

The sacrament of the present moment: Eucharist in the time being

PATRICIA BAYS

In 1941-42, the poet W. H. Auden wrote in memory of his mother a long poem, *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*. Written in a time of war, in a time of rationing and social constraints, in a time of despair, the poem is nevertheless a meditation on the Incarnation and how God's reality breaks into our world in ways we do not expect. It is the sort of poem Auden might have written in a pandemic. Near the end of the poem, the Narrator sums it up for the reader. Through Auden's verse we have reflected on the Incarnation through the perspectives of different speakers. But, immersed in our daily lives, in the Time Being with bills to pay and irregular verbs to learn, we must find ways to redeem the Time Being from insignificance. For, he says, "the Time Being is in a sense the most trying time of all." We surely can feel that now at this time of lockdown and quarantine. How can we manage to live through the weeks and months still to come? How can we as church celebrate the Incarnation, God's presence among us, when we can no longer come together for Eucharist, for that sacrament that brings God deeply into our lives? How can we gather again when only some of us can meet?

In the poem, Auden has some advice for us. "The time is noon," he says, "when the Spirit must practise [the] scales of rejoicing." I believe that is what we have been called to do in the last 6 months, and what we must learn to do each week in the months to come. Any music student, any aspiring athlete, knows the necessity of practice. The tedium of scales, the relentless discipline of fitness training – mind-numbing, sometimes painful, but essential in order to live more fully into the music or the sport. In our living rooms, in front of our computers, many of us feel as if we have been marking time, treading water, waiting for

something to happen. Soon, as each part of Canada lifts restrictions, we will be able to return to public worship and the celebration of the sacraments. But we will return to an unfamiliar new reality and new challenges. Perhaps the whole community will not be able to gather. The receiving of Communion will be different. We still cannot hug our friends. What “scales of rejoicing” can we practice in the months to come?

It may help us to think about Eucharist and all that it means. For celebrating Eucharist is far more than a one-hour observance of the gathered community. It is far more than bread and wine, blessed, broken, given and received. Jesus taught by image and metaphor, by parable and story. Eucharist as metaphor and image has much to teach us.

Eucharist means thanksgiving. Perhaps one way to keep Eucharist in a time of pandemic is to “practice our scales” of gratitude. We are thankful for health and strength, for family and friends and helpers, for groceries and drug stores and those who serve us, for social systems that come to our aid. And this offering of thanks can and should continue even though we cannot come together to receive the sacrament. The pandemic has increased our sense of gratitude.

Eucharist is connection and community. No priest can celebrate the Eucharist alone. The pandemic has increased both our sense of isolation – no visits to family and friends, no social gatherings – and our excitement in finding new ways to be together. We have learned how to “social distance” in driveways and on patios. We have kept in touch by phone and mail. We have all learned to use Zoom in order to stay in touch with family and with our parish community.

And we have found ways to keep in touch with the wider faith community. And this has been exciting and enriching. My husband and I have followed the video services of our own parish community, All Saints’ Westboro in Ottawa. But we have joined in worship with our son’s church, Trinity Copley Square in Boston. We have spent Sunday mornings learning about the witness and worship and music of the Washington National Cathedral. We have visited a former parish, All Saints Winnipeg, and joined Dawna Wall of St. Michael and All Angels, Victoria, in her garden. We have worshipped with Canterbury and Lincoln Cathedrals. It has been a rich experience and a privilege to share in the life of faith communities around the world. The pandemic has certainly increased our awareness that we belong to an immense company of witnesses. This wider sense of Christian community is one that I want to continue even when I return to the four walls of my own church building.

Eucharist is bread and wine, outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace. In our Province, we were asked to fast from the physical act of receiving the sacrament, to fast from the bread and wine. Though we have not taken bread and wine during these months of virtual liturgy, we have been invited to consider more deeply how God's grace comes to us. It comes not merely in prayers for spiritual communion but in other very concrete and sacramental ways. We receive grace as we continue to hear Scripture and to reflect on the stories of God's relationship with all humanity. God's grace comes to us in the loving help of others. We "fasted" from grocery shopping for a few weeks until we could assess the risk to ourselves as seniors. Our food was brought to us through the acts of friends, and we felt humbled as we learned to accept the loving care of others. The pandemic has reminded us that God's grace comes to us in many ways.

As we begin the process of returning to our church buildings, there are opportunities here for conversations about Eucharist, for education about sacraments, about reception, about different kinds of communion. We need to talk with our fellow parishioners about all that Eucharist means. The effects of this pandemic seem likely to continue for months, if not years. The Time Being is the new normal. We grieve as we mourn the old ways, but we take up the risk and the challenge of making new music with what we have learned from "practicing the scales of rejoicing" during this time of lockdown. As a church, here is our chance to teach, to stimulate conversation, and to encourage the community of faith to observe Eucharist in both new and familiar ways.