

Trinity VII

I take as my text from St. Mark's Gospel:

....and he took the seven loaves, and gave thanks, and brake, and gave to his disciples to set before them; and they did set them before the people. And they had a few small fishes: and he blessed, and commanded to set them also before them.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

Last week, the passage from St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, opened the way for a discussion of Baptism, the first of the two Sacraments instituted by our Lord as being necessary to salvation according to the Doctrine of the Church.

It is not just that Baptism makes us a Christian by signing us with the mark of the Cross but it also brings us into a sacramental relationship with God, indeed, giving us access to all the Christian Sacraments, of which there are seven.

From the Old Covenant, we inherited a sacramental system, transformed from the shedding of blood on an altar as a means of sacrifice to a bloodless sacrifice where we each can offer ourselves to God as a living sacrifice. Our offering to God under the New Covenant is ourselves, our souls and bodies.

That living sacrifice we offer specifically in the Holy Eucharist is a celebration of thanksgiving that joins us at the Altar here on earth with our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in Heaven.

Today's Gospel passage from St. Mark is a perfect opportunity to talk about the Holy Eucharist, the central act of worship of the Anglican

Church, the central act of worship of the Catholic Faith handed down through the ages in Apostolic Succession.

That we, as Anglicans, acknowledge, accept, and proclaim the Apostolic Succession is a confirmation of our Catholic Heritage and has been even more significant over the years since the Protestant Reformation. Although the Church in England was torn and pulled by the Protestant Reformation, it emerged strong and intact, having maintained its Apostolic Succession and embracing a more clearly defined Doctrine of Faith, no less Catholic but purified and reformed of the evils that had crept into the Church during the Dark Ages of history.

Why is this Apostolic Succession so important?

In a few words, it is the tie to Christ through the Apostles that validates our sacramental worship; else our ritual or liturgical worship would be, essentially, an empty shell.

Or perhaps we could liken it to a pond where the water supply is cut off and it becomes stagnant, even dries up over time, without the inflow of fresh water.

Each bishop in Apostolic Succession receives the infusion of the Holy Spirit through his consecration with the “laying on of hands,” thus receiving Christ’s Authority as a shepherd to feed and tend His sheep, an infusion of the Holy Spirit that continually breathes life into the whole Church.

Seemingly at odds with the Roman Catholic Church, yet unaffected by the general Protestant rejection of most of the sacramental aspects of Christianity, Anglicanism has retained the key element of liturgical worship, that unbroken connection of the Celebration of the Holy Eucharist within the Church today with the Institution of this Sacrament by our Lord on the night before He died.

The Lord's Supper that we celebrate is not merely symbolical but efficacious. We do not attempt to define it in philosophical terms but accept it as a Holy Mystery, consistent with the early Church Fathers.

During His ministry, before He celebrated the Last Supper, instituting the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, our Lord, on at least two occasions, gave His disciples a foretaste. We refer to those occasions as the feeding of the multitudes.

In the passage from St. Mark, we heard the account of the feeding of the four thousand by our Lord in Galilee, a miracle that has been interpreted as extending Christ's ministry to the "Gentile," because it takes place on Gentile soil in the region of the Greek city of Decapolis.

Whether the feeding of the four thousand, depicted in St. Mark, is the same story as the feeding of the five thousand, recounted by St. Matthew (as some Biblical scholars have claimed) is inconsequential. The meaning and significance are not affected. Over a three-year ministry our Lord could well have fed many more multitudes than reported in the Gospels.

With the reading from St. Mark, we are presented with an opportune time to take a closer look at the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion.

Foremost, the Holy Eucharist is both a sacrifice and a thanksgiving, often phrased as a "Sacrifice of Thanksgiving."

The word *Eucharist* comes from Greek, meaning "gratitude", thus it has come to mean a "thanksgiving."

When we reflect upon our Lord's ministry and the final offering up of Himself on the Cross, we are reminded that what our Lord did when instituting the Eucharist was sacrificial, done in sacrificial terms, at a sacrificial time for a sacrificial end.

This means that the Eucharist is more than just a memorial; it is a solemn action in which sacred gifts are offered to God; and those sacred gifts are not just bread and wine, but each of us, for we offer "ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice..."

But, are we really worthy to make such an offering to God?

Not hardly. However, understanding and accepting his Grace and Love freely given, we acknowledge our unworthiness and beseech God to accept our "bounden duty and service."

So, in the Eucharist, we make an offering of bread and wine; but, more than that, we make an offering of ourselves in a self-oblation. *That* is our "living sacrifice": ourselves, our souls and bodies.

We place ourselves at the foot of the Altar like as in the days of the Old Covenant when the sacrifice was offered on the altar; and we call upon God to send down His Holy Spirit to fulfill the sacrifice, in similar fashion to the burning of the sacrifice in the Temple, which being consumed by fire signifies God's acceptance.

Through the operation of the Holy Spirit, in one of the great mysteries, the bread and wine become the BODY and BLOOD of Christ, which we consume as we feast on the sacrifice, completing the sacrificial rite in a manner, again, similar to that of the Old Testament.

What we do in the Eucharist is but an earthly representation of what Christ does in heaven where, in an heavenly oblation, He offers a perpetual intercession for us in Heaven, not a mere praying for us, but a full exercise of His Priesthood as mediator, which has been consecrated once and for all by His death on the Cross, a sacrifice that lives on.

By this, we mean that Christ appears before God for us in Heaven and, through the Eucharist, we are joined to Him. It is Christ Who is the Offerer in both cases, in Heaven and on earth.

The Eucharist is the earthly counterpart of the heavenly oblation and though the priest stands at the Altar and makes the motions, it is Christ who is offering, acting through the priest.

As you can see, from the Catholic view, as is our heritage from the Anglican Church, the Eucharist is not just a sometime memorial. It is a corporate act wherein we feed upon the Body and Blood of Christ in communing with God. We are in communion with Him. The elements, which are the offering of the fruits of the earth, as well as ourselves, are accepted and acted upon by the Holy Spirit.

We feast upon the Body and Blood of Christ, not asking how the bread and wine are transformed, but accepting it as one of the Holy Mysteries, because Jesus Christ said so. To say it is other is to dispute our Lord and Saviour.

In His words of Institution when He took bread, gave thanks and brake it, He said "This is My BODY." Likewise, when He took the cup and gave thanks, He again said, "This is My BLOOD." Finally, the Eucharist is a thanksgiving to God for all the benefits that He bestows upon us, both natural and spiritual. The name Eucharist was given to the "Breaking of Bread" during the time of the Apostles to signify this aspect of thanksgiving.

We are indeed thankful that God feeds us with the spiritual food of the blessed Body and Blood of His Son Jesus Christ, and that through the Bread of Heaven, we are incorporated into the Mystical Body of His Son, "which is the blessed company of all faithful people..."

As St. Paul states in his first Epistle to the Corinthians, "We, who are many, are one bread, one body: for we all partake of the one bread."

And, as St. John recounted the words of our Lord in his Gospel:

"I am the bread of life...if any man eat of this bread he shall live forever: yea, and the bread which I will give is My flesh, for the life of the world. He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood hath eternal life..."

The Holy Eucharist is the central corporate act of worship in the Church, instituted by Jesus Christ Himself and passed down to us in the Apostolic tradition of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

It is truly a corporate act, for each time the Eucharist is celebrated, we join together with the Angels, Archangels, with all the company of heaven, and with the whole Church, the Body of Christ, in offering this sacrifice of thanksgiving, and in receiving the Bread of Heaven.

It is a sacrifice of love, too; lovingly offered and lovingly received.

In accepting the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the consecrated bread and wine, we accept this Holy Mystery and God's invitation to His Holy Table, where we are fed not with just crumbs that fall from the table but with the Bread of Eternal Life.