

We do not presume (or do we?)

DAVID HARRISON

“We do not presume.”

Our Anglican *Prayer of Humble Access* (known by some, not always affectionately, as the “Humble Crumble”) sums up in those four words the Anglican piety of the eucharist for a good deal of our history, both before and after the Anglican Reformation of the sixteenth century. Appropriating the stance of the Syrophoenician woman who begs Jesus to heal her daughter, the prayer puts those who pray it, like her, falling at Our Lord’s feet. The Prayer of Humble Access, although having been picked up by some Protestant denominations, is one of those uniquely Anglican prayers, first appearing in the first *Book of Common Prayer* of 1549 and in the form known to us in its successor, the *Book of Common Prayer* of 1552.

And yet a humble expression of reticence and unworthiness in anticipation of receiving holy communion was already embedded in the rite of the English Church before the Reformation. Thomas Cranmer primarily looked to the Sarum rite (being the rite that developed for use at Salisbury Cathedral and which found widespread use throughout England) as his jumping off point for his recasting of the English liturgy. In the Sarum rite, the tone of reticence and humility is expressed privately by the priest before he receives communion in the recitation of three prayers notable for their tone of penitence and unworthiness.¹ (And, lest

¹ The three prayers are these:

God the Father, Fount and Source of all goodness,
who, moved by compassion for us, didst will thine only begotten Son to descend to the low
places of the world, and to take our flesh,
whom I, unworthy, here hold in my hands :

(Here let the priest bow to the Host, saying:)

I adore thee, I glorify thee, I praise thee, with complete intention of mind and heart:

we think that this sort of expression is uniquely English, or reflective of a Protestant spirituality, the Roman rite then and to this day includes the *Domine, non sum dignus*, where the priest presents the sacrament to the people saying: “Behold the Lamb of God; behold him who takes away the sin of the world”, with the faithful responding - echoing the words of the centurion: “Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.”²)

At the time that King Henry separated the English Church from Rome the actual reception of communion was much more the exception than the rule. The focus of the mass was not on receiving communion but rather on the ritual itself. The reality was that most of the mass was spoken by a priest in an inaudible voice, in Latin, standing at an altar some considerable distance away facing away from the people. Indeed, it would only have been when the bells were rung as the priest elevated the host and the chalice that the faithful person in the pews, otherwise engaged in their private devotions, might look up and take notice.³ The Prayer of Humble Access, introduced by Cranmer, actually assumes that those attending the liturgy *will* receive communion; that they will (as it were) be invited to gather up the crumbs that might have been left for the dogs, in

and I pray that thou mayest not forsake thy servants, but pardon our sins;
that with pure heart and chaste body we may deserve to serve thee, who alone art God,
living and true.
Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lord Jesu Christ, Son of the living God,
who, according to the will of the Father, with the Holy Spirit as co-worker, through thy
death,
hast given life to the world :
Deliver me, I beseech thee, by this thy most holy Body and Blood, from all my iniquities,
and from all evils;
and make me always to obey thy commandments, and never permit me to be separated
from thee for ever.
Who livest and reignest God, with God the Father and the same holy Spirit, throughout all
ages. Amen.

Let not the Sacrament of thy Body and Blood, O Lord Jesu Christ,
which, although unworthy, I presume to receive, be to me for judgement and condemnation,
but may it avail, through thy mercy, for the salvation of my body and soul. Amen

² Before the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the response “Lord, I am not worthy” (said in Latin) was repeated three times, with the striking of the breast each time.

³ This is *not* to suggest that the eucharist was unimportant in the spiritual life of the realm. On the contrary, as the late Professor Stephen Reynolds puts it: “Mass – the western Church’s name for the Holy Eucharist – was the linchpin of the Catholic religion. It was celebrated daily, even several times a day, and for any one of a wide variety of purposes. People might offer their petitions to God in the set offices of prayer or over a meal or before climbing into bed at night; but it was the sacrifice of the Mass that inscribed their needs, concerns, hopes, and desires on the agenda of heaven itself.” See Professor Reynolds’ *Theologies of the Eucharist I and II*, available at tspace.library.utoronto.ca. The unpublished works of this fine teacher and theologian deserve to be better known.

order to be healed. For Cranmer and the English reformers, the eucharist was *not* intended as a passive act of private prayer but rather an encounter with God through receiving the sacrament. This is not to suggest a catholic sacramental understanding; Cranmer was a receptionist, meaning that although he did not hold that the substance of bread and wine changed, the faithful did, by faith, receive Christ when receiving holy communion.⁴

As the English Church evolved in its independence, there were various epochs of eucharistic piety to be observed. The Act of Uniformity of 1662, which settled the century-long struggle between Catholicism and Protestantism under the hand of Queen Elizabeth I, mandated that the faithful must receive communion at least three times a year. And it seems likely that, in most places, that was precisely the number of times that Holy Communion was celebrated. The eighteenth century is generally considered to be the nadir of the history of the Church of England. And yet even then, the great reformer Charles Wesley, whose movement led to the establishment of the Methodist Church, called for “constant communion” and was said to receive the sacrament at least twice a week.⁵ The Oxford Movement of the nineteenth century re-introduced daily celebrations of the eucharist back into Anglicanism, and this became the trajectory for a some, but still a minority, of Anglican parishes.

Fast forward to 2020 and the words “we do not presume” take on a different meaning in a different context, but much to the same effect. Since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Anglican Communion has been thrust into an expected place where the receiving of communion in the accustomed manner has been impossible in all but certain, enclosed communities. And behind the myriad practical matters that have demanded careful and immediate attention, bishops have had to make decisions about the celebration of the eucharist in a time of pandemic. Some have continued to allow the celebration of the eucharist in their dioceses; others have not, declaring (as the Ontario provincial house of bishops did) a “eucharistic fast”.⁶ The theological and pastoral motivations behind the fast were made plain: “[s]acramental celebrations are the work of the whole

⁴ This is most clearly expressed in the new words of distribution introduced in the *Book of Common Prayer* 1552. Replacing the declaration “The Body/Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for you”, the new book introduced “Take and eat in remembrance” and “Drink this in remembrance”, and the phrase “feed on him in your heart by faith with thanksgiving.”

⁵ Wesley’s Sermon 101 is entitled “The Duty of Constant Communion” where he makes his case on Our Lord’s command “Do this”.

⁶ The Bishop of Niagara subsequently allowed the celebration of the eucharist to resume, and one of the area bishops of Toronto have provided some latitude for parishes to continue to celebrate the Eucharist.

People of God and require a gathering of people who can be physically present to one another. That is impossible for most of us at this time. The Great Three Days of Easter, and through the 50 days of the season, we will be fasting from the Eucharist but feasting on the Word.” In short, the lack of the ability to gather physically, combined the inability for all to receive together, was the impetus for a fast for all.

The eucharist, like the sacrament baptism, defies a tidy and pithy description. It is, rather, multi-valent. (Is the eucharist a sacrifice, an offering, a commemoration, a meal? Yes!) Throughout the history of Anglicanism the eucharist has always been celebrated, although frequency and theological understandings of the sacrament and the rite have differed. Our own Canadian *Book of Common Prayer* 1962, still the official prayer book of the Anglican Church of Canada, reflects a kind of seriousness about the act of receiving communion which may seem more than a little strange for us today. In the rubrics of the Service of Holy Communion the faithful are enjoined to receive communion regularly, but the priest is, at the same time, told to emphasize to the faithful both the importance and the seriousness of receiving communion, and to ensure that those who present themselves are worthy.⁷ And let us not forget that this prayer book also contains long exhortations mandated to be read on some Sundays before, and when, holy communion is to be celebrated. Such exhortations clearly intended to emphasize upon the faithful the utter seriousness with which receiving the sacrament is to be considered. Many cradle Anglicans of a certain generation will remember “1st and 3rd” were Sundays when holy communion was celebrated and “2nd and 4th” were Morning Prayer Sundays. For some

⁷ Among the rubrics:

“It is the duty of every confirmed person, after due preparation, to partake of the holy Communion frequently, and particularly on the greater Holy-days, of which Easter is the chief.”

“The Minister shall frequently remind the people of what is required of those who come to receive the Lord’s Supper, as set forth in the Catechism and the Exhortations. It shall also be his duty to warn individually any whom he knows to be living in grievous sin, that they presume not to come to the Lord’s Table until they give evidence that they truly repent; and if they do not heed his warning, he shall refuse to administer the Communion to them. He shall deal in the same manner with those between whom he perceives malice and hatred to exist, not allowing them to be partakers of the Lord’s Table until they be reconciled. But if one of the parties is willing to forgive and, to the best of his ability, to make whatever amends may be proper, and the other party refuses to do so, the Minister shall admit the penitent person to the holy Communion and refuse him that is obstinate. Before repelling any from the Lord’s Table under the provisions of this rubric, the Minister should consult with the Bishop or the Archdeacon. After so repelling any, he shall within fourteen days give a written account.”

familiar with more low church realities, holy communion was celebrated monthly.⁸

We find ourselves in a much different place in most of the Anglican world with respect both to the frequency, and the spirituality, of receiving communion. Most parishes now celebrate the eucharist weekly as their “principal” act of worship.⁹ The Oxford Movement led, in the Church of England, to the “Parish Communion Movement” of the 1920s, where the practice of weekly celebrations of the eucharist became normative in some parishes. This movement was part of what we now know as the “Liturgical Movement” of the last century, a movement which emerged out of the Roman Catholic Church (culminating in the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council) but which influenced Christian liturgies in the West much more broadly and deeply. Indeed, our own *Book of Alternative Services* 1985 is very much a product of this movement, not least in the emphasis on and reform of the rite for celebrating the eucharist.

It can be argued that the overarching thrust of the Liturgical Movement was to recover and emphasize the “eucharist as a meal” aspect of the celebration, an aspect de-emphasized at other times in the history of Anglicanism, and a notion which would have been completely puzzling to our medieval forbears. This renewed emphasis was borne out both in rite, the ceremonial, and the architecture of the liturgy. The rite emphasizes the gathering of the community with the introduction of the greeting. There is an intentionality in the gathering, listening, praying, and feeding of those gathered. The move to what is now normative in our ritual of having the priest standing at the altar *versus populum* (“toward the people”) emphasizes this, as does more modern ecclesiastical architecture, which has moved away from the separate spaces of nave, chancel and sanctuary toward an integrated whole.

But this emphasis, worthy as it is, may just explain why in this pandemic time the idea of a eucharistic fast has taken hold. *If* we cannot imagine the eucharist without the entire community gathered (or at least able to gather), then we cannot imagine the eucharist. *If* we cannot fathom how one or two (the priest, perhaps with one or two physically distanced) can receive holy communion when others can’t, then we cannot imagine the eucharist. It would seem a plausible hypothesis that the Liturgical Movement has taken such a hold on our consciousness and

⁸ Indeed, until the 1970s it would only be in so-called Anglo-Catholic parishes where the Eucharist was celebrated weekly (and daily in some).

⁹ It is true that the “early communion” was in some places celebrated weekly in many parishes, even if Matins followed at the “main” hour.

practices as Anglicans that, for very sound pastoral and theological reasons, some have seen no alternative but to suspend celebrations of the eucharist during the current pandemic.

Could this reality, though, also be urging Anglicans to reconsider and perhaps recover a fuller breadth of eucharistic theology and practice? In embracing so whole heartedly the idea of “eucharist as meal”, have we lost other understandings which might also be edifying? And assuming (as it seems) that 2020 will emerge as a watershed year in the life of the Church, how will our eucharistic theologies and practices evolve in light of the new vistas and modes of “being Church” which are now fully upon us?

From time to time concern is expressed that we celebrate the eucharist *too* often. That we have lost something of the mystery of the sacrament, something of the (gospel-mandated) call to self-examination before receiving the sacrament and the need to make amends with those from whom we are estranged. Could it sometimes be that the sheer repetition and frequency can lead, even for the most pious, to a kind of casualness that would likely be scandalous to generations of our Anglican forebears? And, perhaps more seriously, have we “domesticated” the eucharist? Made it ours, or about us, or about our need to be fed, and less about God and what God is doing and will do?

It is said that the doctrine of the Incarnation is at the very heart of Anglicanism. That our whole lives of faith are centred in, and dependent on, the reality that God took on our flesh, *our* flesh, in the babe of Bethlehem, in dwelling among us. And, certainly, the eucharist makes no sense if we don’t begin with the Incarnation. If it is not true that God (all that is divine) did not take on our human nature, or could not do so, or chose not to do so, then our sacraments collapse like a house of cards. They become mere symbols, pointing to a God who may be real, but who is not incarnate. Sacraments point to something else, but they also *are* that something else, that someone else. The bread and wine of the eucharist points to Jesus, but they also *are* Jesus. And so, if we are to centre our lives on the Incarnation and the sacramental reality that flows from it, how can we not celebrate the eucharist? How can we not make Christ known in the sacrament of the altar? Grieve as we might (and perhaps must) that our communities cannot gather to receive the sacrament in the ways and with the frequency which is familiar, are we putting too much on ourselves and not enough on God to conclude that the eucharist is not, in and of itself, our act but God’s, and that God’s world continues to need the sacraments celebrated despite whatever limitations are put upon us. That the eucharist not only recalls but *makes*

real the death and resurrection of Christ. And that the command “Do This” was offered without footnotes.

It is surely unrealistic to imagine that these questions will vanish as soon as a vaccine can be widely distributed. Technology is not going to disappear. Online worship will become normative for perhaps the majority of Anglican communities. Some will have simply fallen out of the habit of coming to Church, and some will elect out of the habit. There will be ongoing public health concerns, and experts say another pandemic may not be far off. New means and modes and pathways of being Christian communities are opening wide up, and the Church is now figuring out, on the go, how the eucharist will, or won't, be part of what is here and is to come.

Virtual communion? Can we imagine it? What are the implications of virtual communion on the debate about open table and the suggestion that all should be invited, whether baptized or not? The frequency of communion? YouTube analytics are now telling many of us that the majority of viewers do *not* watch the entire liturgy but “pick and choose” what they wish to be part of it. How does that impact our ideas of liturgical integrity and the flow from gathering to dismissing?

Our ancestors in Anglicanism almost five centuries ago approached the sacrament also with a sense of trepidation. “We do not presume.” Over the last number of months, many Anglicans have, again, not presumed, but the reasons are entirely different. For what are, in many ways, good and worth reasons. But is it because we do *not* presume? Or because we do?