

In the book of the holy communion, we do not pray absolutely that the bread and wine may be made the body and blood of Christ, but that unto us in that holy mystery they may be so; that is to say, that we may so worthily receive the same, that we may be partakers of Christ's body and blood, and that therewith in spirit and in truth we may be spiritually nourished.

These words written by the great Elizabethan theologian Richard Hooker seem to me to sum up the way the Anglican tradition generally treats all the speculation and doctrinal definitions concerning what happens to the bread and wine we bring to the altar and then share as the Body and Blood of Christ. They were written at a time when the Council of Trent was declaring anyone not believing the bread and wine to become the Body and Blood of Christ, in all reality other than observable appearance, to be outside the faith.

In his writings, Hooker laid the foundations for a Church of England suited to the new age of the Renaissance, an age when a broader range of people had permission to think about their faith and form their own views, and when anyone who could read (remembering that this was still a small minority of the population) had access to the Scriptures in English, and could hear them read in their own language at Church services.

It is an exaggeration to suggest that the Church of the Middle Ages operated a sort of Thought Police against heresy and disobedience, but if you happened to be a free thinker or Bible translator like the Cathars or like Wycliffe, it must have felt like that. Burning heretics – consigning them to the purifying fire on earth – so that they would not be condemned to the eternal fire of Hell – this was a genuine belief on the part of some, and a cover for cruel sadism on the part of others. In England, Christians of every variety were put to a cruel death if they fell foul of the changing religious whims of Henry VIII, and as the religious settlement swung between the Protestant advisors of Edward VI and the Catholic Mary Tudor, so first one side and then the other was made subject to persecution. The State Thought Police could be far more efficient than the Church variety – and they operated from a place much closer to home.

These religious wars and disputes were a matter of regret for the first Queen Elizabeth. While the political threat of Catholic Spain, with the support of the Papacy, led her to consider many Catholics to be enemies of the State, she proved her religious tolerance through employing a Catholic like William Byrd at the highest levels of her court, and if Philip of Spain had not employed the support of the Church in his attempts to add England to his empire, it is interesting to speculate as to how a variety of religious thinking and practice might have flourished in Elizabethan England. She did, after all, on coming to the throne, address her Privy Council in the following words:

Let them have their Masses if they wish, I will not make windows into men's souls. There is but one Christ, Jesus. One faith. The rest is a dispute over trifles.

There is a sub-text running through the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation, and that is the tension between the conformity that comes from absolute obedience to authority, and the diversity that comes from allowing individuals and groups to form their own views. The Church of England was in the Elizabethan Settlement meant to be an 'umbrella Church', allowing a broad variety of views, although we are surely all very much aware of the pitfalls of allowing different views to exist together in the same institution, especially if they appear to contradict each other.

The aim of this historical digression has been to provide a reminder of how much hasn't changed since the sixteenth century. The Church is still beset with tensions between those who are looking for an authority which tells them what to believe – people who claim to be 'confused' if those in authority suggest they need to work out a solution to their issues between God and their conscience – and those who have fallen for the post-modern subjectivism we seem to be calling 'post-truth', where everything is down to the perception of the individual and there is no objective truth at all.

The Elizabethan settlement would not be to the taste of either of these extremes. With a theologically educated and prayerful monarch saying categorically that *There is but one Christ, Jesus. One faith. The rest is a dispute over trifles*, and the leading theologian of the day saying that the most important thing in

the Holy Communion is that we so worthily partake of it that we are spiritually nourished by the Body and Blood of Christ, there is here no doubt over what is true – and no doubt either over what can be left to the faith and conscience of the individual.

This is clearly where Anglicans are meant to stand today, and events have shown how hard some find it to understand how Anglican thinking and belief can stand firm on the rock of Christ, while allowing a rich diversity of understandings and practices in how to follow him and serve him.

There are some things that need to be made clear, however, when considering the question of *Receiving Christ in Holy Communion*. Many church communities until relatively recently did not practise frequent communion. While some, like this one, were early adopters of the focus on the Mass, the Eucharist, as the main act of worship, for many others until the 1960s, 1970s and beyond, the main act of worship was Matins or Evensong, and communion was taken on high days and holidays, or even only at Easter. Infrequent communion was often preceded by very careful preparation which involved thorough repentance and a new commitment to faith, accompanied maybe by some of the helpful admonitions from the Book of Common Prayer. Frequent communion has changed this. In a context where everyone goes to the altar rail, it is all too easily noticed by those who should be concentrating on their own devotions if someone who does not feel ready or worthy fails to go to the altar. While this is made a touch easier by the way in which blessings as well as the Sacrament are these days offered at the altar rail, nevertheless there is almost a pressure to receive Communion even when not fully prepared.

It is worth reminding ourselves that, while the best way is to receive the spiritual food of the Body and Blood of Christ as frequently as possible, the encounter with Christ can take place through hearing his Word and through many other acts of worship. At the same time, there is an imperative for all Christians to make the receiving of Christ in Holy Communion the centre of their lives. For it is a sure thing that worthy reception of the Sacrament means that Christ becomes alive in us, and through us to world he came to serve.

I have been trying in these addresses to look at the themes of the Lent Course, and to offer a different, and, I hope, deeper way of looking at things. When people discuss the question of receiving Christ in Holy Communion, they will often talk about the way they feel, or end up in discussion about how Christ can be present in bread and wine. I have wanted to suggest that the Anglican way and teaching takes us beyond discussing feelings or doctrines to a place where the important thing is simply Christ, and the simple truth that once we have received the Sacrament worthily Christ lives in us.

Let me conclude with some further words from the first Queen Elizabeth, reputedly said by her when questioned for heresy under her predecessor and half-sister Mary Tudor. For me, they express perfectly what is necessary and that which should be the focus of our faith and our devotion:

*Christ was the word that spake it.
He took the bread and brake it;
And what his words did make it
That I believe and take it.*

PC, 19th March 2017