

# Behold what you are; become what you receive

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*“When you hear ‘The body of Christ’,  
you reply ‘Amen’. Be a member of Christ’s body,  
then, so that your ‘Amen’ may ring true.”<sup>1</sup>*

I am grateful for the opportunity to offer this reflection in the General Synod’s project on the response of faithful Anglicans living in the midst of a worldwide pandemic. The COVID-19 coronavirus has wreaked havoc on our families, our communities, our economies, and faith communities. Millions of people have fallen ill and died – too many without the comfort and support of loved ones nearby. Our spirits and our ability to cope have been tested to the limits in the ‘new normal’ of COVID-19.

In the darkness the mantra, “We are all in this together” has become the watchword as we did all we could to ‘stay home and stay safe’. Communities rallied to support its essential and frontline workers, as leaders gave daily press conferences keeping us informed about the spread of the virus. New words like ‘physical distancing’, ‘flattening the curve’, ‘self isolation’, and ‘social bubbles’ entered our lexicons. We moved our businesses, schools and churches to a virtual world from home. Collaborative efforts in medicine and science are taking place in the hopes that new treatments for the virus and a vaccine will soon become available.

The church moved almost seamlessly from its buildings to online worship praying boldly for the healing and salvation of the world. The voice of prayer has never been silent as services of the Word and celebrations

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine on the nature of the Sacrament of the Eucharist: Sermon 272.

of Eucharist took place in homes, outdoors and with limited numbers of people in our houses of worship. We could attend worship anywhere around the globe.

Over the last several months I have begun to ask new questions about how we in the church are being transformed through this time of pandemic, as members of the human family and of the body of Christ - All of us who are 'in this together.' One of my last memories of corporate worship before the lockdown happened at the end of the election of the 10th Bishop of Ottawa as I sent God's people, fed with the body and blood of God's Son into the world to live his risen life, to bring that life to others and to give light to the world. The bread we ate was only a morsel, insufficient to stave our hunger for any length of time, the wine a mere sip. Yet that was food for the journey, the very bread of life, and enough to sustain us for the long road ahead.

In this time apart I have been wondering:

- How we have been living the Eucharistic life as a people who have been taken, blessed, broken and given in Christ?
- What does it mean when we say the word, "Amen" when we hear the words 'the body of Christ' being spoken to us at the communion rail?
- What does being part of the 'body of Christ' look like now in the midst of a pandemic?
- Will we keep saying, and remain committed to being, "All in this together," when life gets back to normal in a post-COVID world?

In reflecting on this time I've come to the realization that this has been more than just a challenging time to get through as quickly and safely as possible, and then return to a pre-COVID world, but God's 'kairos' time in which something new is coming to birth. This has been a *liminal time*<sup>2</sup>, to which we should pay very careful attention. God is always active in it even though it is a very difficult space and time to occupy.

Liminal time calls us to let go of those things we cherish and love the most to wait in the darkness of unknowing. Liminal time calls for an act of surrender to that which can be frightening, strange and unfamiliar. But it is also a space that can be transformative in which we can grow more and more into the full stature of Christ becoming the new creations we already are in Him.

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<sup>2</sup> Beaumont, Susan (2019) *How To Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*. Rowman and Littlefield. London.

In Jean Anouilh's play *Becket*, Henry II is totally bewildered by Thomas à Becket's new faith and the new language he uses. Henry II says to his friend, "Absurdly. That word isn't like you!" To which Becket replies, "Perhaps; I am no longer like myself."<sup>3</sup>

I want to think of this liminal season as being so life altering and transforming that we are no longer like ourselves anymore!

As the boundaries of geography and time have blurred we have seen the beginnings of that as we discovered that we are now more than ever a fellowship of believers who '*recognize in each other the Christ who is present in the body and who receive and meet each other as one meets the Lord, in reverence, humility and joy. We receive each other's benedictions as the benediction of the Lord Jesus Christ.*'<sup>4</sup>

I have witnessed these benedictions firsthand, catching a glimpse of the kingdom of God on earth in many ways over the last months.

Below are just three.

## 1. Feasting on the Word

Online, livestreaming and virtual worship has been a gift at a time when we could not do that one thing which is the distinguishing feature of our lives as Christians and a '*source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer*'<sup>5</sup> – to gather as the physical body of Christ to break bread together and pray for the salvation and healing of the world.

The right words, at the right time, delivered in the right way, had an important place during our exile from our church buildings in the season of COVID-19. In the online services that I participated in and livestreamed there were many expressions of the faithful feeling comforted or encouraged by the ministry being offered and for the ability to gather in this new way for prayer and to hear God's Word preached by different preachers.

In '*Feasting on the Word*' we drew fresh strength from the Scriptures. Like the Israelites wandering in the desert we were fed with the manna of God's Word. The Lectionary provided rich material to draw on which sustained the faith of the anxious and the weary providing nourishment for the journey ahead.

It also provided a place and a space for that which was lost to be acknowledged and grieved. Writing of David's Song of Lament after the

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<sup>3</sup> Anouilh, Jean. (1995) *Becket*, trns. Lucien Hill. Riverhead Books. New York, 102.

<sup>4</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. (1954) *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*. Harper Collins. New York, 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

death of Saul and Jonathan and David's Song of Lament (2 Sam 1:17ff) Brueggeman writes:

*"Words matter. Sound religion is often a matter of finding the right words. Words that genuinely experience, process, and embrace the edges of our life. The cruciality of words needs to be the centre of the church's life, for, we live in a culture that grows mute by our commitment to technique."*<sup>6</sup>

May this benediction in a pandemic become a habit of the heart forever.

## 2. The church seeking visible unity in a common mission

I experienced the benediction Bonhoeffer describes mostly profoundly through the collegiality and collaborative ministry of the Ontario House of Bishops as we met weekly for mutual support and encouragement and to lead the dioceses in our care.

The mantra 'we are all in this together' became ours as we stood together in front of the black hole of COVID-19 becoming a visible sign of unity for the church. While we knew little about the pandemic we understood completely our vocation and calling, passed on to us from the apostles to share in the leadership of the church throughout the world. (BAS, 636). We prayed without ceasing, and through the wonders of technology continued with our preaching and teaching.

In this unusual time we welcomed two new bishops into the fellowship of bishops around the Communion. On Pentecost Sunday I had the distinct privilege and joy to preside and preach at the consecration of +Shane Parker as the Bishop of Ottawa in a celebration that was livestreamed. There was a poignancy in standing in an empty Cathedral knowing that the 'living stones' who made up the body of Christ could not be present physically for the service.

We did not lead in a vacuum but relied on the collective knowledge and wisdom of others in the church – lay and ordained, who generously offered their gifts and time. On Pentecost Sunday the Ecclesiastical Province of Ontario presented a collective online celebration, "One in the Spirit"<sup>7</sup> for the church as a visible sign that we are one body in Christ.

And we discovered that along with teaching and preaching public health is part of our mandate as leaders in a pandemic. We consulted with epidemiologists and took counsel together, making difficult decisions with the best knowledge we had at the time.

May this benediction in a pandemic become a habit of the heart for all time.

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<sup>6</sup> Brueggeman, Walter. (1990) *First and Second Samuel*. John Knox Press. Louisville, 217.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.province-ontario.anglican.ca/pentecost>

### 3. *Becoming ‘Vehicles of eternal charity’*<sup>8</sup> (an excerpt from the sermon I preached at the Consecration of +Shane as Bishop of Ottawa)

“Many years ago the Bishop of Hippo Augustine challenged his flock with these words: ‘You are the body of Christ; that is to say in you and through you the method and the work of the incarnation must go forward. You are to be taken, you are to be consecrated, broken and distributed that you may become the means of grace and the vehicles of eternal charity.’ Anything less is a diminishment and a crippling of the body of Christ (Maximus the Confessor) since I am the body of Christ and one with its members.” (1 Cor 12:27)

While there is no doubt that the words *taken, consecrated, broken and shared* is a reference to Christ’s presence in the Holy Eucharist that most beautiful expression of unity in our gathered communities, it is also clear that Augustine had in mind that not only are we made one in Christ through our baptism, but also a people who having been clothed on high with the Holy Spirit and sent out into the world in that power to be the real Body of Christ.

Throughout the pandemic we caught glimpses of that truth in those moments when, moved by his spirit alive within them the millions of ‘vehicles of charity’, were being Christ to the Christ they see in each other through acts of compassion and works of mercy.

This says to me that even though we are apart; have not held the Bread of Life in our hands, or sipped from that life giving cup for some time, that our identity during this time of pandemic has not changed at all. We are still we who are in Christ – those all powerful living stones, an outward and visible sign of the real presence of Christ – a Sacrament to the world of our unity in Him.”

May this benediction in a pandemic become a habit of the heart for all time.

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<sup>8</sup> The Consecration of Shane Parker as the 10th Bishop of Ottawa, May 31, 2020, <https://youtu.be/auGAP8xSSPk>.