

Dining at the Table of the Word

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The question caught me off guard, as it wasn't the response that I was expecting. As a theological student entering my second year at Trinity College, I had spent the summer ministering in a summer chapel in the Diocese of Algoma. Before heading off for the summer, I had been in the habit of attending the Eucharist, and receiving Holy Communion, almost every day. Suddenly all that changed, and over the course of nearly three months, I had been able to attend the Eucharist twice, both times when a priest came to the summer mission to celebrate the Eucharist. Returning to the College that September, I was greeted by a member of the faculty who asked how my summer had been. It had been a wonderful summer. I had had a lot of fun. I had met some really wonderful people. And I had missed the Eucharist enormously. I had expected some sympathy from this professor; some recognition that being cut off from the Eucharist was indeed a loss; some assurance that things would be fine now that I was back. What I received was a comment that I have spent the next forty years unpacking. *Well, James, he said, I assume that you dined daily at the Table of the Word.*

For the last six months, Anglicans across Canada and around the world have been cut off from the Eucharistic life of the Church. Where once regular attendance at the Eucharist, and reception of Holy Communion was the norm, suddenly the absence the Sacrament in many of our lives, has been the reality. Who has not missed the comforting assurance of Christ's presence in bread broken, wine poured, in bodies cleansed by His Body, and souls washed by His Blood?¹ Who has not missed the comforting solace of familiar ritual? Yet the comment made to me that September day nearly forty years ago, continues to haunt me. *Well James, I assume that you dined daily at the Table of the Word.*

¹ See Book of Common Prayer, 1962, Prayer of *Humble Access*, 84-85.

As I reflect on the situation in which we have found ourselves, during these last months, I must confess, I do so from a privileged position. As a member of a monastic community (I belong to the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, SSJE) which contains several priests, we have been able to maintain our practice of daily Eucharists and Divine Office. However, because we act as a centre of worship for a congregation of over 100 people on Sundays, and a dozen at our daily Eucharists during the week, I am aware of the hunger and longing many experienced during this time, when they are cut off from the Eucharistic life of the Church. At the same time, I also reflect on our current situation, not simply as a pastor to a congregation, but also from nearly thirty years of experience as a spiritual director.

In the practice of spiritual direction, where the role of the director is to help people recognize the movement of the Spirit in their lives, I often find myself asking people who come to see me, a few simple questions: *Where is God in this? What is the invitation?* I believe that these are helpful, and focusing questions, because they shift the focus away from the individual, to the movement of God in a person's life. They also shift the attention towards the gift of hope. If the Anglican Church of Canada were sitting across from me in one of the conference rooms here at the monastery, rather than an individual, I would ask the same things: *Where is God in this? What is the invitation?* In other words: *Where is the hope?* To these questions I would also ask, *How is God feeding you now?*

Father Richard Meux Benson² the founder of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, speaks a great deal about hope. For him, the gift of hope was the result of the worship of God, and worship was not confined to what happens on Sunday morning. The whole life of a Christian is to be a life of worship, and thus the whole life of a Christian is to be a life of union with God. We remind ourselves of this in our **Rule of Life** where we say that *human beings were created to bless and adore their Creator and in the offering of worship to experience their highest joy and their deepest communion with one another.... [The] Father never ceases from seeking true worshipers to worship him in spirit and truth. God sent the Son into the world to heal and raise us up so that, empowered by the Spirit, we could surrender our whole selves in adoration and be reunited in the love of God. God draws us into our Society so that our calling to be true worshipers can reach fulfillment in the offering of the continual sacrifice of praise. In this life of worship together we are transformed in body, soul and spirit.*³ If the life of the

² See Reynolds, Stephan, *For All the Saints*, Anglican Book Centre, 1994, 54 (for a short biography of Father Benson).

³ SSJE, *Rule of Life, Worship*, Cowley Publications, Cambridge MA, 1997, chapter 16, 32.

Brothers of SSJE is to be a life of adoration, it is only because, like all Christians, in Holy Baptism we have been made *a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.*⁴ It is as the baptized that live this life of worship, and seek the gift of hope, given to all who worship God in spirit and in truth. For Father Benson, it is this gift of hope given to all who are worshipers of the Triune God, which draws us to the very heart of God.

*Our life must be a life of continual hope.... We need to live in supernatural hope in order to be sustained when ... times [of trial] come. Oh! Hope must carry us over the gulf, like a vehicle which, born with an impetus down some steep mountainside, is carried over the gulf and reaches the other side below in safety. What is it which draws downward with such speed that vehicle, which seems to be ready to plunge us into danger? It is the power of gravitation. And what is hope but the gravitation of the whole being to God, not by the link of natural law, but by the link of a supernatural unity of life. The natural law of our nature gives us a tendency in other directions, is continually repressing us. But this gravitation towards God draws us onward.*⁵

And that brings out the spiritual director in me, asking once again: *Where is God in this? What is the invitation? Where is the hope? How is God feeding you now?*

While it is true that most Anglicans have been separated from the Eucharist, we have not been separated from God, nor from the gift of hope, nor from the *real presence* of Jesus. As Anglicans it is our belief that Jesus is truly present in the Sacramental Gifts of Bread and Wine, and we speak of the *Real Presence of Christ* in the Eucharist. Yet it is also true to say that *Christ, who will be present to us in communion, comes first to those who are listening in "the word of God... living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword," and as the one who speaks words that are spirit and life.*⁶ We speak of the *Real Presence*, but we could just as easily speak of the *real presences*, for Jesus who comes to us in Bread and Wine, Body and Blood, comes to us first in gathered community, Word proclaimed, prayers offered, sins forgiven, and peace restored. We may have been cut off from the Sacrament of the Eucharist, but not from the sacramental life of the Church, for in community, Word, prayer, forgiveness, and peace, the abiding presence of Jesus is with us, just as he promised. *Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*⁷

⁴ Book of Common Prayer, 1962, 544.

⁵ Benson, Richard Meux, *Instructions on the Religious Life, Second Series*, A.R. Mowbray and Co. Ltd., London, 1935, 117.

⁶ SSJE, *Rule of Life, The Word of God in Preaching*, chapter 19, 38.

⁷ Mt 28:20.

One of the roles of the spiritual director, is not simply to listen, to question, to prod, it is also to point. So again, if the Anglican Church of Canada were sitting across from me, in answer to my questions: *Where is God? What is the invitation? Where is the hope? How is God feeding you now?* I would point in a number of directions.

As a member of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist my life is rooted in the Fourth Gospel. It is in John's great Prologue that we read *[and] the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*⁸ The gospel of John is the gospel of the incarnation, the gospel of God Emmanuel, the gospel of God's faithful abiding presence with the People of God. Throughout Scripture, God promises to be with us, because that is the nature of God Emmanuel, and God's promises never go unfulfilled. Where is God? God is with us, because God in Christ is God Emmanuel, if only we have the grace to see.

As a monk, while I have continued to receive the Sacrament of the Eucharist over these last six months, I have done so knowing that it is a privilege. Each time I have received the Sacrament, I have been aware that many cannot, and I have carried you in my heart. We say in our **Rule of Life** that *[according] to an ancient monastic saying "A monk is separated from all in order to be united to all." The pioneers of monasticism believed that the monk was called to the margin of society in order to hear within himself the deepest cries of humanity, and to discover a profound unity with all living beings in their struggle to attain "the freedom of the glory of the children of God." In our intercessory prayer this solidarity will find its deepest expression. We shall also experience through faith our communion with all the saints in glory who pray unceasingly with us and for us.*⁹ As I have reached out my hands to receive the Bread of Life, and Cup of Salvation, I have done so as a member of the Body of Christ through Baptism. As Christ's Sacramental Body and Blood have nourished me, the whole body of the baptized has been nourished, for we are one body. A deeper understanding of our place in the Body of Christ, not as individuals, but as a *member of Christ* is one of the invitations which God is holding before us now.

In the last six months, Anglicans across Canada and around the world, have rediscovered that the primary Christian community is the domestic church, in other words, the home. As people have been cut off from the worshipping life of their parish churches, small and large groups have gathered online, or around the dinner table, to pray Morning and

⁸ Jn 1: 14.

⁹ SSJE, Rule of Life, *The Mystery of Intercession*, chapter 24, 49.

Evening Prayer, or Compline. Households, especially those with children, have taken active parts in various kinds of Christian formation. Prayer spaces or corners have been set up in bedrooms or studies, as a way to create sacred space that is set apart for our encounter with God. The recovery of the domestic church is, I believe, a sign of hope.

Standing in the hallway of Trinity College that September day God spoke to me through the words of my professor. *Well James, I assume that you dined daily at the Table of the Word.* It is true, I had missed the Eucharist that summer, and longed to dine again at the Table of the Lord. The reality however was that God had feed me at other tables, and it was only standing there that I came to understand.

Over the last months we may have been cut off from the Eucharistic life of the Church, but God Emmanuel has still been with us. Over the last months we may have been cut off from the Eucharistic life of the Church, but God's invitation to discover our place as baptized members of the Body of Christ has still been offered. Over the last months we may have been cut off from the Eucharistic life of the Church, but God's gift of hope has still been drawing us deeper into the very heart of God. Over the last months we may have been cut off from the Eucharistic life of the Church, but God has still fed us in wonderful and surprising ways.