

Bread of Life: Bishops' teaching series

2 - The Eucharist: *Thanksgiving* – Bishop Clive Gregory

Within Anglicanism it has become increasingly common to speak of 'the eucharist' as short hand for 'eucharistic worship'. And so we say such things as 'there's a eucharist every Sunday at 11'. But of course the liturgy of which we are speaking contains different key aspects, which we could call a prayer shape. In the first part of the liturgy there is Penitence, Proclamation & Intercession and then, rather as with a set of Russian Dolls, within the Eucharist is the Eucharistic prayer itself – often called 'the great thanksgiving'.

Within a liturgy comprising many prayers, this is the culminating, climactic, prayer offering, because thanksgiving is not merely one aspect of our responsive prayer to God, but the chief expression of our human response to God's loving kindness to us, revealed in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit.

As Karl Barth once insisted, the proper response to grace is thanksgiving. 'Grace and gratitude', he said, 'belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder lightning'.

The importance of a spirituality of thanksgiving is a central theme of Pauline teaching, as I will discuss later ...

Much scholarly attention has, in recent generations, been devoted to re-establishing the proper shape and content of the Eucharistic Prayer. None have been more influential than Dom Gregory Dix who revealed the great thanksgiving in its historic forms to be structured around the four basic acts of taking, blessing, breaking and distributing.

As for the content, in Anglican churches, as in others, modern eucharistic prayers show a heightened awareness of the Eucharistic Prayer's importance and possibilities, as will be explored later. By contrast we have come to see the limitations of Archbishop Cranmer's eucharistic prayer, enshrined in the 1552 and 1662 editions of the Book of Common Prayer. In some cases we have reclaimed ancient eucharistic prayers in adapted forms and we have added acclamations to encourage congregational participation.

But how have such changes affected our actual experience and understanding of the great thanksgiving? Have they helped us appreciate better the place and possibilities of thanksgiving at the Eucharist?

At first sight, such questions may seem irrelevant. After all, the great thanksgiving is unquestionably a prayer prayed by the presiding bishop or priest. It has been so almost from the beginning. It might seem therefore that the extent of the congregation's interest in it is exhausted by attentive listening and solemn assent. Perhaps more significantly, though, most

of us regard this prayer as chiefly a prayer of consecration by which the sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood is made present for all of us to share in.

In the words of Evelyn Underhill: "Silence falls. Awful words are said. A bell rings. A miracle is accomplished."

To be sure, most Christians through the ages have believed in the transformation of the bread and wine, however differently they might express the mystery. But the eucharistic prayer itself has not generally been understood only in terms of the consecration of the bread and wine of communion. In the Anglican tradition, for instance, it was only in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer that it began to be described as a 'prayer of consecration'. Such a description focuses upon the effect of the prayer rather than on the character of the prayer itself. Over time that has obscured our appreciation of the kind of prayer it is.

At root the Eucharistic Prayer is a Christian adaptation of a principal genre of Jewish prayer, namely the berakah which is commonly translated as 'thanksgiving prayer' or, using its Greek form, 'eucharistic prayer'. The berakah was not, however, a prayer expressing gratitude in the way we commonly understand; it was not merely saying 'thank you'. Rather it was a proclamation of God's great deeds on behalf of his people. As a prayer its basic form was twofold: first, a blessing of God (Blessed are you, Lord God...); then a recounting of the specific acts for which God was being blessed. This was the 'common thread' in Jewish spirituality in Jesus' time. Therefore it is little wonder that Jesus' own prayer should be cast in terms so typical of Jewish thanksgiving prayer. Take, for instance, that moment of his spontaneous prayer (one of the few recorded instances) after the return of the seventy disciples: 'In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father such was thy gracious will"' (Luke 10 v 21). Here, Jesus' own prayer to the Father exhibits the essential features of thanksgiving or eucharistic prayer. He begins by thanking God and then he recounts the deeds of God for which praise is offered. For Jesus, as for every other Jew, the berakah or blessing-thanksgiving was the pre-eminent response to God arising out of the acknowledgement of God's actions on behalf of his people.

As Jesus prayed, so did the first Christians. Their thanksgiving prayer involved praising God the Father for what he had done 'for us and for our salvation' in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. In a significant passage in Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, where he speaks of faith and its consequences in the lives of believers, he reveals how central to Christian prayer such thanksgiving is:

'Since we have the same spirit of faith as he had who wrote, 'I believed, and so I spoke,' we too believe, and so we speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God'. (2 Cor Ch 4 v 13 – 15).

This is but one expression of a theme which fills Paul's letters: the privilege of thanksgiving made possible through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul's message to his readers, both Jewish and Gentile, is that thanksgiving of the kind described above is the very hallmark of resurrection life. It is with thanksgiving above all that the church as the body of Christ is to 'overflow':

'whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him' (Colossians Ch 3 v 17).

All of this helps us to see thanksgiving to God as the very culmination of Christian prayer as rooted in the Jewish and early Christian berakah. Such thanksgiving is not therefore merely one sort of prayer, as some traditional understandings of prayer have suggested. It is rather the chief expression of prayerful response to God; thus the eucharistic prayer is the prayer of Christian worship.

In keeping with that, our modern eucharistic prayers seek to express a comprehensive view of the basis for Christian thanksgiving, as opposed to Cranmer's Prayer Book Eucharistic prayer, which focusses more narrowly on the atoning sacrifice of Christ on Calvary.

Thus within the varied menu of eucharistic prayers offered through Common Worship, thanksgiving is offered for creation itself, for God's faithfulness throughout salvation history, and even for our future hope as inheritors of God's Kingdom to come.

Consider these examples:

From the beginning you have created all things
And all your works echo the silent music of your praise.
In the fullness of time you made us in your image,
The crown of all creation. (*Prayer G*)

You fashioned us in your image
And placed us in the garden of your delight.
Though we chose the path of rebellion
You would not abandon your own.
Again and again you drew us into your covenant of grace.
You gave your people the law and taught us by your prophets
To look for your reign of justice, mercy and peace.
As we watch for the signs of your kingdom on earth,
We echo the song of the angels in heaven,
Evermore praising you and saying: (*Prayer F*)

The principle behind this rich palate of prayer offerings, drawing on both Eastern and Western traditions, is of major importance; namely that although Christian thanksgiving reaches its height in remembering before God the deeds he has done in Jesus Christ, Christians see those acts at the centre of a wider tapestry of God's involvement with the world. That involvement begins with creation and continues ceaselessly until, as the Orthodox liturgy puts it, 'God has

endowed us with his heavenly Kingdom'. All of that long history is, for the Christian, seen in its true perspective in the light of Jesus' resurrection. In that light the paschal pattern of life, by which we enter into that history becomes discernible.

For that reason, the motive for thanksgiving is never a merely impersonal one. However much the causes of praise may have to do with God's dealings with his people as a whole, the prime locus for such praise is the personal relationship between the one who praises and the God who is praised. Even in the Jewish experience of thanksgiving to God for the liberation of Israel from slavery in Egypt, the motive for thanksgiving is personalised or interiorized. Indeed the exodus came to be understood as the centre and pattern of the history of the whole people because it was, at the same time, the basis of the personal history of each and every man and woman. Parts of the Jewish Passover ritual, celebrated in the home, witness to this personal identification with the act or acts for which God is blessed:

In every generation (*says the head of the household*) let each (person) look on himself as if he came forth from Egypt...It was not only our (ancestors) that the Holy One, blessed be he, redeemed, but us as well did he redeem along with them...Therefore, we are bound to thank, praise, laud, glorify, exalt and adore him who performed all these miracles for our (ancestors) and for us. He brought us forth from slavery to freedom, from darkness to joy, from mourning to holiday, from darkness to light, and from bondage to redemption.

For the Christian too the 'voice of Eucharist' is not just a formal expression of prayer uttered by the priest on behalf of the gathered body of Christ. It is not an impersonal prayer. How could that be appropriate?

For the whole intention of the Good News is that each of us who believe must so dedicate ourselves to God that we become a place where the wonderful deeds of God are brought to pass in conformity with Christ.

"God wills always and everywhere to work the mystery of his Incarnation", St Maximus the Confessor once affirmed, pointing to the bond which links the life of each believer to that of Christ and to the whole people of God.

What is called for then at the great thanksgiving prayer is the integration of personal and collective thanksgiving. The collective thanksgiving is expressed as the president images Christ by speaking to the father in thanksgiving and love on behalf of his body and bride, the church, gathered all around.

But what of our own personal eucharistic prayers, offered as the climax of our personal response to God's Word, as spoken through the Liturgy? As far as we know, the eucharistic prayer has never included a time of silence for such prayers. So how might our private prayer be integrated into the collective prayer of the great thanksgiving ?

One approach lies within ourselves, namely the adoption of a thanksgiving orientated spirituality. Such a spirituality, rooted in St Paul's vision of Christian life as perpetual thanksgiving, needs to become for us the spiritual disposition in which the great thanksgiving is heard and prayed. The eucharistic prayer then becomes the centre-piece of a wider chorus of thanksgiving to which every member of the congregation contributes.

The spirituality of eucharistic praying thus involves an ever deepening sensitivity to the way in which God is at work in our lives. The eucharist offers us the opportunity to make a response of sheer praise for the ways in which we discern God's loving and glorious presence. Whereas previously in the Liturgy of the Eucharist there have been opportunities for prayerful silence and reflection, now the spiritual tone is very different and it is set by the invitation to 'lift up your hearts' and 'give thanks to the Lord our God'.

What the 17th century Anglican preacher Mark Frank said of worship generally is especially appropriate for our personal response of thanksgiving;

"Our souls magnify the Lord, our spirits rejoice in God our Saviour; our memories recollect and call to mind his benefits and what he has done for us; our hearts evaporate into holy flames and ardent affections and desires after him as their only hope and joy".

Frank was here reiterating an insight of St Paul: joy and thanksgiving converge in an inseparable union (1 Thess ch 5 v 16f).

Coming then, to offer our response of praise and thanksgiving to God as part of the great thanksgiving of the whole church, we concelebrate with the president of the Eucharist. Indeed it is part of the royal priesthood of Christ shared with every believer through his or her baptism, that a personal sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving is offered together with the church's great thanksgiving. As noted by one of the early church fathers, Isadore of Pelusium, "Each person has been ordained priest of his own person, to make his body a temple and his heart a pure altar". Our eucharistic praying is an expression of that personal priesthood.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. (1 Peter 2 v 9)

That is our calling. And as for our disposition, let St Paul have the last word...

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God (Colossians 3 v 15 -17).

+Clive Wulfrun