

Eucharist

I'm acutely aware that this is the first time since March that we have gathered as a community to celebrate the Eucharist. I say "as a community" because I don't really count the one that was broadcast to the diocese on Easter Day. That one was pre-recorded on Maundy Thursday with only the clergy, a reader, and musicians present. It was most peculiar to proclaim the resurrection before Jesus had even been crucified. Without all of you it didn't feel much like a typical Eucharist.

Today's won't be typical, either. After I say the offertory sentence, Greg Braid will sing an offertory hymn but the ushers won't pass around a plate. I'll go into the sacristy to put on a mask under my face shield, wash my hands, and then go up to the altar. We'll *say* rather than sing "Holy, holy, holy" and the "Lamb of God." Then I'll bring communion out to each of you, so that you can stand in place to receive a wafer in your palm and consume it after I have gone to the next person. And it will be bread only, not wine. We believe that Jesus is fully present in either bread or wine. You can choose to receive a blessing instead, as usual. When everyone is done I will return to the altar, consume the bread and the small amount of wine in the chalice, clean up everything, and we'll finish the service.

That's all about process. What about meaning? What has it meant to have waited this long to receive the Body of Christ, given for you? For me it has meant a great deal of longing. One thing Raisin and I learned last spring when every church closed for a time is that we missed it. We knew we could never be like those clergy who stop going to church once they retire. We figured that out pretty quickly. But not having the Eucharist was a much more subtle loss. Something in our core was not there – or perhaps more accurately, something in our core was not being fed. I do believe that once we are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism we are marked as Christ's own *forever*. That mark can be effaced or buried but not removed. Yet the awareness of Christ within needs to be nourished. Without regular Eucharist the spark of God gets buried more and more by the cares of the world. Anglicans talk about the Real Presence of Christ in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, a Presence we need to encounter on a regular basis to keep our inner compass centered on true north.

I'm an Episcopalian because of the mystery of the Eucharist, the stateliness of the liturgy and the beauty of the music. I like being surrounded by mystery. I have learned over the last few months that the Liturgy of the Word is not enough. The Bible *has* informed my life ever since I could read and will continue to do so. On Sunday morning, however, I need Jesus to be present in the bread and wine. The Eucharist provides something that words do not.

Some eighty years ago an Anglican Benedictine abbot named Gregory Dix wrote a book that launched the remarkable liturgical changes of the twentieth century. In *The Shape of the Liturgy* Dix argued for the centrality of the Eucharist in Christian worship, describing it in the four simple actions of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving. At the end of his massive book he launches into a remarkably beautiful description of what the Eucharist has meant to generations of Christians. I'd like to read it to you – and I apologize in advance if I have trouble doing so, for I always find it deeply moving. Dix is commenting on the command of Christ at the Last Supper, "Do this in remembrance of me." He writes:

Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacle of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. Men have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; for the proclamation of a dogma or for a good crop of wheat; for the wisdom of the Parliament of a mighty nation or for a sick old woman afraid to die; for a schoolboy sitting an examination or for Columbus setting out to discover America; for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover; in thankfulness because my father did not die of pneumonia; for a village headman much tempted to return to fetich because the yams had failed; because the Turk was at the gates of Vienna; for the repentance of Margaret; for the settlement of a strike; for a son for a barren woman; for Captain so-and-so wounded and prisoner of war; while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheatre; on the beach at Dunkirk; while the hiss of scythes in the thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church; tremulously, by an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his vows; furtively, by an exiled bishop who had hewn timber all day in a prison camp near Murmansk; gorgeously, for the canonisation of S. Joan of Arc—one could fill many pages with the reasons why men have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them. And best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this just to make the plebs sancta Dei—the holy common people of God.

People of God, let us give thanks that we have at long last gathered here this day when we can finally obey the command of Jesus, “Do this in remembrance of me.”

[The quotation is from page 744 of *The Shape of the Liturgy* by Dom Gregory Dix.]