

Reflections on the Eucharist, prompted by digital services.

Hello, my name is Sue Hammersley and I'm the Vicar of St Mark's Sheffield. I'm sorry that I can't be with you in real-time but thank you for giving me the opportunity to reflect on our experiences of online sacramental services.

At the beginning of 2017 we were confronted, here in the diocese of Sheffield, with the prospect of a Diocesan Bishop who did not acknowledge the priestly ministry of women.

It made me question, as a woman ordained by the Church of England, what I thought I was doing when I presided at the Eucharist. I became aware that there were groups of people who felt that when a woman presided at the eucharist it was not safe to say that this was the sacrament. (This was also the case if the priest was a man who had been ordained by a male bishop who had ordained a woman.)

As a woman and as a priest, the question which seems to trouble some people was whether when I preside at the Eucharist I am offering my congregation the sacrament. When I began to offer Eucharistic services online I found myself asking the same question, albeit for very different reasons.

When we start to explore the theology of the Eucharist it is complicated, to place this in a digital context during a pandemic makes it particularly so.

The Gospels give us a vivid picture of Jesus' table ministry. He sat down and ate with people, especially with people who were usually excluded from the tables of the religious elite.

When our churches were closed in the first lockdown, priests were advised that we too should find ways to work from home, to avoid the risk of cross-infection.

Table fellowship was not allowed.

Communal worship was not allowed.

I was fortunate that members of my team were able to navigate their way around the mysteries of the digital world. The church went into lockdown in the week approaching Mothering Sunday and Cate, then the curate at St Mark's, managed to convert the liturgy she had prepared for that service into a Sway presentation which was made available for members of the congregation to access via the website.

The feedback we received was that this was just what the majority of the congregation needed – a point of connection and stability at a time of extreme uncertainty and change. Over the coming weeks we decided to keep the liturgy the same, and that meant including the Communion.

We used the same words and invited participants to share a "spiritual communion" either by simply letting the words speak to them or by having some bread and wine at this point in the service.

Fairly quickly we discovered Zoom and we saw our congregation grow.

But was this Eucharistic worship? Was there any way in which the dispersed congregation was sharing the sacrament?

In thinking this through I began with the scriptures.

We must remember that what we call the New Testament was all written down at least 50 years after Jesus' death. In other words, when physical table fellowship with Jesus was no longer possible.

Everyone who was encountering what we now know as the Lord's Supper, the Communion, the Eucharist, was experiencing a sense of Jesus' presence "remotely" without being in the same room as him.

Paul writes of the mystical union experienced by believers.

We read in 1 Corinthians 10.16-17,

"For we who are many are one body for we all partake of one bread."

Eating the bread connects people with the times that Jesus shared bread with his disciples but, more than that, eating the bread gives us a physical sense that we are united as the body of Christ – even though we are apart from him we are united in him; even though we are apart from one another we are united by our union with him.

Whilst we often refer to the Last Supper as the Institution of the Eucharist there are many more stories of Jesus' table fellowship, of times when bread is taken, blessed, broken and shared – for example, the feeding of the five thousand which is told in all four of the Gospels.

Edward Schillebeeckx wrote in 1979 about what the Feeding of the 5000 teaches us about the eucharist, “the focal point of the story,” he says, “is not so much the miracle as the marvellous abundance that comes into play when Jesus offers his fellowship at table.”

In John's Gospel, chapter 6 we read, “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him.”

Abundance and abiding is what our congregation lacked during a time of so much loss. It was precisely this which they continued to gain through their attendance at the Eucharist.

Although we lost the physical space of church, for those of us able to meet via Zoom, the community we shared continue to nourish us.

Random breakout rooms meant we could talk to people we had never spoken to in the building and the advantage of digital connectivity was that we could join together across different parts of the country – and even the world. A new sense of community was emerging.

“Though we are many we are one body”.

But this wasn't always easy or obvious to me.

During this time I experienced a profound sense of self-doubt. What did I think I was doing? I had been trained that it was only possible to preside at a Eucharist if there was a congregation. The House of Bishops had instructed us that we were not to advise our congregations to share bread and wine at home.

When I was sitting at table, on my own, at home, was I presiding at a Eucharist? Could I reserve this sacrament to share Communion with the sick?

I had to dig deep and think hard.

I chose to be faithful to my holy orders, to serve my congregation as their priest and give them space to find out for themselves what worked for them. All of us had to improvise. I knew what it meant to be a priest; I knew how to feed my congregation with the sacrament. Now I had to trust that the same Spirit which I relied on Sunday to Sunday would continue to be at work through my ministry and within my congregation.

In the first half of the eighth century, **John of Damascus** wrote about the central role of the Holy Spirit in bringing about the transformation of the bread:

“Let it be enough for you to understand that this takes place by the Holy Spirit, just as the Lord took flesh, in and through himself, of the Holy *Theotokos* (Mother of God) and by the Holy Spirit.”

The pandemic was a time in my life when all I could do was be obedient to my calling. I had no sense that I was being of any use but week on week I said yes to God and I showed up. Perhaps this was what Mary experienced: a naïve ignorance of all that lay ahead, but a genuine belief that God was giving her the strength she needed.

Commenting on the Walk to Emmaus, Timothy Gorringer reminds us that Jesus is known in the breaking of the bread. He says, “it is a characteristic action, a habit or custom, which reveals Jesus’ identity”

It was through repeating familiar actions, taking, blessing, breaking and sharing that our community remained united.

In a discussion about “spiritual communion” a couple described how they were sure they were participating in sacramental worship. As the Eucharist was prepared on Zoom they brought their own elements to the table; as the eucharistic prayer was spoken they felt the power of the Spirit blessing their offering, as they broke bread to eat it and shared the cup between them they felt the presence of Christ connecting them as members of one body, their church. They found this a deeply moving experience.

And as they described it, so did I!

Here was an abundance; just like the gathering up of the fragments after the sharing of those five thousand people. Here, taken, blessed, broken and shared, Christ was present.

Writing in the fourth century, **Cyril of Jerusalem** said of the sacrament, “do not think of them just as bread and wine. As the Lord himself has declared, they are body and blood. And if your senses suggest otherwise, then let faith reassure you. Do not decide the question on the basis of taste, but on the basis of faith, and be assured beyond doubt that you have received the body and blood of Christ.”

When we try to approach the Eucharist rationally we are left with a piece of bread (or a wafer) and a sip of wine. When we allow the transformative work of the Holy Spirit room to inspire us, then we participate in a meal which can change our lives. It seems to me that this has happened through Zoom in just the same way as it has happened in the building.

My question changed from what I thought I was doing at the Eucharist to how I could do anything other than feed my people.

As I moved back into the church building to preside, with the congregation still gathering on Zoom, I began to hear from more members of the congregation that what we were doing was sustaining them. The Eucharist was feeding them, whether or not they shared a symbolic meal. Someone told me that it was gathering on a Sunday morning that got her through the rest of the week.

A different couple talked to me about a new intimacy they were experiencing at the Eucharist. Instead of the separation between the priest in the sanctuary and them in the nave, on Zoom they could see the expression on their priest's face and observe her actions more clearly. As bread was taken, blessed, broken and shared, the body of Christ, broken and scattered by an invisible virus and a pandemic of fear, was re-gathered, re-formed and re-stored.

The Eucharist, that great prayer of thanksgiving, is a reminder of the liberation we are all invited to participate in: from fear and doubt to new life and service of others.

My experience during this last eighteen months has been that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, not the gender of the priest, not the dispersion of the community, not the invisible virus which has changed the world in which we live and not the technology which has made it possible for us to gather together in worship whilst staying in our respective homes.

“If the mass is a promise” Martin Luther said in the sixteenth century, “then access to it is to be gained, not with any works, or powers, or merits of one's own, but by faith alone.”