

Experiencing the sacramentality of the Word

PAUL JENNINGS

The pandemic has brought loss: in all aspects of church life, and specifically and obviously in our liturgical life. We are so conscious of the things we must do without. We miss being physically and socially present to one another in the Christian community, and have come to experience with bitter intensity how important an aspect of our liturgy that is. We have found it impractical, inappropriate, or (for some) downright theologically impossible to celebrate the eucharist. Since the eucharist has in recent generations been restored as the mainstay of weekly communal worship, its temporary loss has provoked something of a crisis of identity in Anglican worship. The loss of congregational singing is felt by many with great poignancy.

These deprivations call forth a variety of reactions in each one of us: longing, melancholy, nostalgia, resentment, and the compulsion to try to recuperate as much of our traditional worship as we can under the circumstances. But our faith in God's providence invites us to another set of responses as well: to discern the will of God in any challenges and troubles that life sends our way, to ask what lessons the Spirit may be trying to teach us. We may rightly mourn what we miss, but we should also turn to the opportunities that a reordering of our liturgical emphases brings with it.

Two axes in particular frame this reordering of priorities. Our inability to gather together in person invites us to reflect on the relationship of *community* and *interiority* in worship from a different perspective. Similarly, our enforced abstinence from the eucharist demands that we reevaluate the relationship of *word* and *sacrament* in our theology and practice. Rather than simply seeking to preserve community and eucharist in whatever imitation of our usual practice is practical, there is value

in exploring the opportunities of an enforced emphasis on inwardness and the word.

Word and sacrament are complementary aspects of the one liturgy of Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate. I take this to be axiomatic – in contrast to the occasional tendency in Anglicanism (driven by our high church/low church feuds, and the various ways in which we position ourselves vis-à-vis our Catholic and Protestant sister churches) to see them as somehow in competition: as though it were necessary or possible to maintain the priority of one over the other, as though honouring one requires downgrading the other.

Against such occasional lapses it is essential that we affirm the unity of word and sacrament, as equal and interdependent expressions of the one Word among us, as equal and interdependent means by which Christ is present to his people. It is the genius of our Sunday eucharistic liturgy, in its deepest, most basic structure, that proclamation and eucharist follow one another in a way that is not merely sequential: they mirror one another, echo and deepen one another in a single but multi-layered encounter with Christ, allowing us to experience the gospel at different levels of our humanity. One might be tempted to suggest that the appeal to our intellect through Scripture and preaching is complemented by the physical, visceral experience of being fed, of having that same word dissolve upon our tongue. But we should be cautious here. This distinction has some truth, but it does not go to the depth of either word or sacrament, as it still suggests too great a distinction between them. At root they are one: the sacrament is an event of the word, and the proclaimed word is sacramental in nature.

The sacrament is an event of the word. While it essentially involves physical elements, to be received physically, the eucharist also essentially involves words. On the most obvious level, it is words – the Words of Institution, the epiclesis of the Spirit – that make the sacrament more than simply the bread and wine we bring to the table. But the eucharistic prayer is much more than an instrument to consecrate the sacrament: it is an act of praise in which we give thanks to God, as we proclaim anew God's mighty deeds, and in so doing are shaped by the story we proclaim. Most fundamentally, the purpose of the eucharist is to proclaim the death of Christ, until he comes again: an anamnesis of Christ's self-giving love, in joyful trust in the power of the resurrection. In the words of institution – “this is my body, given for you” – Christ brings to a single point the story summed up in the eucharistic prayer, proclaiming to the church the whole of the gospel – incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, Pentecost – in a single phrase, which is incarnated in a physical form we

take into our mouth. In the words of distribution – “the body of Christ, given for you” – this proclamation is then addressed to each of us personally as individuals in community. Not only the bread and wine, but the words themselves in all their intimacy are vehicles of Christ’s real presence.

By the same token, the proclamation of the word is never just words, but is properly sacramental. Of course, we often treat it as just words: so many lines of the lectionary to get through, a certain idea or two to be explained in the sermon, keeping the word at a safe, notional distance. But at our best we realize that there is more to the proclamation of the word. When we finish a reading with “the Word of the Lord”, it is more than an empty formula; it should contain at least a hint of the power which the prophets invoked, the expectation that God is speaking to us in the here and now. “Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church” expresses the hope and trust that these ancient words can become living words, addressing us directly in our context. When the words become proclamation, they are a means of making God present, actually and palpably present to us in the specificity of our gathered assembly. As a vehicle of Christ’s real presence, the proclaimed word is sacramental.

If something like this is true of the relationship between word and sacrament, what consequences does that have for us now in a time of eucharistic hunger? Yes, there is a real loss: it is precisely the cooperation of word and sacrament that gives our regular pattern of worship its fullness and depth, and we would not want anything to compromise the normativity of this pattern. And yet, if word and sacrament are so closely bound up, both of them sacramental expressions of the one Word Jesus Christ, something like a doctrine of concomitance might pertain for either the service of the word or the eucharist alone. Just as we maintain that the full benefits of the sacrament are conveyed if one receives only the bread or wine (while at the same time upholding communion in both kinds as the normative full expression of the eucharist), the same might be said by analogy of the liturgical practice of word and sacrament. A eucharist should normally never be celebrated without any Scripture read or sermon proclaimed; but if exceptional circumstances make it necessary, we can rest confident that the word is truly proclaimed in the sacrament alone. And if, as in our present circumstances, we are forced to do without the eucharist, we can be confident that a service of the Word alone will not be lacking God’s full, gracious presence. The reception of eucharist may be a personal preference, and it certainly belongs to the *plene esse* of our liturgical life, but it is not – at least in the short term – essential to encounter God.

In this light, the temporary loss of the eucharist is an opportunity to explore and experience the sacramentality of the Word. In our normal pattern of worship, we can rely on the eucharist as the main vehicle of sacramentality, of a believed and experienced sense of God's real and immediate presence. This may sometimes cause us to neglect the aspect of sacramentality in the proclamation of the word: we may treat the liturgy of the Word as a series of lessons to be attended to, or at worst as a kind of inferior warm-up act before the main event brings God personally onto the stage. Now, without the eucharist, we find ourselves – at least in our parish – suddenly paying more attention to the way in which we can experience the living presence of God in the service of the word.

What do we mean by the “sacramentality” of the word, given that the proclamation of the word is counted neither among the traditional seven sacraments of the Catholic tradition, nor among the two dominical sacraments of the Articles? In other words, in what ways can the sacraments (and specifically the word's companion sacrament, the eucharist) offer an analogy that sharpens our awareness of how God uses the word in our liturgies?

First of all, a sacrament is a vehicle of God's heightened presence with us. The real presence of the eucharist constitutes a naming, an intentionality, a “thickening” of Christ's presence that transcends his (surely also “real”) presence when two or three are gathered, or indeed with us always to the end of time. This specific presence calls forth in us an increased attention, a reverence stemming from the expectation that Christ comes to meet us. This attitude is one, I believe, that we have increasingly learned to bring to the proclamation of the word in recent decades: we are learning to treat proclamation (both the lections and the sermon) less as “lessons” to be learned, and more as encounters with the living God.

A sacrament is characterized by its physicality. More than simply an “outward and visible sign”, this is an echo of the incarnation, an entering of God into the material world. It is presumably this aspect that hinders us from thinking about the word in sacramental terms, as we see or touch no material object. But the word has its own physical presence, when used liturgically: it is a spoken word, with its own shape and rhythm and assonance, above and beyond its meaning. Like any sacrament, we receive it sensually, in this case through the ear. This physicality of the word, its poetic dimension, is one we too often neglect in worship, perhaps out of a justified reluctance to imbue poetic effect with religious significance. But it is not the quality of the wine that makes the eucharist, but the fact that it has taste, that it signifies God as an object

we consume. So too it is not the poetic sublimity of the Scriptural translation or the preacher's rhetoric, but the fact that these words have weight as sounds, that they come to us not just as notions but physically as words addressed to our ears, with a texture of their own.

This brings us to a third aspect of sacrament: it is not just an abstract system of meaning, but one that addresses us personally and intimately. We have considered how the words of institution and distribution bring the eucharist home to us; this personal aspect is also seen in baptism, or really in any of the other of the five commonly called sacraments. Similarly, the word is not just the communication of ideas, but in its fullest form crystallizes into proclamation, words of comfort, assurance, or challenge addressed to the individual soul. Our fear of modern individualism should not blind us to the personal, intimate nature of this proclamation: it must be heard and answered by each particular person.

Finally, a sacrament changes us even as it addresses us at a most intimate level. Through the encounter with the living Christ – in the proclamation of the word as in the eucharist – we are changed into Christ's image, conformed more fully to the pattern of perfect humanity. We are incorporated into the body of Christ, the community of the church – not as a separate step, as though community were a value independent of Christ, but as we are each of us together united with Christ.

None of this should be understood as an argument against the custom of weekly eucharist as the normal pattern for the main gathering of the Christian community. The power of this pattern stems from the duality of word and sacrament, and we grasp the depth and richness of this duality most fully when we understand the word as sacramental, and the eucharist as proclamation. But that very fullness of understanding should encourage us, in a time when the eucharist is denied to us, with the knowledge that all the grace and redemption we look for in the sacrament is present also in the word alone, that the word alone is a sufficient means of God's presence with us, until the fullness of our liturgy is restored.

Appendix: one parish's experience

Under current circumstances every parish and every priest has been forced to innovate, to compromise our ideals of worship in favour of what is possible; and from the decisions taken, there have been different opportunities for learning for each parish and priest. Briefly, a sketch of the liturgical decisions we have made in our parish as we have moved our worship online. This is by no means to suggest that there is one right way of doing online worship. These are simply the decisions we have

made (often by chance or instinct, as much as by conscious theological reflection). Their relevance lies in the lessons they are teaching us, over the months we have had to experience, reflect on, and further innovate our worship.

A primary decision (made in part because of our technological limitations, but with a nod to the wisdom of Marshall McLuhan) was to offer online worship without a video feed, as an audio track accompanying a written order of service. This has brought with it a greater sense of intimacy (in the sense that radio is a more intimate medium than television); our voices come directly into people's homes without the distancing effect of the gaze. And it has brought a wonderful concentration on the word as spoken word, experienced through the directness of the human voice.

We also made the decision to offer a prerecorded service, rather than a live broadcast event. Again, this involves a sacrifice of the experience of community that people might have by tuning in together and interacting. Possibly we feared that that kind of community might feel like a pale imitation of the real thing. But there was also a conscious decision, made precisely in light of the fact that our parish places such a very strong emphasis on community as a value: the decision to try something else, to shift the focus towards a greater experience of "interiority", of prayerfulness. We reframed community as a community believed but not seen, the cloud of witnesses that gather around us when we pray the same service separately in our homes. We encouraged people to pray the liturgy at a set time, while making it clear that anytime was fine); we offered a virtual coffee hour by Zoom following our set time. In the worship itself, however, we consciously set aside the social gathering as a possible distraction to concentrate more directly on the encounter with the Word.

In terms of the liturgy used, we settled on the shape of a Service of the Word rather than Morning Prayer: a pattern of gathering, Scriptures, reflection, intercessions, and sending. At the same time, the very different context of recorded audio in contrast to a physically gathered community suggested an experimental latitude in which certain elements were added or changed.

We slowed and quieted the service down. Without the busyness of the Sunday gathering, through the medium of a quiet voice, we have tried to set a more reflective pace. We have left silences, and given permission to pause the audio for reflection and prayer.

We reduced the number of lections. As strong as our commitment to the Revised Common Lectionary is, we have found reading two lections with a psalm instead of three makes a huge difference in being able to give each lection the attention that is its due. We have generally kept the gospel, and read either Old Testament or Epistle as a first reading, often using the complementary track for the Old Testament and Psalm.

After each of the readings, we offer a short reflection: a couple of sentences of necessary context, but moving towards posing questions for reflection. This is an opportunity to practise and model Biblical reflection and *lectio divina* with the whole congregation (not just the small group which normally gathers for Bible Study). These have been anxious weeks, between the pandemic, the economic fallout, the Nova Scotia shooting, the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, and the ongoing climate crisis. Rather than simply talking at people in the sermon, these questions invite them to make the connections themselves, to let the Scriptures speak to their context. At first this was offered in place of the sermon, or together with a short homily; but we have retained it even when we offer a full sermon.

We have experimented with alternative translations of the Biblical text. In particular, we have tried two recent translations: Robert Alter's Hebrew Bible, with its particular attention to the literary qualities of the Hebrew, and David Bentley Hart's New Testament, which attempts to retain the strangeness, even awkwardness, of the original. These versions, with their unexpected, jarring turns of phrase, invite us to listen even more deeply to the word as something strange, untamed, beyond our control. While they may not be suitable for regular liturgical use (among other considerations, neither uses gender-inclusive language), they have proved effective for occasional use.

We have included poetry in the service, not every week but more often than normal: Malcolm Guite, Mary Oliver, Thomas Merton, Gerald Manley Hopkins, and others. We have used poetic liturgy: Jan Richardson's Blessings, the alternate collects, and opening responses we have found or written ourselves. And we have inserted meditative texts – Stephen Charleston, Richard Rohr, and others, to guide our reflection. The effect of all this is to slow us down, help us to pay attention to words in their subtle precision of meaning and the physicality of rhythm and assonance. These too cultivate in us

the attention to God's presence, these too can verge on the sacramental.

Finally, we have become much more eclectic in our music. We are blessed with gifted musicians in the parish and have recorded some of their contributions. But we have come to rely mostly on YouTube videos for service music. This gives us an immense variety of musical experiences: traditional hymns from King's College Cambridge, contemporary hymns, choral pieces in all styles, Bach arias, jazz variations. With the loss of the gathered community, there has been a shift in the role of music: it is less about singing along (though participants are certainly encouraged to), and more about a meditative listening experience. Texts are printed when they are not included in the video, allowing the poetic imagination of the hymn texts to come more into focus. Once again, the music leads to a deeper encounter with the word as a vehicle to experience the presence of God.

Which of these adaptations will continue to influence our practice when we have returned to our regular eucharistic gatherings, and which are simply temporary innovations, remains to be seen. In any case, this unusual time has helped us to deepen the conviction that the liturgy of the word is a powerful sacrament of God's presence, one we do not always use to its full potential.