
Teaching Eucharist

Deuteronomy 26.1-11, Mark 14.22-5

Five addresses offered in Duke University Chapel on September 20, 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

How can we become a people who can hear God speak in the Scriptures?

Jesus was the moment in time when God opened his heart to us and our human life was for once completely open to God. How is that moment accessible to us 2000 years later? On the night before he died Jesus said, "This is how." He took bread and wine and showed us how to remember and be re-formed in all that he was and did. Everything we do at the Eucharist is about allowing our life to be shaped around Jesus life.

If you look closely at the way the service is laid out in your bulletin, you'll see it's arranged in five parts, like movements of a symphony or acts of a play. You can think of each of the five parts of the service as a response to a question. The question at the start of the service is, "How can we become a people who can hear God speak in the Scriptures?" Look at the series of things we do as the service begins that make us ready to hear.

As the carillon calls us to worship we gather, and, as we gather, we reflect on who is here and who is missing, and the many reasons why people might be missing. The silence and stillness of the congregation in preparation for worship are ways in which we express a sense of expectation that God is about to say and do something. The organ prelude focuses that expectation. The pastor offers a greeting and this act turns us from an assembly of individuals into a church. The greeting identifies the person who has been set aside for today to help us speak with God and one another. The same person who begins the service generally ends the service, just as the chair of a meeting tells us when we're starting and when we've finished.

Sometimes the choir sings an introit, which proclaims that God is here, and pinpoints one part of God's life on which to focus our hearts and minds. The opening hymn then begins the story of the service. It binds the congregation together around a common proclamation. Our singing proclaims our joy that *we* are the song in *God's* heart, and our longing to make *God* the song in *our* hearts. The procession during that hymn is a physical way of saying, "We are God's pilgrim people, never settled in any one abiding city." Every processional hymn that begins our worship is a reminder of King David's joyful dance as he brought the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem for the first time.

Immediately all have found their place, we make together a public act of confession. Like old friends having a tense reunion after a long estrangement, we want to name and address and put behind us all that damages our relationship with God and one another, so we can relax and enjoy one another's company and rediscover the depth of our love. In Genesis chapter 3 God says to Adam and Eve, "Where are you?" In Genesis chapter 4, God says to Cain, "Where is your brother?" The first question inspires our confession to God, the second propels us to seek forgiveness and reconciliation with one another by sharing the peace. In so doing we embody these words from Matthew chapter 5: "When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

Now let's stand together and praise God.

What is God saying today?

So ten minutes into the service we have become the church, God's pilgrim people, and we have been reconciled with God and one another. Now and only now are we ready to hear the scriptures. Here then is the second question: "What is God saying today?"

We begin with a prayer to the Holy Spirit. Just as later we carry up the bread and wine and in a long prayer ask God to make Jesus present in the sharing of food, so here we carry up the Bible and in the prayer for

illumination ask God to make Jesus present in the sharing of words. Our tradition is to have three readings, one from the Old Testament, one from the later part of the New Testament, and one from one of the four gospels. This is a way of saying the story of Jesus, found in the gospels, can only be understood in the context of the story of Israel, found in the Old Testament, and the story of the early church, found in the later part of the New Testament. The psalms are the hymn book of Israel, and singing the psalms indicates our desire to make Israel's relationship with God our own. The readings are accompanied by psalms and hymns and anthems, which illuminate themes and offer moments for reflection and praise and meditation and devotion.

We have a grand procession to read the gospel. This says something about us, that again we are a pilgrim people, and that like the tax collector Zacchaeus, who climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus, we need to adjust our posture to catch the words of eternal life. But it also says something about Jesus – that he made the journey to be with us rather than us making a journey to him, and that he came to us as a stranger just as strangers pour through the doors of the Chapel. But most of all we have a procession at this point because it makes the reading of these precious words a climax to the first half of the service to balance the way the sharing of food is a climax to the second half. We surround the gospel with a hymn that is specially chosen to reflect and highlight aspects of the readings and inscribe them on our hearts with the rhythm of song.

Imagine this part of the service as an arrowhead. The Old and New Testament readings form an arrowhead, the gospel is the shaft; and the sermon should be the point, aimed where the arrow of God's word is acutely poignant today. The sermon takes God's five-act drama of creation, covenant, Christ, church and consummation, and locates us precisely in the fourth act, called church – between the full disclosure of God's grace and mercy in Christ and the full abundance of his blessings in the consummation at the story's end. Whether the sermon begins with a pressing issue of the day or starts out with a question, command or narrative from the scripture, either way it seeks to enfold our lives within the loving purposes of God, to show how our story is just one tiny but precious part in the endless stream of God's story, and to polish the treasured pearl of faith within the confusing circumstances of our lives. Let's now listen together to what God is saying today.

How can we become a people who can share food?

Here is the third question: "How can we become a people who can share food?" Ideally the hearing of God's word leads to an instant reshaping of our lives so we are ready to share food with God and one another. But before we get to the table we do three things in response to the hearing of God's word. First we say the creed. Sometimes if the service may run long we leave this part out, but always reluctantly. Because this is the moment where we signal that our worship isn't just about these people gathered here but is our participation in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, the communion of saints stretching to all centuries past and future and to all four corners of the earth. This is what has always been believed, everywhere, by the whole church. These aren't just our pet ideas and dreams: this is the faith of the church.

The next thing we do is turn faith into hope by offering prayers of petition. In the sermon the pastor is speaking to the people on behalf of God. Here the pastor is speaking to God on behalf of the people. These are the two most important things a pastor ever does. We come before God naked in our need and limitless in our expectation. That's how the sermon should have left us: completely aware of the reality of our weakness and folly, yet on fire with the wonder of what God can do, even with us. The prayers place the deepest needs of the world and ourselves within our understanding of the way God works in the world.

And then we bring forward God's gifts and lay them on the altar. Deuteronomy chapter 26 instructs the children of Israel to bring the first fruits in a basket and give them to the priest and then tell the story of salvation. In just the same way we bring our money, the harvest of our work, the bread and wine, which at this stage represent the ordinary food of life and the extraordinary drink of eternal life; and we also bring symbols of our university and civic community, as a living offering of thanks and praise. During this time the choir sings an anthem and the people sing the doxology. In every way in creed, prayers, offering and song, we are saying, "This is our best understanding of how to respond to your gospel: take it and transform it into food that gives us eternal life."

What does it mean to be God's companions?

And now we come to the fourth, and crucial, question at the heart of the Eucharist and the heart of our faith: "What does it mean to be God's companions?" This is the question answered by the long prayer of thanksgiving and the distribution of the bread and wine. A companion literally means one with whom you share bread. I want you to pay close attention to several processes taking place simultaneously in this sharing of bread.

When the presiding minister says Jesus' words "Take... bless... break... give," we are of course recalling what Jesus did at the Last Supper. But we are also recalling what God did to Israel. God took one special people, blessed them, then broke them in the Exile before giving them as a light to the nations to bring the Gentiles to God. And then God took human form in Jesus, blessed us through the incarnation and ministry of Jesus, was broken on the cross before giving us life in the resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit. And in just the same way God takes our lives and blesses us, and if we are sitting here today feeling our lives have been broken this moment of the service is telling us that we are broken in order that our life may be shared that God's people may be fed. For this reason our prayers for healing accompany the sharing of communion. Our prayer is that even while we are broken, God may continue to bless us.

And look at what happens when the bread and wine and money and prayers are brought to the altar. In that moment we each bring our different qualities, resources, hopes and dreams to God. And then the pastor recalls the sacred story of how God took what we are and made it what he is. And in that transformation we each receive back the same. What this is depicting is a new society in which we each bring our differentness to God but we each receive back from God the same bread of life. We each have different hungers, but God satisfies them all.

And in this dynamic of transformation we see how salvation works. God takes a simple people and their simple offerings and gives them a sacred story and sacred actions and in the regular telling of that story and performance of those actions they are transformed into God's holy people. And that's exactly what the regular celebration of the Eucharist is about: God taking an ordinary people and through this story and these actions turning them into the body of Christ, God's companions forever.

What do we need to make the whole world a Eucharist?

We have seen, we have touched, we have heard, we have tasted the Lord our God. The Eucharist is a whole body experience of truthful living in a new society as God's companions together forever. We were made to glorify God and enjoy him forever, and this vocation was never more fully realized than in these moments together. Only one thing more remains. What do we need to remake the whole world like this? What do we need to make the whole world a Eucharist?

The words of the benediction crystallize all that has gone before and focus it into a commissioning for all we shall set our hand to once we depart. What the benediction is saying is "May the Lord preserve in you all the good gifts he has given you this day – joy and forgiveness and truth and the meeting of your needs and the satisfying of your longing and reconciliation with your neighbor and the bread of eternal life." The sung response "God be in my head" is a prayer that this blessing be felt in all our five senses and in every stage of our life from cradle to grave. By circling the congregation as it is sung, the choir affirms that in the Eucharist this diverse assembly of different people on different journeys with different identities and needs and concerns has indeed become one body, the body of Christ.

It's very appropriate that the service concludes with an organ postlude. For a pipe organ turns air into music by channeling wind through many carefully crafted pipes. The organ enables us to hear the wind of God's Spirit as song, and, in transforming the ordinary stuff of air into the wondrous elixir of music, it mimics the way God in Christ turns ordinary food into the bread of life.

In our recessional hymn the choir and ministers set out to begin the week to come, taking the sacred actions and words and seeking to speak and hear and practice and receive them in every moment of every day. I have a

golden retriever called Connie and I often throw a tennis ball for her to fetch. At this moment the pastor is like a person who throws a tennis ball out of the church into the world beyond, inviting the eager members of the congregation in their different ways to locate and discern and cherish the place where it lands, and at the next service to bring back the wisdom and wonder of where it landed and of how they met God there.

For the next act of worship begins the moment this one ends. Everything that precedes the next service is a gathering of joys to celebrate, sins to confess, money to offer, food to share, and needs to bring to the next time we come together to meet God. That's what it means to make the whole world a Eucharist.