



SAINT RONAN STREET DIARY

A blog from Andrew McGowan of the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, mainly connected with Anglicanism, early Christianity, and theological education.

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March 14, 2020

LITURGY IN A TIME OF PLAGUE: A LETTER TO A COLLEAGUE

[This post is based on an opinion recently sought by a diocesan authority in response to a request to celebrate the Eucharist via Skype; it does not seek specifically to address (or criticize) the possibility of "livestreaming" a Eucharist celebrated by a community, so that others unable to attend may have some connection with the event]



Bassano, St Roch among St Roche among the Plague Victims and the Madonna in Glory (Milan)

Dear X.,

There are a couple of reasons I would not counsel accepting the proposal to celebrate the Eucharist via a communication service like Skype. It is an interesting idea, but the implications need to be thought out further, and there are alternative approaches with fewer problems attached.

Christian worship generally implies a community physically present in one place. Forms of prayer without physical presence are also important, and believers are joined in prayer even without knowledge of the fact, because they are members of the body of Christ united in the Spirit. So yes there is always a "communion" of sorts present in prayer. There are various ways the "communal" aspect of this more individual activity can be enhanced, including adding physical presence. But this is quite a

different matter from corporate worship. We get into trouble when we start with generic ideas about prayer and worship and not the specifics of Christian practice.

The title of our normative Anglican source - the Book of Common Prayer - offers the implied understanding that what we term "worship" is a specifically communal activity defined by place, not merely by spiritual unity; the NT is also clear that this is a different sort of activity, and that it is

fundamentally important to come "to the one place" (1 Cor 11.20; Acts 2.1). That understanding includes both the forms of daily prayer (when used communally), and the sacraments. The sacraments however also involve physical material signs, whose significance comes from the communal and social context - they are administered by one to another, not merely present and used. Anglicans exclude private eucharistic celebration and auto-baptism for this reason. It takes two, it takes material substances, and it takes the exchange of them in each other's presence, for a sacrament in particular to be what it is.

In the case of the Eucharist there are multiple actions and signs which have a physical nature, necessary for the celebration, and not merely prayer (Dix's formulation of a four-fold action is worth remembering: we take, bless, break, share). The Eucharist is consecrated by a set of actions, including prayer, but also (e.g.) by the breaking of the bread and its reception in company with others. These conditions should not be taken to diminish the importance of the body of Christ as a reality beyond physical and material community, because they do not; as stated above, Christians are always united in prayer, but this has never been seen as a basis for avoiding either the company of others, or playing down the importance of a the eucharistic actions as a whole.

Two sorts of qualification or addition to this view may now present themselves.

First, technology of course raises new possibilities for community and communication. Many people have access to knowledge of all kinds and relationships previously inconceivable. For some, this has been welcomed as a potential substitute for familiar forms of community. Given my points about what "common prayer" and "sacraments" in particular mean however, I think these positive possibilities should be understood as enhancing the body of Christ in other ways, enabling closeness in prayer, in pastoral communication, etc. This does involve a clear theological judgement that "virtual" reality is not in fact reality, but an adjunct to it. This is important. The incarnation was not merely signaled, or human life emulated. I do not think that the material and social reality of the incarnate Word's ministry and example can properly be performed sacramentally, except by material signs and physical presence, even though it can (also) be communicated in other ways.

The second qualification is of course the reality of pastoral need made so visible by COVID-19, but which is quite often experienced by people shut-in or otherwise physically unable to be together with other Christians for sacramental or other worship. Under some circumstances, these can be connected with the rest of the community by the physical signs of bread and wine taken from the table. At other times this is not possible. Here it is worth bearing in mind the clear teaching of the 1662 BCP (and its predecessors) about circumstances where communion is not possible, if and when a person by sickness or...

...by any other just impediment, do not receive the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood: the Curate shall instruct him that if he do truly repent him of his sins, and stedfastly believe that Jesus Christ hath suffered death upon the Cross for him, and shed his Blood for his redemption, earnestly remembering the benefits he hath thereby, and giving him hearty thanks therefore; he doth eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ profitably to his soul's health, although he do not receive the Sacrament

with his mouth.

Cranmer is affirming here that the reality of the body of Christ exists for the person unable to receive, even if the sign of the Eucharist is inaccessible. I would also say, in passing, that this view helps the person or community where the sign of the common cup cannot be shared (it should however be partaken of by the priest or another, again because participating is part of the sign).

Yet to substitute some other material proxy - (e.g.) bread and wine on coffee table and eucharistic prayer on livestream - would be both to question the affirmation of the body of Christ that exceeds the eucharistic signs, while at the same time calling into question the necessity of the material sign otherwise. It creates a sort of middle ground which undermines the two known points of reference either side of it.

Of course an individual may undertake some other form of material sign (including eating and drinking) in personal prayer - any human activity could be accompanied by prayer. To present this actively and publicly as "eucharistic" however is a different matter.

I note here that there are some Anglicans whose refusal of a classic sacramental doctrine (whether evangelical or catholic) would lead them to suggest the material signs are not necessary at all, whether for Eucharist or ordination, etc. but merely useful or edifying. I think the problems with this view are too deep to address here, but it is worth noting that establishing a precedent where this position is implicitly affirmed now, even in crisis, would have implications whose scope would be hard to anticipate.

However the more evangelical side of our tradition offers another solution that is appropriate at least to a time of temporary crisis, namely the celebration of Morning and Evening Prayer as principal services. These forms straddle the gap between the invisible body residing in individuals, and the corporate body assembled for worship, in a quite different way; they are always equally available to both. I would commend their use both for individuals and households quite alone, and as something that could be presented as an appropriate simulacrum for collective forms of worship when communities cannot meet, whether by using virtual technology (in which case preaching can be included), or simply by agreeing to pray at a given time.

Blessings,

Andrew.

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Labels: Corona Virus, COVID-19, Daily Office, Eucharist, Sacraments, Social Distancing, Virtual Reality



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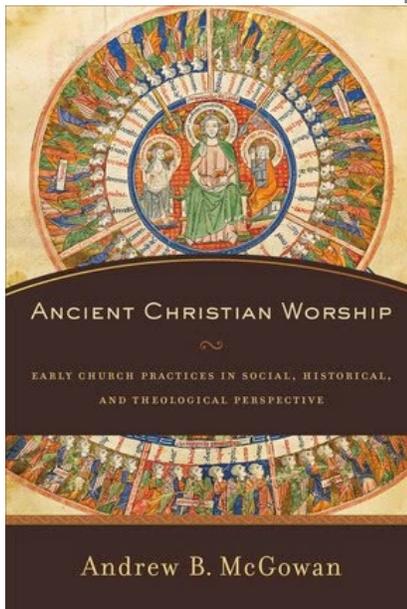
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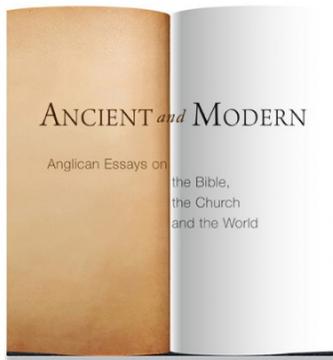
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COMMENTS



Unknown 12:33 am

Thank you for this thought-provoking and challenging article. I will try to respond faithfully and within the context of the current global situation. I, like many others, wondered how I would worship and participate in an online Eucharist. I approached it with some fear and much trepidation, although with an open mind and faith in Jesus, our Loving god and a trust in the Holy Spirit - as well as faith in our Vicar and our Ministry team. Perhaps even, with some faith in myself to move to a different way to participate in worship.

"We are one Body", for we all share the one bread. I remember the time Jesus spoke to his disciples at what I know was the first Eucharist. Yes, they were together. No church, no internet, but clear instruction which we hold close today. We know what we were asked to do, in remembrance of our loving Jesus.

With my first experience of The Eucharist online, I was able to share, in my heart, the sharing of the bread and wine. Our Vicar was able to connect with me and my husband, and others I am sure. It WAS congruent worship.

I believe in the Resurrection of Jesus. I believe I can partake in the Body and Blood of Jesus as we were asked to do by Jesus through the spiritual administration of the Eucharist by our priest. I WAS THERE.

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