

“In this Sacrament the whole of what our religion means is expressed”

by Rev Alan Falconer, Minister at St Machar’s Cathedral, Aberdeen

Introduction

The title I have given for this presentation is part of a quotation from the writings of the Congregational New Testament scholar, C.H. Dodd.:

In this Sacrament we accept that which God gives, become that which he makes of us and render it up to him. Indeed in this Sacrament the whole of what our religion means is expressed. That which otherwise we would apprehend piecemeal is integrated in a rite which presents it all as the sheer gift of God. On any one occasion we may be conscious only of this or that element in the meaning; but it is all there, because God in Christ is there. In dependence on Him for everything, we render it all back to Him in thankful adoration.¹

This quotation appears in our Order of Service on every occasion on which the Sacrament is celebrated as it seems to me to sum up so well the centrality of the event for our life and worship.

I have been asked to reflect on the Sacrament in the life and worship of our community. Unusually, I am in a position to note the changes that have taken place in our celebration, as I served as ordained assistant minister in the Cathedral some 35 years ago. At that time, the Sacrament was celebrated twice per year -in May and October. The Minister of the time – Rev Stewart Todd, a prominent member of the Committee on Public Worship and Aids to Devotion of the Church (where he was largely responsible for the 1979 Book of Common Order) and a member of the CH3 Committee – held that the sacrament should be celebrated more frequently, and he thus introduced a monthly celebration which took place immediately after the morning service in a side chapel in the Cathedral. Thus once a month those for whom the Sacrament was a mark of their individual spirituality celebrated this event. If memory serves me right, this was also the pattern for the major Feast Days of the Church. Dr Todd had argued convincingly that CH3 should follow the pattern of the Order of Service for the celebration of the Sacrament since all our worship should lead towards - or point to - the Sacrament as the central act of worship of the Christian community.

It was in his successor’s time – Dr Richard Frazer - that the Sacrament came to be celebrated on the morning of the last Sunday of each month and on Festivals by the entire assembled community, and on the first Sunday of each month in the evening He also introduced a Prayer Tree in to the Church, and used the prayers during the morning service intercession.

This was the pattern of frequency which I inherited on returning to Aberdeen in 2004. The Order of Service used was that of the Book of Common Order, with the congregation joining in the spoken Kyrie, the Apostles’ Creed, the Sursum Corda, Sanctus and Benedictus and Agnus Dei. The service itself continued the tradition of the double procession (Lesser and Great Entrance), and while the frock coats had disappeared the atmosphere remained one of sombre quiet reflection.

Since 2004, the changes to the Order of Service and to the frequency of celebration have been minor. I have initiated a separate weekly service on Friday mid-day of Prayers for Justice and Peace, and at this we join in praying the prayers left on the prayer tree, (since in a morning service it is not possible to name people and their problems nor to pray some 20 – 40 petitions) - so that on Sunday they are symbolically placed in a box and presented to God along with our offerings. Prior to the sermon, I take a prayer for illumination from one of the fathers or mothers of the Church, ranging from St Ambrose to Dag Hammarskjold, to emphasise the importance of the prayer to the Holy Spirit in seeking understanding, and our participation in the communion of saints. After the Sermon ,on every occasion I have introduced the practice of Music for Meditation, where the organist plays meditatively for a couple of minutes while we all reflect on the readings and on the exposition of the Word of God - without rushing into the affirmation of trust in God, as expressed in the words of the Creed. We also in every celebration of the Sacrament share the Kiss of Peace. At the celebration, I as minister receive the elements after the elders and the congregation have been served.

¹ C.H. Dodd *Christian Worship* cited in F.W. Dillistone *C.H.Dodd:Interpreter of the New Testament* London ,Hodder and Stoughton,1977

A slightly less formal atmosphere is evident in our evening celebration, where the service begins with the elements being laid on the Communion Table, and the congregation stands round the table - in the style of the Swiss Reformed Churches – for the breaking and the sharing of the Bread and Wine – a practice introduced by Richard Frazer.

In the celebrations, of the Sacrament I use not only the Book of Common Order, but also the Book of Worship of the Presbyterian Church (USA), liturgies of the Iona Community, and from time to time draw some elements from the liturgies of other churches.

The Sacrament as an Event of Christ's Presence and a Community Celebration

Over the past two years, I have led the community in reflection on the nature of the Sacrament, by focussing on each of the elements in turn which are, as C H Dodd noted:

“.. integrated in a rite which presents it all as the sheer gift of God.”

Thus we have explored the meaning of the processions; the call to worship; the remembrance of God's activity in Creation (the concept of blessing – berakah); the prayer for forgiveness and God's activity in forgiving us individually and as a community; the proclamation and hearing of the Word of God; the response of the community in affirming its trust in God; in the intercessions, in mission; in offering; the invitation to the meal; the kiss of peace; the remembrance of the death, resurrection of Jesus; the sending out in mission; and the blessing of God.

In this we are remembering (anamnesis) the life, ministry of calling, teaching, healing, forgiving, interceding, commissioning, inviting, and the death and rising of Jesus .The whole drama of salvation in Christ is celebrated every time we celebrate the Sacrament. Christ, we believe, is present among us calling us, teaching us, forgiving us, making us whole, interceding with us and joining us to Himself and each other in his death and rising. As C H Dodd noted:

“...it is all there, because God in Christ is there”

It seems to me that the major change in both the celebration and the perception of it by the community is that the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is primarily a community event, rather than an ordinance for the strengthening of the individual's faith and Christian life. I do not want to polarise these too much, but do wish to note the change in the accent of meaning and understanding.

Contribution by Scholars of the Reformed Tradition to our understanding

All the churches in the twentieth century have undergone renewal in respect of the Sacrament, both in respect of the liturgy itself and the understanding of the event. Much of this was due to the liturgical movement , where scholars sought to trace the origins of the Sacrament ,and not simply affirm their own confessional traditions understanding and practice .The results of this scholarship perhaps came to fullest expression in the Faith and Order Agreed Statement, *Baptism, Eucharist Ministry* (otherwise known as BEM or the Lima statement 1982)²

In a symposium organized in 2001 by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the International Reformed Centre, John Knox in Geneva, I argued that a major contribution to our understanding ecumenically of the practice and theology of the Sacrament had been made by scholars of the Reformed tradition.³ Who were these scholars and wherein lay their contribution? Professor Donald Baillie of St Andrews University helped us to recover the meaning of Sacrament; Oscar Cullmann of Strasbourg University and Franz Leenhardt of the University of Lausanne ,helped us to recover again the meal traditions of the New Testament and in particular the resurrection meals of Jesus; Max Thurian of the Taize Community provided a seminal study on Anamnesis (remembrance) in the Old and New Testaments, and crafted a liturgy for the Taize community – and a commentary on it, which influenced many churches; Jean Jacques von Allmen of Neuchatel University focussed on the importance of the epiclesis - the prayer to the Holy Spirit that Christ would be present through the word and the bread broken; Tom Torrance emphasised

² *Baptism Eucharist Ministry* Faith and Order paper no 111 Geneva, WCC 1982 , and Max Thurian and Geoffrey Wainwright (ed) *Baptism and Eucharist : Ecumenical Convergence in Celebration* Faith and Order paper no 117 Geneva WCC 1983

³ See my “Word ,Sacrament, and Communion : New Emphases in Reformed Worship in the Twentieth Century” in Lukas Vischer (ed) *Christian Worship in Reformed Churches Past and Present* Grand Rapids ,Eerdmans 2003 pp 142-158

the importance of Jesus being both gift and giver at the meal celebration and of Christ being the Host of the meal; and Lukas Vischer, then Director of the Faith and Order Commission - a theologian of the Swiss Protestant Churches - helped us to appropriate again the understanding of Berakah (blessing)- though the seminal work on this was done by the Lutheran scholar Claus Westermann - and on Intercession, a subject of his own primary research.⁴ All of this scholarly research came into the international ecumenical sphere through interchurch dialogues. Donald Baillie was the chairman of the Faith and Order Study on Intercommunion in 1952; the work of Cullmann, Leenhardt, Thurian and von Allmen was central to the work of the Groupe des Dombes (a dialogue between Reformed and Roman Catholics in South East France and Suisse Romande); von Allmen, Thurian and Lukas Vischer were key to the Faith and Order Lima statement, and Tom Torrance to the Reformed - Roman Catholic Dialogue on the Presence of Christ in Church and World (1977).⁵

Clearly on this occasion it is not possible to elaborate on these various contributions to our understanding and practice. However, let me point to the impact of some of them. The importance of the recovery of the meal traditions of the New Testament - and particularly of the post resurrection meals - emphasises the continuing presence of Christ as present among us and as host. It is no coincidence that our worship takes place on Sunday - the day of Resurrection (and the Eighth Day)⁶ Our celebration is therefore a joyful occasion and reflects a tradition encapsulated in the ancient Liturgy of St Basil:

“Do this in remembrance of Me, for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you show forth my death and confess my resurrection”⁷

Oscar Cullmann also went further to suggest that this awareness of the post resurrection meal tradition was the key to understanding one of the primary New Testament expressions for the church - the community who eat salt together⁸ - the community who meet at the sign of the fish. Communion, therefore, is not simply a remembering of the death of Jesus but a joyful celebration of the resurrection.

The recovery of the emphasis on Christ as the host of the meal - which is so well expressed in one of the liturgies of the Iona Community⁹ - for me raised the question of the order of receiving the bread and wine. The Minister, rather like the King in Psalm 85, acts with a dual function, representing the community and representing Christ. In exploring the approach of Jesus to individuals and the community, I do not see Him placing himself first, but rather seeking to satisfy the needs of others. This has certainly determined my own practice of receiving the elements last.

The contribution of Lukas Vischer in his work on Intercession has also been important. Tracing as he does the biblical understanding of intercession, Vischer leads us to the awareness of being joined in Christ with the church of all places and times. A prayer attributed to John Calvin emphasises this well:

Save us, Lord from being self-centred in our prayers, and teach us to remember to pray for others. May we be so caught up in love for those for whom we pray, that we may feel their needs as keenly as our own, and pray for them with imagination, sensitivity, and knowledge.¹⁰

⁴ See Donald Baillie *The Theology of the Sacraments* London, Faber 1957; Jean Jacques von Allmen *Worship: Its Theology and Practice* London, Lutterworth, 1965; Jean Jacques von Allmen *The Lord's Supper* London, Lutterworth 1969; Max Hurian *The Eucharistic Memorial* 2 vols London Lutterworth 1959, 1961; Oscar Cullmann and J Leenhardt *Essays on the Lord's Supper* London, Lutterworth 1958; Oscar Cullmann *Early Christian Worship* London, SCM 1953; T.F. Torrance "The Paschal Mystery of Christ and the Eucharist" in T.F Torrance *Theology in Reconciliation* London, Chapman, 1975; Lukas Vischer *Intercession* Faith and Order paper no 95 Geneva WCC 1980; and Claus Westermann *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Early Church* Philadelphia, Fortress Press 1978

⁵ For the texts see Donald Baillie *Intercommunion* London, SCM 1952; H. Meyer and L Vischer (ed) *Growth in Agreement* Faith and Order paper no 108 Geneva WCC 1984; H.R. McAadoo (ed) *Eucharistic Agreement* London, S.P.C.K. 1977

⁶ See my "Sunday, Communion, Community" in *Milltown Studies* 53(1) 2004:1-13

⁷ Joseph Raya and Jose de Vinck (trans) *Byzantine Daily Worship* Allendale N.J., Alleluia Press 1969 :330

⁸ The term *sunaltsesthai* (Acts 1:4) means assembly - but at root - the community which eat salt together. Cullmann suggested that since fish was preserved with salt, this was a reference to the fact that Jesus ate fish with the apostles in one of the post resurrection meals. The sign of the fish appeared in the catacombs, and the Christian community met at the sign of the fish - probably not because of the mnemonic Ichthous - but because of the experience of the post resurrection meal of fish.

⁹ Wild Goose Worship Group *A Wee Worship Book* Glasgow 1999

¹⁰ Dorothy Stewart (compiler) *The Westminster Collection of Christian Prayers* Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press 2002 p314

Based, as this prayer is, on Calvin's strong baptismal and eucharistic ecclesiology, Vischer reminds us that Christ draws our prayers of intercession into the prayer to the Father, and that we are joined in our celebration with the saints of all ages and all places. On the basis of his work, the Faith and Order Commission took two initiatives, both of which have found a place in our worship in the Cathedral. The Commission drew up an ecumenical prayer cycle where through the year on each Sunday we join our intercessions with churches in different nations.¹¹ Secondly, Lukas Vischer through the Faith and Order Commission encouraged the churches to draw up an ecumenical calendar of the saints.¹² This is currently a project of the churches under the title "The Cloud of Witnesses", and it is an encouragement for the churches in each place and time to join with and learn from the churches of other places and times. In practice this has meant that from time to time in our evening services we explore a prayer by one of the Fathers or mothers of the Church, and that as appropriate we draw for our prayers for illumination on the rich tapestry of prayer from the saints of different traditions and ages.

Concluding Remarks

In drawing on these insights by Reformed scholars to help shape our worship and our understanding I believe that we are being faithful to our heritage as Reformed Christians. However, as the 2001 Symposium in Geneva affirmed:

Our primary concern is not that worship should be *Reformed* but that it should be truly Christian worship.¹³

The studies noted above which have made an impact on our contemporary practice and understanding of worship have been very careful expositions of Scripture - and in this sense are also true to our Reformed heritage. I believe that the most radical shift in the practice and understanding of my congregation has been the recovery of the awareness that the celebration of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is primarily an event of Christ with the community and that the individual takes his or her place within that context - and as both Bernard Cottret and Elsie Ann McKee have shown, this emphasis on the community and worship as an event for the community was the major focus of the ministry of John Calvin.¹⁴

The Sacrament at each celebration draws us, as C H Dodd noted, into the whole drama of salvation:

"In this Sacrament we accept that which God gives, become that which he makes of us and render it up to Him. Indeed in this Sacrament the whole of what our religion means is expressed. That which otherwise we would apprehend piecemeal is integrated in a rite which presents it all as the sheer gift of God. On any one occasion we may be conscious only of this or that element in the meaning: but it is all there, because God in Christ is there. In dependence on Him for everything, we render it all back to Him in thankful adoration."

¹¹ The latest edition of this is Hugh McCullum and Terry MacArthur *In God's Hands: Common Prayer for the World* Geneva, WCC2006 - the prayers can also be found on the WCC web site - www.wcc-coe.org

¹² The early fruit of this work is *Comunita di Bose Il Libro dei testimony* Milan, Sao Paolo 2002 ; the Scottish Churches through ACTS have been asked to contribute a list for the project

¹³ Lukas Vischer(ed) *Christian Worship*.op.cit. p 282

¹⁴ See Bernard Cottret *Calvin: A Biography* Edinburgh, T& T Clark 2000; Elsie McKee John Calvin :*Writings on Pastoral Piety* New York , Paulist Press 2001, and "Reformed Worship in the Sixteenth Century" in Lukas Vischer (ed) op. cit. pp3-32