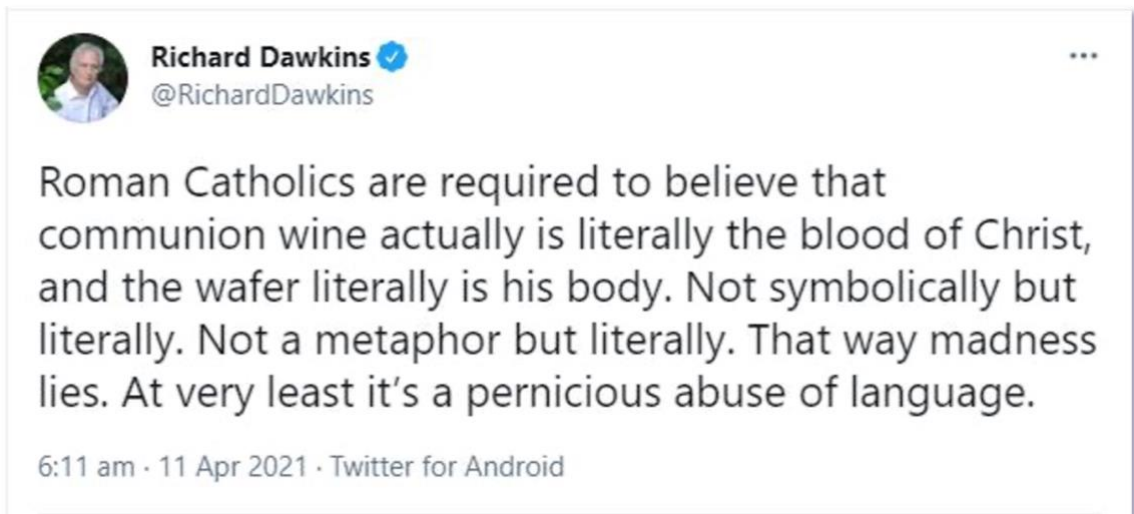


Bread of Life: Bishops' teaching series

5 - Presence – Bishop Matthew Parker



This trenchant comment comes not from the writings of John Knox or Martin Luther but from that well known Protestant theologian, Professor Richard Dawkins in a tweet on 11th April this year. He is not persuaded by Aquinas' distinction between substance and accidents and sides firmly with Ulrich Zwingli on the matter of the nature of the 'real presence' of Christ in the bread and wine. It is somehow reassuring to know that, in some quarters at least, the battles over the precise nature of Christ's presence in the sacrament are still being waged with gusto. Which is not to say that Christians (or indeed Anglican Christians) have now come to a settled view nor that this issue is not of great importance but that we no longer quite feel the need to burn one another at the stake over the matter as once we did.

In this talk I am going to think about how, in the Eucharist, God in Christ is present to us by the power of the Holy Spirit. I would like to draw the lens back first to look at how, in Scripture, the presence of God is experienced by God's people. We will then narrow the focus down to consider how God is present when we receive the gifts of bread and wine in Holy Communion before finally drawing the lens back out again to consider the range of ways in which we experience the divine presence in the whole Eucharistic celebration.

Scripture and the Presence of God

We might begin first by noting that there is no place in which God is not present. What is styled in classical theological terms as God's omnipresence, is expressed more poetically and personally in the Jewish Scriptures. So, in Psalm 139:

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

In this sense, we can never find ourselves out of God's presence. Even if we do not feel it, nonetheless God is there because there is nowhere where God is not.

Because of this we will find God is actively at work and present to us in structures and processes of creation. God's hand is to be seen in the wonder of the natural world and, again, we might turn to the Psalms:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. (Ps19.1)

We find God's presence written into the book of creation. The "world is charged with the grandeur of God".

God's power and nature is evident in the structures of the world, but it is also the case that God's presence is clearly expressed by very particular encounters at specific times, and in specific places and people. So, for example, Jacob wrestles with God at the Jabbok (Gen 32.22) and has a vision of God's glory at Bethel (Gen 28.16). Moses meets God in a burning bush (Ex 3.5), is fed by manna in the wilderness (Ex 16) and led through that wilderness by a pillar of cloud and fire (Ex 33).

In the same way the Ark of the Covenant is a sign of God's presence in the midst of the people (Ex 25) as is, later, the Temple in Jerusalem. God is not trapped or encompassed by these places but here the presence of God is felt particularly powerfully, we might say almost *sacramentally*, especially when the people gather to worship.

These are also locations where God is present in the Law, the Torah, which governs the life of Israel and makes known the character of God. God addresses the people as their Lord and the people offer their praise and thanksgiving in response. "Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!" (Ps 95.2).

God is present *to* the people but is also present *in* the people. This is not true simply of those who are identified as especially holy, though such people stand out in the story of God's dealings with Israel as they do in the Christian story. The prophets look to the day when God's Torah is written in the heart of all. God promises Jeremiah: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer 31.33). God will be present in each person and in the community. God in *me* and God in *us*.

So God is present in the infinite spaces of the universe and the subatomic particle; God is present in the order of the natural world; God is encountered miraculously in particular places and moments; God's presence is experienced when worship is offered by God's people and God is present, both individually and corporately, in the receptive hearts of those who believe.

And when we speak of God being *present* in these various ways, we do not mean simply that God is in "evidence" but that God's presence brings grace, love and joy as gifts.

It is the same God we meet in the New Testament, but this is a collection of writings generated by the church's experience of encountering Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, so, unsurprisingly, there is a Christological reframing of the how God is understood to be present in the world. In the great Christological hymns of Colossians and Ephesians,

[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible...
(Col 1.15-16)

But Jesus is encountered not only as the 'cosmic Christ' who is 'all in all' inhabiting the structures of creation but as the Word made flesh, Emmanuel, God with us. He is the incarnate Christ made present to human beings in a particular moment and place in history. He is the new temple, the location of God's presence in the world. In Jesus, God's person and nature is to be encountered in all its fullness but also in the particularity of *this* life, in the detail of a human being who walks in Galilee and the hills of Judea proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour.

At the heart of this ministry are the meals that Jesus shared with friends and enemies, with "tax collectors and sinners", censorious religious leaders, crowds of thousands and, on the night before he died, with his disciples in an upper room where bread was taken, blessed, broken and distributed and wine was in the same way poured out and shared. The command was given that they should continue to do this "in remembrance of me".

The incarnate Christ is also the crucified and risen Christ by which we are set free from the power of sin and death and in whose resurrection, we are given hope of eternal life. After his resurrection from the dead, Jesus continues to share meals with his friends: breakfast by the Sea of Galilee (Jn 21.9), broiled fish in an upper room (Lk 24.42) and, significantly, a meal with two disciples on the road to Emmaus in which the risen Christ was made known "in the breaking of the bread" (Lk 24,28-35).

St Paul's epistles and The Book of Acts we see that the sharing of a fellowship meal become a distinguishing feature of the early Christian community as a sign both of their love for one another and for the Lord they worshipped and continued to encounter "in the breaking of the bread". From such meals grew what we call, amongst other things, the Eucharist - when Christians gather in the presence of the Father to worship and give thanks through the Son in the power of the Spirit, the primary focus of which is the act of sharing in bread and wine that has been taken, blessed, broken/poured and shared. The theology and practice surrounding this act of worship has, through the years, been contested and varied but, however it has been observed, Christians have done so in the belief that when bread is broken and wine outpoured

then Christ is present there amongst us and that by it we experience the gifts of grace, love and joy.

The Bread and Wine and the Presence of Christ.

It is now time then to “zoom in” to this liturgical action that sits at the very heart of Christian worship and yet has been the cause of much division, as we have argued (and sometimes fought) over the exact nature of in what way the Christ is present in this sacrament.

Ever since I was ordained, I have been haunted by the moustachioed figure of Matthew Parker, Elizabethan Archbishop of Canterbury appointed following the turbulent reign of Queen Mary. Historian Owen Chadwick is somewhat dismissive of my namesake, “He was ...more persevering than able, in the eyes of the government he possessed the supreme merit of being a moderate man who would conciliate” (Chadwick, Owen, *The Reformation* p132). It is true that he aspired perhaps rather too eagerly to the classical virtue of “golden mediocrity”, but it is a subsidiary thesis of this talk to claim that Parker set the course for the Anglican love for the *via media* and not least in the matter of the Holy Communion.

The Thirty Nine Articles of Religion, one of “historic formularies” of the Church of England, were before the Canterbury Convocation under Archbishop Parker revised them, 42 in number. They were largely the creation of Thomas Cranmer. (It is a shame we didn’t retain the *number 42*, which we all know is the meaning of life, the universe and everything.) Some Articles were dropped, some were edited and a few were added. Broadly Calvinist in theology, the Articles were revised by Archbishop Parker to make them rather more inclusive, especially of the Lutherans, Lutheran princes being allies of the new Queen.

This is evident in Article 28 *Of the Lord’s Supper*. The doctrine of transubstantiation - by which the elements of bread and wine, whilst retaining their appearance, nonetheless are changed into the actual body and blood of Christ - is still roundly condemned on four grounds:

1. That is not found in the Bible
2. That is actually “repugnant” to scripture.
3. That it undermines the very nature of a sacrament
4. That it generates superstition.

But there is a significant revision to Cranmer’s original Article. This paragraph was dropped:

...Because (as Holy Scripture does teach) Christ was taken up into heaven, and there shall continue unto the end of the world, a faithful man ought not, either to believe or openly to confess *the real and bodily presence* (as they term it) of Christ’s flesh and blood in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.. (*my italics*)

This omission was a concession to the Lutherans, but it brings us directly to our theme. Cranmer’s original Article explicitly repudiates any notion of a “real and bodily presence” of

Christ in the bread and wine. Parker, the conciliator, by his revision, opens the door at least to entertaining some notion of "real presence".

But before we run away with the idea that this allows anything close to transubstantiation (or indeed, consubstantiation) we need to read the opening paragraph of Article 28:

THE Supper of the Lord is not only a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves one to another; but rather is a Sacrament of our Redemption by Christ's death: insomuch that to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith, receive the same, the Bread which we break is a partaking of the Body of Christ; and likewise the Cup of Blessing is a partaking of the Blood of Christ.

The Lord's Supper is a sacrament, and the elements are not merely "badges and tokens" (Article 15) but means by which the believer "partakes" of the Body and Blood of Christ and receives thereby the grace and blessing of God.

But how is Christ present in the sacrament? Not, the reformers proposed, in the physical elements themselves but at the moment of faithful reception by the believer.

This so called "receptionism", is taken up in the theology of Richard Hooker. To partake in Holy Communion is not simply an *aide-mémoire* but "a true and real participation of Christ, who thereby imparteth himself" but, says Hooker, the "real presence of Christ's most blessed body and blood is not therefore to be sought for in the sacrament but in the worthy receiver of the sacrament" (Hooker, Richard, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, V lxvii). The bread and wine are not like a medicine that will make you well whatever your frame of mind or moral condition at the point of receiving it. The efficacy of the sacrament, the imparting of grace, love and joy, depends on the faith (or lack of it) of the person who is receiving the gifts.

This understanding of the Eucharist was the one largely held by the Church of England for centuries, neither Zurich nor Rome. Latterly, there were, of course, challenges to this consensus from the Oxford movement and ecumenical dialogue has sought greater alignment with other Christian traditions. I, of course, hold Parker's and Hooker's view to be sound and not only out of loyalty to the legacy of my namesake. Christ *is* present in the Eucharistic "action" and this presence cannot be abstracted from the actual bread and wine we take, but it becomes "to us the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ" at the point that we receive it so in faith.

However, I recognise that some latitude of interpretation is given both in the *Articles of Religion* (as revised) and in *The Book of Common Prayer*. Richard Hooker was always ready to concede that all these fine distinctions, "these endless mazes" and "intricate disputes" were not for everyone (and you may be feeling the same) and should not stop us either actually coming to Holy Communion or remembering that in the end it is a "holy mystery" and any "explanation" will fail to comprehend the nature of that mystery. Such a concession

along with a willingness to allow (or, at least, not to forbid) a range of understandings has been the hallmark of the Anglican *via media*.

Community, Worship and the Trinity

Which means it's time to pull the lens out again and take a somewhat wider view. In true Anglican fashion, I would like to suggest we need to "rebalance" our understanding of how God is present to us in the Eucharist in three ways:

1. God is present not only to the individual but in the experience and life of the *community*;
2. God is present not just at the moment of reception (or consecration) but *throughout the Eucharist celebration*;
3. God is present to us as *the Holy Trinity*.

The narrow focus historically over exactly how Christ is present in the bread and wine has distorted our understanding, and perhaps our experience, of God's presence in the Eucharistic celebration. This was probably inevitable. The bread and wine are tangible objects; the taking, blessing, breaking and sharing are the climax of the action. Because we receive the sacrament as individuals there will be an emphasis on the character of the personal encounter. And because we partake of the body and blood of *Christ*, the Christological focus will predominate. Nonetheless, our survey of the Scriptures at the beginning of this talk, showing the diverse ways in which God is present in the world and in the church, alerts us to a richer understanding of how God is present in the Eucharist.

A) God is present not only to the individual but in the experience and life of the community

It's there in our Reformation history as Anglicans. The Eucharist is not merely an act of personal piety but an expression of the fact that we are "very members incorporate in the mystical body" of Christ which is "the blessed company of all faithful people". The Reformers for this reason forbade so-called "private" communion and instead, in the *Prayer of St Chrysostom*, recalled the promise of Matthew 18.20: "Almighty God ... you have promised through your well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together in his Name you will be in the midst of them".

We will experience the presence of God through the *koinonia*, fellowship, of the Body of Christ gathered in expectation of an encounter with God. Just as the Spirit came upon the individual believers on the first Pentecost when they were "all together in one place" (Acts 2.1) so Christ is present in the heart of each believer *and* "in the midst", of the community of the faithful when assembled to worship together. We are not atomised individuals, but we partake *of* the Body of Christ *as* the Body of Christ, gathered in God's presence. God in me, God in us.

B) God is present not just at the moment of reception (or consecration) but throughout the Eucharist celebration;

This alerts us to fact that when we gather to give thanks we might expect to meet with the Lord in a variety of ways. In Order One of the Common Worship service of Holy Communion, we are reminded that the first part of the Eucharist is called "the Gathering." When we come together in this way, we experience, in our midst, the God who is always present. We "come into his presence with thanksgiving".

But this is not the only way we encounter the presence of God. The Lord is also present when we confess our sins and in the assurance of sins forgiven. The Lord is present when the Scriptures are read and Word of God is faithfully preached – in the written word we encounter the Living Word. The prayers of the faithful presuppose that God is present and ready to hear our prayers and at the peace we recognise that it is the "peace of the Lord" that we share.

The modern rites are also insistent that we should see the whole of the Eucharistic prayer as one single prayer and consecratory and not just at the narrative of institution (*contra The Book of Common Prayer*). "The Lord is here", says the President, "His Spirit is with us" the people respond. Our praise and thanksgiving are offered "in the presence of your divine majesty" (Order One, Prayer A) or we rejoice that we are "worthy to stand in your presence and serve you." (Order One, Prayer B)

In thanksgiving and praise, in hearing and responding to the Word, in the gathered community, through the experience of being blessed and forgiven and in prayers offered and heard, we encounter the presence of the Lord. None of this detracts from, or "flattens out", the significance of that moment when we take bread and wine but rather enriches and helps us understand that moment more fully.

C) God is present to us as the Holy Trinity.

In Order One of Common Worship, the President may begin the service with the formula: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son and the Holy Spirit". It's an important reminder that this Eucharist is celebrated in the presence of God, the Holy Trinity.

Such an awareness is not absent from *The Book of Common Prayer* but mention of the work of the Holy Spirit, is, for example, famously very sparse in the liturgy. But all Christian worship, the Eucharist is offered to the Father through Jesus and in the power of the Spirit. Our experience of the presence of God in the Eucharist is Trinitarian, something that the controversies over the way in which the bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ have somewhat obscured.

The Prayers of Thanksgiving are addressed to the Father. The "holy gifts" of bread and wine are gifts of the Creator and we pray that, in the act of taking bread and wine we will be gathered by the power of the Spirit into the Kingdom of the Father (Order One, Prayer B).

Likewise, it is by the Spirit's power that "by these gifts we may feed on Christ with opened eyes and hearts on fire" (Order One, Prayer D). The Spirit enables the believer and the community, in Richard Hooker's terms, to be worthy receivers of the sacrament.

It is God the Holy Trinity who is present to us in Eucharist filling our praise, guiding our thoughts as we listen to the word and as we pray and as we gather as God's people to receive the sacraments. It is God the Holy Trinity who brings gifts of grace, love and glory when we assemble as the Lord's people, at the table of the Lord, in the presence of the Lord.