

An eschatological view of Eucharist in a pandemic period

REBECCA GRAHAM

What does it mean, for Eucharistic theology, for Eucharistic practice in this time of pandemic? Really, this is the question that we face today. At the same time, this is also our current reality, across the Church, prompted by the safety restrictions of the current pandemic.

While some have come to an accommodation of how to "do Eucharist" in this time, many, like our diocese, enjoys a "Feast of the Word," until we reopen our doors and invite people back in, under COVID-19 conscious guidelines and patterns.

So, the question, then, is how we are living out an interminable eschatological period of time until we reopen the doors of our various churches. And yes, it is uncomfortable!

Overnight, we went from a regular practice of celebrating the Eucharist, to suddenly no reception of the Eucharist since the declaration of the pandemic, since COVID-19 forced us to close our doors, for the safety of our people.

Overnight, we have been cast into Exile we have been overthrown from our regular patterns of living and worshipping, and we have been shoved, none too gently, into the requirements of self-isolation, physical distancing, hand washing, and the recommendation of non-medical grade masks over one's nose and mouth, in populated public spaces. And as much as we lament and fight against such seemingly obverse patterns of living, here we are, and where they are. As much as we long to return to pre-pandemic practices and patterns, even when we do return to such a place, it's not going to be the same as we recall.

We need to recognize and celebrate that period of loss, that time of lament—a practice that we have limited to no experience with in today's society. We're more used to seeking affirmation after affirmation, positive after positive, never desiring or acknowledging the negatives in life.

So, here we are, caught betwixt and between, needing to find a way to grieve what we've lost, to lament the situation, yet still look with hope toward the future. And we currently remain betwixt and between what we have and what we'd like, like when we anticipate the second coming of our Lord and Saviour, through Advent, and yet what we receive, at the change of season from Advent to Christmas is the babe in the manger (Lk 2:1-20), not the anticipated warrior Messiah who will judge the living and the dead – a state of eschatology (Mt 24:36-50).

We know what eschatology is like, briefly, as the church year brushes up against it for four, maybe five, Sundays of our liturgical year. It's a confusing and bewildering time in the church calendar, as well as what we've been experiencing in this time period.

When we're looking at the definition of Eschatology, we look to the end of times, but really, its focus is a trifle closer than that. Although eschatology is looking at the end times through our own filters, the 'now but not yet' that we find in the celebration of the Reign of Christ - Christ the King Sunday - and we find it throughout the season of Advent when we look, simultaneously, for the second coming of Christ and the infant in the manger.

It's a now, but not yet mindset of the Christian, all focused on the return of Christ, on the final judgement, on the time when God will make his home among humanity (Rev 21). And what has been discovered, recently, is that there is a dimension of physicality to eschatology, as well. We're discovering it through all those who attend video conferences and meetings without wearing pants these days. We see it in those forced to migrate from one place to another in search of a place of hope, opportunity, and the ability to live in peace in one's life.

The fact that we're living in a 'now but not yet' period of time is remarkable as we look around. We see what's been forced to be changed, and what's been shoved aside as medical systems struggle to define and treat the pandemic, and its symptoms, and as governments the world over struggle to keep their populations safe. And as we, in our empty or mostly empty churches, find that this 'pregnant moment' has a theological dimension, not just a physical dimension to it. We're discovering that it has geography, and it's well populated with all of us who long for the return of a regular Eucharistic worship practice. We find this exile populated with all who long for the Sacraments to be celebrated, once more, in albeit muted yet recognizable patterns.

And this also brings us to the reminder of what a Sacrament is, in the theology of the Anglican Church. A Sacrament, according to the Book of Common Prayer (550) is "an outward and visible sign of an inward

and spiritual grace, given to us by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive this grace, and a pledge to assure us thereof.”

Now, this isn't the first-time humanity has found itself here, but admittedly, the last time was during the outbreak of Spanish Flu in 1918-20, and in the Bubonic Plague of the Middle Ages - “Black Death” - in 1347-52.

In this exilic period, or period of Eucharistic drought in our lives, we are able to find many images in scripture. There's the seven-year famine, in Genesis that drove the fledgling Israelite nation to Egypt. (Gen 41-46) There is Elijah and the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kgs (1 Kgs 17-18:1) as well as the Assyrian (2 Kgs 17:7-41), Babylonian (2 Kgs 25:1-21) and Persian (2 Kgs 36:15-23); but none of these lasted forever, and neither will this current pandemic.

Through this time, we are given the gift to see how our definitions and our theological interpretations are able to carry us forward into whatever the future of the church is going to look like as we reopen the doors. We can see how this pandemic is reshaping our perceptions of the world. Scripturally, we can remember the work of Ezra and Nehemiah who rebuilt the temple and encouraged the resumption of worship practices (Ezra 3:1-16, 6:16-22), although the Persian exile had still not yet concluded. And although they attempted to retain ‘tradition,’ naturally there would be somewhat altered practices by the fact that tomorrow is a brand-new day and we come at this from a brand new perspective, a new way of looking at things.

At the same time, we're able to examine what this period of exile - this eschatological situation - feels like, as we seek and yearn to return ‘home,’ as we yearn for the return of our eucharistic practices, once restrictions ease. All the while we might compare our lament to the exilic laments of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible. And through this reflection we are able to come to a better understanding of the exile of the Israelite people. We are able to better identify with all of those who are displaced from the regular patterns forced to move out of their lives, whether by famine, war, genocide, drought, or as the Jews experienced in the 1st century, driven out by forced expulsion from their homeland by the government of the day.

Not all things we would regularly identify with or with which we would choose to get ‘cozy,’ so maybe this is a part of God's plan to open our eyes to the plight of those who have been and continue to be geographically displaced, yet yearning, from the sidelines of society, for the promises of God to lead them, to lead us, to the/a promised land.

How does it feel? What biblical passages come to mind in regard to the fact that we have been physically barred from the celebration of the Eucharist?

Can you find a new immigrant family with whom to talk about their experiences of a life on the edges of society? Of the eschatology found in such moments that keep us looking to tomorrow, with hope in our eyes, and in our hearts? How do their experiences compare to our exile from the receipt of the Eucharist?

Having faced this exilic period experienced the pain and confusion of the eschatological nature of this period, we can anticipate the repatriation of our lives as parishioners in the church, in the receipt of eucharist, once more, but will we recognize it? Will we recognize Christ in the Sacraments? Will we find the Holy Spirit in our future together? After all, at the moment, masks will be a mandatory part of corporate worship, as will use of hand sanitizer, and the receipt of Eucharist in “one kind,” (bread only) not “both kinds” (bread and wine).

When the doors reopen, and this period of exile ends, we will most likely be sitting in different pews, with perhaps a different view of the sanctuary, as well as other minor changes. But what we’re looking for, in this renewal of the practice of Eucharist, at this point, will be a sense of liberation. What we will experience is not just a return to an earlier practice that we’ve been missing, but rather we will come to it with a renewed sense of purpose, and a renewed sense of participation that may not have been there before.

Like kids returning home from college or university for our first thanksgiving, we are home! We’ve brought the dirty laundry for mom to do for us, as we reconnect with the friends we’ve not seen or heard from in a while. We settle down to a family dinner to celebrate the season to discover that we’re now working from the same dishes but perhaps there are new serving utensils on the table that we’ve never seen before, and Mom and Dad have adopted a few new habits since we’ve gone away to school, and we’re all expected to maintain these ‘new rules.’ After all we were all young children when our mothers told us to wash our hands in preparation to coming to the dinner table, yet here it is, renewed, and complete with handwashing instructions that require us to sing to ourselves “Happy birthday” twice in the process. We suddenly find ourselves at the table, but where elbow room was once a premium, there’s now lots of it, as Cousin Bob is sitting six feet away, and Cousin Jenny is cuddled up with her fiancé six feet in the other direction.

It’s the same, but at the same time, its new and it’s different. And as long as we cling to what we’re missing – the lack of elbow room, the fact

that we hadn't been urged to wash our hands since we were six years old (and really I loved those old salad tongs) then such a new face on the experience is marred by those old longings and we continue that time of lament and eschatology instead of facing the liberation to be found in this new expression of the Eucharist.

The church is, in this time period, searching for the essence of itself, and that is found in the biblically commanded sacraments of the eucharistic and baptismal practices, and in the historically commanded sacraments of unction, confirmation, celebration of a marriage, ordination, and confession and absolution.

What we need to hold onto is the theological understanding that in the Eucharist we find the meal commanded by Jesus (Mt 26:17- 30, Mk 14:12-26, Lk 22:7-23). At the same time, this is the meal that he gives to us to carry us, spiritually, into the world, blessed and refilled by the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 11:17-34).

This is the meal where Jesus blesses and breaks the bread, where he blesses and shares the cup, where he feeds us his body and blood, figuratively in the bread and wine. This is the meal where he commands us to "do this in memory of me."

This is what we're missing, and for which we're yearning. This spiritual sustenance, this physical inclusion with the Body of Christ in past, present, and future, and this is what we've been missing, although we may not even have recognized it in such a way, before this time of imposed absence. Often what we recognize is we're missing that element in our lives, especially if it was a regular part of our pre-pandemic worship.

What we recognize is there's something that we can't quite put a finger on that satisfies us, in some way, and helps us through the week, and it's not here, right now – community, inclusion, the body of Christ found in the pews, and in the Eucharist.

We remember the words, and we long for the day that we to hear them, to receive the Eucharistic element(s) in our hands, and to feel that 'something' that has been absent since this eschatological exile has been imposed.