – contributes to people’s expectations and experience. Behind the debate about the degree of formality that is appropriate and over what can or should drive change, for instance over issues of human comfort and communication, ultimately is it not rather important to discern how precisely space, or time, becomes sacred, the meeting-point between heaven and earth, and so to keep the geography of liturgy issues within the most sound perspective?

Social Fabric – “opposing groups” (1 Cor. 11.18)

The social fabric heading is to take on board in the first instance issues which were of key significance in Christianity at its beginnings – namely the composition of the church where, finding its identity around both Word and Sacrament, all sorts of people came together. The breaking down of social barriers, whether between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, men and women, was arguably fundamental. Secondly, in respect of the church’s place within society, an appreciation is needful of how the church defines itself within the culture of its day shaped by a variety of forces.

The early church needed to accept that in the eyes of the world they were a sect, but after Constantine this changed radically, to an extent ultimately that the outsiders, the deviants even, were those who did not come in to the church. For the Church of Scotland, while the age-old problems of social distinctions being maintained somewhat in the face of Christian doctrine have probably been more of a challenge in days past than nowadays, in respect of its national establishment, however, and the pursuit of the goal of a covenanted nation, there continue to be some unresolved issues.

Once upon a time a church like Clachan, and many others, would carry seats set apart, sometimes a whole loft or gallery, for the local gentry. Kirk Session records would show a disproportionately high number of the well-born both holding the office of Elder and less frequently being cited for lapses in ecclesiastical discipline. And the Church of Scotland suffered major splits over other, not unrelated issues of social influence. However, that aspect of the social fabric surely counts for less now than it has done in previous generations and so the vision of social equality manifest through our common baptism and equal participation in the Lord’s Supper is less marred than perhaps it once was. Any residual problems cluster around fairly small discussions on, for example, what dress is appropriate for going to church.

On the church’s place within society, the ground can seem to be a little less certain. In Clachan in days past, the Communion “season” was very much a public event. Besides a succession of worship services before and after the administration of the Sacrament, there was a day of fasting on the Friday and shops would close; on the Sunday itself, there would be no question of activities alternative to the church, and indeed there would regularly be visitors, a gathering of extra people, within the local community for the season of the Sacrament. (I note the issue of who was able to participate fully in the Sacrament under the heading of theology and practice.) Church and society were thus very closely intermeshed, and there was reinforcement of this through the public education system. Nowadays, the extent to which the experience of the Lord’s Supper overshadows the life of the community as a whole is nothing like what it once was. In a place like Clachan the Communion season may still be kept, but society at large is set on alternative paths. The understanding of “holy-days” has, for most people, become entirely secularised and church people are known to take times off from attending Sunday worship. Commercial pressures are readily owned to weigh more heavily than the invitation to worship God and so the shops are open. Freedom is interpreted in terms of liberty from all constraints rather than in the classic Christian terms of service and love. The Church’s input into public education system is far from straightforward.

Without becoming caught up in taking views on what has been lost, the need then is to consider what is implied by the contemporary situation. What, for example, will Christians nowadays believe about Sundays; and how does that affect our rhythms of life, whatever anyone else may think? What now are the terms of the church's mission? In the Scottish situation, the hangover from the past still carries some weight. Memories are treasured of great revivals around the Communion seasons; and perhaps still there is a sense, not necessarily on theological grounds, of the Sacrament time being a special time, feeding off the tradition of it being rare and momentous. It may be timely to reach for some clear ecclesiological distinctions. When, for example, even in everyday life nowadays the family meal is under threat, is it not time decisively to own the break between church and society as a whole, and to clarify what distinctively makes the community which is the church?

The dimension of witness – “you proclaim” (I Cor. 11.26)

The dimension of witness relates to the unity of faith – every time proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes, as Paul put it (I Cor.11.26). There was then a necessary concern not merely to celebrate the faith but also to define it in contradistinction to heresy, and this again has been an obvious aspect of the church's history. In the positive aspect, the unity was marked through the Sacrament of Baptism, the necessary entry-point into the Christian fellowship, and creeds came in support of that; negatively, there were the sanctions of excommunication and a tendency therefore to strengthen the bonds of communion, within which of course the *episkopos* or bishop played a key role. The Church of Scotland in Reformed tradition likewise took very seriously its confessions of faith and, whatever its polity, its deployment of ecclesiastical discipline, and the stakes (literally) were high until the eighteenth century.

Christian unity historically has become exceptionally problematic. The schism between East and West, the break-up of the Western Church through the Reformation and the multiplication of Protestant churches by no means themselves in communion one with another is altogether messy. The scandal of division is conspicuous around the celebration of the Lord's Supper. In the Highland parish where Clachan Church lies, the divided Presbyterians can only agree insofar as they time their Communion seasons to match one another! Still, as everywhere else, there is no possibility yet of crossing the barriers to join with the Roman Catholics. Furthermore, the definition of orthodoxy “just” confined to articulations of the faith has come to be problematic. The crises engendered by modern philosophy and science, and the contemporary movements of thought in the theological disciplines, have raised as many questions as answers. Creeds then may be said or sung and not entirely subscribed to; the confessions of faith, in some people's minds, have become all but historical artefacts. All of this spills over into the heading of theology and practice, but even aside from being finely argued over, it has its impact through the multiplication of assessments current in respect of the Lord's Supper.

In the heyday of Clachan there was probably a strong measure of agreement on essentials of Christian faith, which were anti-Rome, anti-Episcopalian and so on. The easy option, in our brokenness, is to perpetuate divisions. Even after the so-called ecumenical twentieth century, congregations are more likely to look for common ground around shared prayers or action, and possibly the preaching of the Word, but almost never around the Lord's Table. In the face of awkward problems, the easiest option is to keep out of the most difficult arenas. This is a serious cop-out. Is there not a continuing challenge before the church both to articulate and live a common witness which takes seriously in our own day those issues of unity and holiness and catholicity and apostolicity, such as we believe mark the church of Jesus Christ? Partisanship over against, separation from others on the same path is pain-filled and contrary to belief in the body of Christ.

Within its own house, the Church of Scotland may consider a further challenge. There has been progressively a downplaying of issues of ecclesiastical discipline, not without good reason. However, the notion of the bonds of communion always set out to do more than enforce moral standards on individuals' conduct. Thinking on Presbyterian polity can be all too functional; the *communio* ecclesologies powerfully articulated by Catholic and Orthodox theologians raise some large questions on how we understand the connections between parish churches and across the whole Church of Scotland. Unity as a gift and calling is powerfully manifest through sharing in Word and Sacrament. If, for example, Presbyteries or General Assemblies are seen to be distant and unengaged, is it at all wise to relegate Word and Sacrament so much to the fringes of our coming together there?

Theology and practice – “the meaning of the Lord's body” (I Cor. 11.29)

Theology and practice takes us to the teaching of the church on the Lord's Supper, both what is to be prayed and believed. Historically for our attention is the development of liturgical form on the one hand and of catechetical formation on the other. In these considerations of what we do and what happens to us, and to the bread and wine, when we gather together for the Lord's Supper, again there was an obvious shift of emphasis at the time of the Reformation, with new catechisms and new liturgical forms, and the sources for reflection from all sides since then demand attention.

Although there was debate over the meaning of the Sacraments long before the Reformation, the heated sixteenth-century exchanges brought into focus a range of understandings on which neither then nor

now has there been common agreement. There was a polarising of views, in particular over interpretations of what was happening as bread and wine were shared and also in the rival establishments of churches, with claims to authority in one or the other. It was no polite debate; lives were lost on all sides, and martyrdom lent another serious dimension to the experience of dividedness. In more recent decades, the sharp dividing-lines have only begun to be crossed. Common prayer has become possible, and theological dialogue; there have been explorations of the reconciling of memories and some small steps of ecumenical advance.

Is the church clear about what it is doing when the people come together for the Lord's Supper? The late Pope's encyclical *Ecclesia de eucharistia* or the resolute patterning of the Divine Liturgy in Orthodoxy on ancient texts make the insistence from elsewhere that the church's very being is tied up with the Sacrament. Classically the Reformers also were very clear that the Lord's Supper was instituted by God and implied a particular set of actions to be carried through. Dependent on the action of the Holy Spirit, the true church has the "right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus". The Church of Scotland continues to engage with this, witness the current General Assembly determination to reflect on theology and practice.

Another recent spur to discussion arose with the question of what knowledge and attitude were fitting for any who participate, with reference to children baptized but not yet admitted to membership; the area of discussion is not closed, and there are lingering questions indeed over the very notion of membership as distinct from baptism. With Clachan in view, another aspect of this is raised. Given a Highland parish, we are bound to ponder the continuing inheritance of wariness in the Highlands about becoming a communicant member and how, in many Highland situations, there would be typically far fewer feeling worthy to participate in the Supper than elsewhere. Who, then, can or should participate? Historically the eldership, established for the sake of ecclesiastical discipline, were esteemed not least for the sake of the examination of faith and morals prior to the Communion seasons. The people gave account to those set over them in orders of ministry. However we might view this fencing of the tables, as it generally became known, which began with the elders' pastoral visits and climaxed in the admonitions given by the Minister prior to the breaking of bread, our contemporary experience of eldership and of printed liturgy has all but entirely left it behind.¹

The publication in 1994 of the latest edition of the *Book of Common Order* followed in a line of publications dating back to the time of John Knox and, even in the sixteenth century, produced both in English and Gaelic. There is no denying that the world has changed. In the early Reformation, prayers may not have been uniformly prescribed as in the Church of Rome, but there was not a vacuum. For the sake of "rightness", reformed theology implied reformed prayer, i.e. strictly in accordance with the Word of God. Freedom was encouraged only insofar as it was freedom in the Spirit, the One who bears witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. By the nature of extempore practice, the evidence does not survive to illustrate how exactly this worked, but the stirrings in the general assemblies of the nineteenth century over innovations in worship would support the argument that there was for centuries a strong element of homogeneity. Since then there has been running a rollercoaster of change, in liturgy as well as in other aspects. While we rejoice in a polity disposed to be open to the stirrings of the Spirit, there are inevitably certain risks in the faith and order direction. Creativity may be inspired, or it may foster theological ignorance or mistakings, whether in the language of prayer or in modifications in practice being adopted which tend to the alteration of meaning. It cannot be assumed that one approach is more right than another, but is there in some respects a remarkable lack of concern as to whether that might be so?

"The tradition which I handed on ..." (I Cor.11.23): what do we need to be deeply attentive to? In the Scottish reformed tradition, we have an accountability to the Scriptures in the first instance, and the challenge then of interpreting them in our times, with ecumenical consciousness; and an inheritance in the next place located within the Westminster Confession, which was itself conspicuously reticent on those very ministry and liturgical matters which are so much at the heart of modern and post-modern shifts of pattern. Now in what follows I would like, briefly, to set out a constructive response to some of the questions I have been raising. I repeat the caution already given, that this is by no means the last word on the subject.

II. The Lord's Supper: the gift of Christ to his church

Christians believe in the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Even in a brief exposition, that Trinitarian shape is more than helpful. What do even two or three gathering in Christ's name in Clachan Church need to know?

Faith in Christ

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, to use that name, points us to the Lord of the church, Jesus Christ, in whose name we gather and offer all our prayer and worship. The Son, sent by the Father for our salvation, commissions the ongoing work of making disciples who will be fed by Word and Sacrament. The Word is both

¹ Elders are still used regularly in helping to serve Communion. Ecclesiastical discipline, in the Lowlands certainly, tended to break down much longer ago with the rapid expansion of population and changing patterns of thought from the time of the Industrial Revolution. Generally speaking nowadays, external examination of faith and morals by the Kirk Session tends to be focused only around the time of admission to membership / confirmation of baptismal vows; or where there has been "scandal".

the speaking about Jesus Christ and Christ himself; the Sacrament likewise is a participation in realities human and divine, bread and wine as the ordinary gifts of creation, and the life and death of Christ really present. The Sacrament is to be known as an addition to the Word, in the sense that it confirms and deepens our sense of the Word, which and who is for us.

Sacred space and sacred time, therefore, are the human experience as Christ comes into our midst, through the reading of Scripture and the breaking of bread. The encounter with the incarnate God is entirely dependent on God's grace, and thus profoundly a mystery. Christ is made known to us in the power of the Holy Spirit. There is no question of our grasping this merely on our own, in our flesh and blood. What is known, tasted and seen, intimates eternity; nothing is contained by what we apprehend, and yet there is no disconnection with the ordinariness of life. We who are initiated into the fellowship cannot and should not step aside from what is mortal and what is tangible. The love of God, for the time being, is set upon renewing down-to-earth existence, with all its challenges, even if at the same time we are glimpsing the eighth day – beyond time and space, the heavenly.²

Thus the Westminster Confession begins by describing sacraments as “holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and his benefits, and to confirm our interest in him; as also to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his word”. The emphasis on institution is significant, both because of the laying out in the related Scriptural texts of the purpose of sacraments and also in support of the sacraments being a truly powerful and effective part of church life. We impoverish ourselves by neglecting them. There is something awesome here, in direct continuation of the awesomeness of Jesus Christ living once on this earth.

Under this primary focus, in the work of Christ, we are steered. First, there may be conclusions to be drawn about ministry or service, whether ordained or of all the saints. What happens effectively is not by our faithful work, it is by Christ's himself. Within all the debate about sacrifice or commemoration, the truth is that the Sacrament would be empty without the indispensable work of Christ – and that is always more than a memory of a past event. We are called now to follow on the way and it is not for us to seize upon anything but to be humble recipients of our calling. A sign of that comes as within the order of ministry, the one who presides receives first, or certainly not last, because he/she is not the Lord. Around the table we are all together the adopted children, the invitees. This is a moment for the most profound thanksgiving – *eucharistia*. The blessings of the Supper will not depend on what we make of it, other than in terms of our openness to be fed and nourished by Christ himself.

Hope in the Father

The context of the Lord's Supper is one of fragility. The ones whom Jesus calls friends may go out and betray him; feasting and rejoicing are not so far apart from pain and death. Therefore the element of hope has a vital part to play, focused as for Jesus in his heavenly Father. We come around the Table, conscious of our sins and of the sins of the world. At the very same time as we are assured through Christ that sins are forgiven, life is nevertheless testing, sometimes very testing. The understanding that the Lord's Supper is but a foretaste, a preparation for an end to suffering and death, food for the journey, is another aspect of its giftedness. This is not only a very definite articulation of hope but it has its implications for all of “life in ordinary”. It is possible to do more than persevere; it is at the heart of Christian witness that there is no abandonment by the God of creation, either here or in the hereafter. A regularity of rhythm then is utterly wonderful, for bringing together the gifts of God in creation, and a mixed human company, in the knowledge that for all it might be said, “all is vanity”, there is a greater and more glorious purpose in the hands of God.

Our dependence on God for the forgiveness of sins, for the salvation of Christ himself, roots us as God's covenant people, in line with Israel; the Scriptures come to life as they are read anew. And so, if reflection on faith in Christ puts into perspective personal inclinations to be in control of worship, hope in the Father frames the church's self-identity – divided churches' identities. Christ is made the head of the catholic or universal church, and thus God is worshipped and glorified. The invitation to participate then is both open and closed, directed to any and all, but with terms attached. This is the moment for the most profound communion – *koinonia*, a sharing of all goods and most especially in the life of God's Son. Unity is not negotiable. Ecumenical endeavour to enable the catholic church to exercise well its responsibility to guard the essentials of faith is essential, as we are together set on cherishing the mystery of God's reconciling gospel. To quote the Westminster Confession again, the Lord's Supper is “to be a bond and pledge of [believers'] communion with [our Lord Jesus], and with each other, as members of his mystical body”.

Love in the Spirit

As God the Father has given us life now and in promise, and through Jesus the Son has definitely spoken to any prepared to listen, in the Holy Spirit God's transforming power at work is here to be delighted in and journeyed with. As “the Lord, the Giver of life”, the Spirit is on the move; dry bones come alive. For the Lord's

² Meeting “after the week, though of course still in the week, proposes that the salvation of our very times is in a coming grace larger than our times can contain” – G.Lathrop, *Holy Things*, 111.

Supper we are given to understand that without the participation of the Holy Spirit, very little will come to pass.

Dependency on the Holy Spirit is to be distinguished from spirituality in the abstract. The Spirit will make Christ known. Thus, in the Lord's Supper, the Spirit's presence is invoked both upon the gifts of bread and wine and upon the people present, since Christ will be made known both in the eating and drinking and in the communion of love. The invocation is no mere formula; it is rather to be thought of as the opening of the gates, the presence of God welcomed through and despite whatever barriers may be in the way. Whereas talk of the institution of the Supper may sound rather objective and fixed in tone, the Spirit's participation insists that we think in terms of something entirely new and contemporary, albeit having reference also to events of the past. Classic Reformed theology knows Christ ascended into glory and the church not so much incarnational as the community of the Spirit's inhabiting. As well as justification, there is sanctification; the mystery of the church consists in knowing the Holy Spirit.

Talk of the Spirit can be tantalising and confusing, but what it may not be is arid and limited. As we reflect on the greatest gift, which is love, we are taken out of ourselves and beyond our narrow horizons. There is a creative and wonderful tension between form and substance, between what can be sharply focused and what defies definition. We celebrate and take up the invitation to grow the fruit of the Spirit.³ The Holy Spirit meets us so as to transform us, both within the context of worship and outside it; and the rhythms of Spirit-inspired worship, by definition bound to be straining at the edges of human understanding, carry over into all living, and especially all loving. We trust the Holy Spirit to be the one who brings to life all benefits given and received within the Lord's Supper; and we trust in the Spirit's support and shaping of our very being, both individually and corporately.

III. The Lord's Supper: that the world might believe

In Scotland, confidence in the church is ebbing. Though the variety of churches multiplies, it is often with no attempt to make contact one with another let alone share in the Lord's Supper, and in many places of worship, like Clachan, numbers of worshippers are tiny. The heritage of establishment carries a price wherever there is a sense of outdatedness or social influence diminished or tired witness or mixed-up theology. Questions, such as those raised in part I of this essay, are naturally on the agenda.

However, the cutting-edge of church revival in the West seems to be focused frequently around word-dominated approaches (albeit with multimedia elements, for style of presentation reasons). There is more of an emphasis in church growth on flexibility than on any kind of rootedness, on comfort and cosiness rather than on spaciousness and mystery. People do not identify with denominationalism and, as a result, sit very loose with church history; the salvation of individuals is much more the call than the "house and family of God"⁴. This does not sit very well alongside the approach briefly sketched in part II of this essay which has, for our encounter with the living God, an utterly central place for the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. There are strong tendencies to take a view of the sacraments which has them as add-ons and not really at the beating heart of the life of the church. In this last section therefore, again all too briefly, I would like to frame a vision of the church which treasures the Lord's Supper at its heart. If this might be described as a "conservation" enterprise, it is that in the best sense of the term – not merely to prop up what is ancient, but to let its original glory shine, so as to draw in those as yet not caring.

The beauty of holiness

The church will treasure Word and Sacrament together because together they encourage our worship. God will be worshipped not merely as the spoken word is excitingly packaged but as that word comes truly out of God's store; similarly, the sacraments, and here in particular the Lord's Supper, will nurture faith as it truly presents Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. The rhythm of worship starts by our waiting on God, and not in any sense imagining that God waits for our arrivals and productions. There is then a discipline here, a habit, a setting aside of time and space, and it does not conform to the ways of the world. Our time is precious only in the sense that God deserves it, not that we have to rush on to something else; our spaces, and the use of our sensory perceptions, should be shaped not only by what seems familiar to us but what allows the doors to be opened to another plane of reality. We steer clear of being just a community of the likeminded, for there is a much greater calling, to enter into the purposes of the living God which will transform us and the whole creation. The issue then for any individual is not so much to make up his or her own mind as to discover what it means to be faithful. In the Lord's Supper, the absolute expectation is of Christ becoming present and so, by grace, our faithfulness being steered by his. He is the shepherd of our souls, and no-one amongst us represents him to the others, rather the presiding ministers and people together come before God in hope of the new creation and by the gift of the Spirit are given a foretaste of just that.

From the outside this may be a strange and heavy ritual, but something will be lost if it is brought too much down to earth. There has to be both the ordinary and the extraordinary, wherever the church gathers. Let the world be amazed that over a million souls might gather together for a papal open-air Mass; let the

³ "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control" – Galatians 5.22.

⁴ Westminster Confession, XXVII.2.

world also be amazed that two or three cherish the gathering in Clachan and the cessation of rush and other routines. Let the world be amazed by the generosity of giving for reasons of love that knows no limits, the people of God at the Lord's Supper especially being mindful of the poorest and the least. And let the world be amazed that the church believes in prayer – in the prayer of the ascended Christ for his friends,⁵ and in joining our own prayers with his, for blessing and not for curse, for transformation and not stagnation.⁵

I have written a little already about how the Lord's Supper lays down the calling to unity and to catholicity (universality). Another of the marks is of course holiness, for which there is no translation into everyday terms. In one of the most famous ancient liturgies, and recovered in the second printing of *Common Order*, the word is that at the Lord's Supper holy things are given to holy people; and the people respond, "One is holy, one is Lord – Jesus Christ, to the glory of God!" The movement of worship esteems what God is to us, and not vice versa. Performance and posture come behind and not before our being engrafted into the body of Christ. Individually, human beings may aspire to know what is good and what is evil, but Jesus as the new Adam takes us instead around a table to be helped to love one another as he has loved us.

Sent out

"Mass" as a term for the Lord's Supper probably picks up from the Latin words of dismissal, whereby the people of God are sent out having previously gathered to participate. It is a helpful ending-point, for the highest estimation of the Sacrament is not to suspend a commitment to the ordinary business of living. Here I might also touch base explicitly with the mark of the church which is "apostolicity", i.e. following in the tradition of the apostles who, we are to believe, both met together regularly for communion and made their mark on the world around them. For all that the divided churches have not yet found common mind on what precisely follows on from that, as from the other marks of the church, the reference-point is there to be grappled with.

How does the Lord's Supper feed us for our engagement with the world? There are various possible lines here. As the sacrament of the reconciling love of God, it feeds us with a witness against the nurturing of hatred and violence, of ethnic division and of the oppression of any social group however defined (economically, gender, etc.). The Sacrament speaks powerfully of Christ's peace, to be tasted now and not forgotten; and the Sacrament is mocked when there is no intention to live as for the kingdom of heaven. Therefore the Sacrament functions with a note of warning within, warning about sinfulness and issuing the ever-present summons to leave that behind, by trust in the forgiveness of God and with hearts for the forgiving of others. There is something intensely personal here, since that is never irrelevant, and it is alongside the communal vision, the people together being stirred to let light shine from amongst them.

J.H. Yoder, in addressing times even now historic, famously called for a congregational structure of mission to be attended to rather than a missionary structure for the congregation.⁶ I may stretch a point in calling him in as an ally, yet the vision offered here of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is that it is a basic note of what a church is about. As people come together for the breaking of bread alongside the ministry of the word, God's mercy and judgement alike are manifest amongst this people, and so those who would not otherwise find common cause are made one in Christ, are joined into his holy identity and made recipients of the truth of love in its fullness. It is given as a source of revelation and for the forming of God's people. As far as we understand it, it is then a crucial dimension of how God reaches out to bring us salvation. It is in itself mission, the distinctiveness of Christianity which in all places and at all times – Clachan in the twenty-first century included – is to be believed in.

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⁵ Alexander Schmemmann opined that the church is more properly a sacrament with institutions than vice versa.

⁶ J.H. Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood* (1960).