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BEING
CHRISTIAN
BAPTISM, BIBLE, EUCHARIST, PRAYER

"Elegant and lucid."

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Eucharist

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking: if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. (Revelation 3.20)

For Christians, to share in the Eucharist, the Holy Communion, means to live as people who know that they are always *guests* – that they have been welcomed and that they are wanted. It is, perhaps, the most simple thing that we can say about Holy Communion, yet it is still supremely worth saying. In Holy Communion, Jesus Christ tells us that he wants our company.

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The word of welcome

When reading the Gospels you sometimes get the impression that if anywhere in ancient Galilee you heard a loud noise and a lot of laughter and talking and singing, you could be reasonably sure that Jesus of Nazareth was around somewhere nearby. Jesus created

fellowship wherever he was. And it is one of the things in the Gospels that is remembered as most distinctive about him, because even then some of his friends were embarrassed by it. The indiscriminate generosity and the willingness to mix with unsuitable people were already, in the first Christian generation, just difficult enough for the Gospel writers to scratch their heads and cough just a little bit about it. But they could not deny it or suppress it. It was too vividly remembered. Jesus sought out company, and the effect of his presence was to create a celebration, to bind people together.

There are many stories about Jesus and hospitality in the Gospels, but there is one in particular that tell us something very crucial about the Eucharist. It is the story in Luke 19 of Jesus' arrival in Jericho and his meeting with Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus the tax collector is worried that he will be unable to see over the heads in the crowd, so he climbs a tree, hoping that nobody will notice. Jesus stops underneath the tree and looks up. You can imagine several thousand pairs of eyes looking up at the same moment towards a scarlet-faced tax collector perched on a branch – and the collective intake of breath when Jesus says to him, 'Aren't you going to ask me to your home?'

In other words Jesus is not only someone who *exercises* hospitality; he *draws out* hospitality from others. By his welcome he makes other people capable of welcoming.

And that wonderful alternation in the Gospels between Jesus giving hospitality and receiving hospitality shows us something absolutely essential about the Eucharist. We are the guests of Jesus. We are there because he asks us, and because he wants our company. At the same time we are set free to invite Jesus into our

*His welcome gives
lives and literally to receive him
into our bodies in the Eucharist.
His welcome gives us the courage
open up to him*

to open up to him. And so the flow of giving and receiving, of welcome and acceptance, moves backwards and forwards without a break. We are welcomed and we welcome; we welcome God and we welcome our unexpected neighbours. That, surely, is one of the wonderful and unique things about the Holy Eucharist. We invoke Jesus and his Spirit, we call him to be present – and we are able to do this only because he has first called us to be present. His way of welcoming Zacchaeus, and his way of welcoming us, is to say, 'Aren't you going to ask me to your home?'

This giving and receiving of welcome is central to the way in which Jesus' ministry is portrayed in the Gospels. But it is not just an agreeable personal habit that Jesus has, and it is not a decorative addition to the main business of his ministry, a sort of pleasant extra. It is the actual, visible way in which he engages in remaking a

community. Who are the real people of God now? The ones who accept Jesus' invitation. Not the ones who fulfil all the cultic demands, not the ones who score highly on the scale of piety, but the ones who are willing to hear him say, 'Aren't you going to ask me home?' It is as simple as that. The meals that Jesus shares in his ministry are the way in which he begins to re-create a community, to lay the foundations for rethinking what the words 'the people of God' mean.

Now, one of the great themes of the resurrection stories in the Gospels is that this starts all over again on the far side of Jesus' death on the cross. One of the essential truths about the resurrection is that Jesus is still doing what he did before; and part of what he is still doing is exactly this offering and accepting of hospitality. When, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus comes through the locked doors to the disciples, the first thing he says after telling them not to be afraid is, 'Aren't you going to give me something to eat?' The disciples, like Zacchaeus, are so stunned by the presence of the Saviour that for a moment they forget the ordinary courtesies and have to be reminded. And just as Zacchaeus scrambles down from the tree and tries to find adequate words for an invitation, so one imagines on Easter Day the disciples hastily and apologetically rummage around in the cupboards until they have found a probably slightly elderly piece of fish.

'Aren't you going to give me something to eat?' It is the same tone of voice as that used with the tax collector, the same miraculous welcome. The resurrected Jesus is doing what he always did. And that is why it is very significant that in the Acts of the Apostles, when the risen Christ is proclaimed, the apostles identify themselves as the witnesses who 'ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead' (Acts 10.41).

We can see, then, that when the risen Christ eats with the disciples it is not just a way of proving he is 'really' there; it is a way of saying that what Jesus did in creating a new community during his earthly life, he is doing now with the apostles in his *risen* life. We who are brought into the company of the apostles in our baptism - which, remember, brings us to where Jesus is to be found - share that 'apostolic' moment when we gather to eat and drink in Jesus' presence. And that is why, throughout the centuries since, Christians have been able to say exactly what the apostles say: they are the people with whom Jesus ate and drank after he was raised from the dead.

Holy Communion makes no sense at all if you do not believe in the resurrection. Without the resurrection, the Eucharist becomes simply a memorial meal, recalling a rather sad and overpowering

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occasion in the upper room. Allegedly, Queen Victoria did not like going to Holy Communion on Easter Sunday, because, she said, she could not understand why you had to interrupt a joyful day with such a sad service. There is indeed a certain sombreness about some ways of celebrating the Eucharist (and a bit later on, I'll suggest why that is not always inappropriate). But the starting point must be where the apostles themselves began, eating and drinking with him after he was raised from the dead, experiencing once again his call into a new level of life together, a new fellowship and solidarity, and a new willingness and capacity to be welcomers themselves.

Celebrating the Eucharist not only reminds us that we are invited to be guests; it also reminds us that we are given the freedom to invite others to be guests as well. We have experienced the hospitality of God in Christ; our lives are therefore set free to be hospitable. You remember that, when we were thinking about baptism, we saw how Christian life brings us into the neighbourhood of human need and human suffering. Thinking now about the Eucharist, we can fill that out a little bit further. Being in the neighbourhood of Jesus is sharing Jesus' freedom to *invite* – to make our lives and our communities places of welcome for those most deeply in need of solidarity, of fellowship. As sharers in the Eucharist, we become involved in Jesus' own continuing work of

bridging the gulfs between people, drawing them into shared life, in the light and the strength of his great central task of bridging the gulf between God and humanity created by our selfish, forgetful and fearful habits.

God the Giver

But what about the original event on which the Eucharist is based? The Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus was sharing a meal for the last time with his friends, and commanded them, 'Do this in remembrance of me' (Luke 22.19). As Jesus meets with his friends for that last supper and tells them to see the broken bread and wine poured out as his body and blood which are about to be broken and poured out in crucifixion, he says in effect, 'What is going to happen to me, the suffering and death I'm about to endure, the tearing of my flesh and the shedding of my blood, is to be the final, the definitive, sign of God's welcome and God's mercy.' Instead of being the ultimate tragedy and disaster, it is an open door into the welcome of the Father. That is what he is saying in the upper room on Maundy Thursday, and that is what he says every time we celebrate the Eucharist in commemoration of his death; in affirmation of his resurrection; in expectation of his coming again. If we look back to the 'Last Supper' as

simply a sombre, shadowed occasion, we forget what it is that Jesus actually says and does, pointing us forward into the mystery of both the cross and the resurrection.

A great twentieth-century Roman Catholic writer, the Jesuit Maurice de la Taille, once said that at the Last Supper, Jesus 'makes himself a sign': he declares that the bread and wine, identified with his body and blood, are a sign of the world-changing events of Good Friday and Easter, and so a sign of the future, of God's future and God's promise. By identifying himself with the broken bread and the spilled wine, the broken flesh and the shed blood, Jesus says that this death which is approaching is a door into hope. And it is at that moment, when he is looking forward most clearly and vividly to his death, even before the Garden of Gethsemane casts its shadow, that Jesus *gives thanks*. That is, he connects his experience with the reality of God, because that is what thanksgiving does. When we say thank you to God we connect our own experience with God as Giver. We say that what has happened to us is somehow rooted in the gift of God. And when Jesus gives thanks at that moment before the breaking and spilling, before the wounds and the blood, it is as if he is connecting the darkest places of human experience with God the Giver; as if he is saying that even in these dark places God continues to give, and therefore we must continue to give thanks. And that is why the

Greek word *eucharistia*, 'thanksgiving', took root and became the earliest and most widespread name for what Christians do when they meet for Holy Communion: they meet to give thanks, even in the heart of the darkest experience.

So as we give thanks over bread and wine in the presence of the Lord we are – with him and in him – seeking to make that connection between the world and God, between human experience and the divine and eternal Giver. And that means that we begin to look differently at the world around us. If in every corner of experience God the Giver is still at work, then in every object we see and handle, in every situation we encounter, God the Giver is present and our reaction is shaped by this. That is why to take seriously what is going on in the Holy Eucharist is to take seriously the whole material order of the world. It is to see everything in some sense *sacramentally*. If Jesus gives thanks over bread and wine on the eve of his death, if Jesus makes that connection between the furthest place away from God, which is suffering and death, and the giving and outpouring of his Father, and if in his person he fuses those things together, then wherever we are some connection between us and God is possible. All places, all people, all things have about them an unexpected sacramental depth. They open on to God the Giver.

And that is why many Christians have found that in reflecting on the Eucharist they begin to see what a Christian attitude to the environment might be. Do we live in the world as if God the Giver were within and behind and in the depths of every moment and every material thing? Well, no, for most of the time we do not. We live on the surface, we see what suits us and serves our goals – as if, instead of having their own depth and integrity, things are there just for us to exploit and abuse. Reverence for the bread and the wine of the Eucharist is the beginning of reverence for the whole world in which the giving of God's glory is pulsating beneath the surface of every moment.

That is also why, although this sometimes has been a controversial element in Christian history, reverence for the bread and the wine has instinctively been felt to be a good thing, something appropriate to Christians. It is why the Book of Common Prayer tells you that you need to consume reverently at the end of Holy Communion what is left over. Here is something of the world that has been identified as carrying the power and love of God to you. Don't just throw it away. Make what you will of this tradition of reverence for the consecrated things; but it does at least suggest that to take seriously the material

food of the bread and wine can be the beginning of a proper and grateful reverence before *all* God's material things – a doorway into seeing all things as demanding reverent attention, even contemplation.

Holy Communion changes the way we see things as well as people. It changes how we see the world and, as I have already hinted, it changes how we see one another (as we learn to see our neighbour as God's guest). It reinforces and sustains the hospitality that believers want to show to those in need, and it also obliges us to look at other Christians and take seriously the fact that they have been invited too. One of the most transformingly surprising things about Holy Communion is that it obliges you to see the person next to you as *wanted by God*. God wants that person's company as well as mine. How much simpler if God only wanted *my* company and that of those *I* had decided to invite! But God does not play that particular game. And the transforming effect of looking at other Christians as people whose company God wants, is – by the look of things – still sinking in for a lot of Christians, and taking rather a long time ...

It does not solve all our problems and disputes. It does not give us a master plan for Christian unity. But it surely helps us to see that there is a difference between looking at another Christian and saying, 'There is somebody *trying to persuade* God to love them (and not succeeding)',

and 'There is someone whose company is desired by God.' Holy Communion changes the way we see things. One of the gifts we receive at Holy Communion is that gift of new vision: the gift of seeing things – we have to dare to say it just for a moment – from God's perspective.

Honest repentance

I mentioned earlier that there was an element of the sombre in Holy Communion that we cannot entirely avoid: because one of the things that we see at the Lord's Table is ourselves. We are taken back to a last supper at which Jesus identified his betrayer. And in some of the orders of Holy Communion, like the Book of Common Prayer, the narrative is introduced with the words '... in the night in which he was *betrayed*...' We are there as God's guests, there because God loves to have us there, because Jesus has requested the pleasure of our company. But we are also there as those who have the capacity to betray. 'The hand of the one who betrays me is on the table with me,' says Jesus. And he dips the bread in the sauce and passes it to Judas. He warns all those around the table that in a couple of hours' time they are going to abandon him.

That too is part of what is going on at the Eucharist. The Eucharist reminds us of the need for honest

repentance – of the need to confront our capacity to betray and forget the gift we have been given. And that is why the Eucharist is not, in Christian practice, a reward for good behaviour; it is the food we need to prevent ourselves from starving as a result of our own self-enclosure and self-absorption, our pride and our forgetfulness.

In many of our churches it was once thought that receiving Holy Communion was something you should only do when you felt you had made 'proper' preparation. There was a time in the nineteenth-century Roman Catholic Church when weekly communion was something your confessor might allow you to undertake if he thought you were doing well. And there is still, in many parts of the Christian world, a kind of assumption that Holy Communion is something for 'the holy'. All that I have said so far should remind us that Holy Communion is no kind of reward: it is, like everything about Jesus Christ, a free gift. We take Holy Communion not because we are doing well, but because we are doing badly. Not because we have arrived, but because we are travelling. Not because we are right, but because we are confused and wrong. Not

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because we are divine, but because we are human. Not because we are full, but because we are hungry.

And so that element of self-awareness and repentance is completely bound up with the nature of what we are doing in the Holy Eucharist: the celebration and the sorrow, the Easter and the cross are always there together. And as we come together as Christians, we come not to celebrate ourselves and how well we are doing, but to celebrate the eternal Gift that is always there, and to give the thanks that are drawn out of us by that Gift.

Holy Communion, then, is the way in which the whole of the Gospel story is played out in our midst. You remember that, in thinking about the Bible, we recognized those biblical figures in the remote past as part of our own family. In Holy Communion that becomes something very immediate, something enacted very physically: we are members of the same kindred and, here and now, guests at the same table. We are experiencing Jesus creating community by his welcome, but we are also, with the patriarchs and apostles, those who are liable to forget, betray and run. We are the ones who are called back and invited afresh on the resurrection day to experience yet again the creation of community, even through death and even through betrayal, abandonment and denial. And we are now the ones who, as we receive Holy Communion, are commissioned to renew the face

of the earth. We are those who can see humanity and the whole material world in a fresh way, seeing people and things sacramentally, seeing the depth within them, where the giving of God is always at work.

The transforming Spirit

And so our perspectives open out still further. Holy Communion is not only about our redemption, it is about our creation. It is about an immense and glorious debt that we can never repay: the debt to our creator for our very being. God has called us into being because he wants our company, and redemption would make no sense if it were not the same creative longing for our company that was involved, the creating and transforming Spirit of God calling us once again into life because of that eternal 'desire' for our company – not a divine need that we are summoned into existence to satisfy, but an overflowing divine generosity that seeks to share itself more and more with what is other.

In everything we say about Holy Communion we are talking about the work of the Holy Spirit. In the Gospels the Holy Spirit is the living breath of the God who brings Jesus alive – literally, at the beginning of	<i>In everything we say about Holy Communion we are talking about the work of the Holy Spirit</i>
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his life in Mary's womb, fully alive to his vocation at his baptism, alive out of death after the descent to the realm 'where all things are forgotten', in the words of the psalm. And that Spirit-given life he then communicates to his people.

So it is that in Holy Communion we invoke and celebrate the action of the Spirit. At the central moment, just before we receive the bread and wine, we pray the prayer of Jesus: we say, 'Our Father...' - and that is a great and significant moment, not just a bit of muttered devotion before we start on our way to the altar, but one of the supreme transitions in the drama of the entire service. For when we pray the prayer of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is in us and at work in us. We are affirming that in this act of worship the Holy Spirit is speaking Jesus' words in us, praying 'Abba, Father', as Jesus did and does.

At the same time we recognize and affirm that the transformation that is going on in Holy Communion is the work of the Holy Spirit. We call down the Holy Spirit upon ourselves and upon the gifts of bread and wine: we say, 'Here we are, in the company of Jesus: Father, send the Holy Spirit that as these people share these things, the life of Jesus may fill them all.'

It is not just that we ask the Holy Spirit to effect a miraculous change in the bread and wine. We ask the Holy Spirit to effect a miraculous change in all of us, to

make us capable of receiving these gifts, and as we receive them to go out, 'in the power of the Spirit to live to God's praise and glory'. So the Holy Spirit, who always brings Jesus alive in our midst, is very specially at work in the Eucharist, making it a means of spiritual transformation. Because of this we go from the table to the work of transfiguring the world in God's power: to seeing the world in a new light, to seeing human beings with new eyes, and to working as best we can to bring God's purpose nearer to fruition in the world.

The Church has not always seen the Eucharist in this globally transforming way. But again and again, the great thinkers and poets have seen into that depth and said yes, the Eucharist is somehow a revelation of God's final act and purpose. It is, we might say, the beginning of the end of the world. That is quite a lot to carry with us to the Lord's table. But this is where we see the Holy Spirit working, to bring the end of the world closer. Yet that dimension of hope for the end, that dimension of an anticipation of what God will do with all people and all things, that sense that the transformation going on in the Eucharist is just a glimpse of the transformation of all things - all of this is surely one of the things that makes the Eucharist so vital and central in our Christian devotion. It is what makes it so much the appropriate sign of the baptized life, because it is the material sign of a

new creation, a new phase in the world's history that is moving towards God's final purpose with new energy and focus. And it is also what makes it so much the appropriate context for the hearing and reading of the Bible. It is, as some modern Christian thinkers have said, what makes the Church what it really is. For that short

*When we gather
as God's guests
at God's table,
the Church
becomes what it is
meant to be*

Sometimes, after receiving Holy Communion, as I look around a congregation, large or small, I have a sensation I can only sum up as *this is it* – this is the moment when people see one another and the world properly: when they are filled with the Holy Spirit and when they are equipped to go and do God's work. It may last only a few seconds, but there it is. It has happened and it happens again and again. And what is the appropriate response? I have already said: *thanksgiving*. Because one of the ways in which the Eucharist overflows into the rest of our life is precisely in giving us that energy and vision for thanksgiving in all things, for making the connection between God the Giver and everything we experience.

This emphatically doesn't mean that we look at everything and just say, 'Oh, that is just how God wants it to be', and pass on, expecting nothing to change. It certainly does not mean we look at situations of suffering and terror and say, 'That is what God wants.' It is about having the capacity to see into the depth of a situation or person and recognize that somewhere in there is God the Giver; and so there is the possibility of more and more giving on the part of God which will bring something new and transforming. And somehow, as I struggle to change myself, the person I am with, the situation I am experiencing, I find that what I am looking for, what I am opening myself to, is that buried reality: God the Giver, who is never exhausted.

In the Eucharist we are at the *centre* of the world: we are where Christ, the Son, gives his life to his Father in the Spirit. And in the Eucharist we are at the *end* of the world: we are seeing how the world's calling is fulfilled in advance; we are seeing ourselves and our world as they really are, contemplating them in the depths of God, finding their meaning in relation to God. And the job of a Christian is constantly trying to dig down to that level of reality, and to allow gratitude, repentance and transformation to well up from that point. 'With you is the fountain of life', says the psalm; and it is that fountain that we drink from in Holy Communion.

For reflection or discussion

- 1 How do you become more aware of yourself as a guest at the Lord's table? What do you have in common with the other guests?
- 2 In what sense is the Eucharist a service of thanksgiving, and why?
- 3 Why does receiving Holy Communion help you to see the world differently? What difference does that make to the way you live as a Christian?