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The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.33 No.47

The Twentieth Sunday after Trinity

10/13/02

The Holy Communion II

It was evident that the dying man, struggling to receive Holy Communion, had no confidence in himself. There can be no worldly confidence when death draws near, in the humble circumstance of disability and the weak awareness of an absolute need. As this quiet churchman labored to receive the Blessed Sacrament, he made the final effort of devoted faith.

It was the habit of devotion that enabled him to persevere to the very end of his life. It is the habit of devotion that we strive to cultivate in our daily lives.

Our devotion, our need of God, our will and love for God, all become true and habitual through participation in the Holy Communion. It is not just faith, personal and subjective trust, that keeps us abiding in the Lord. God willing, faith is ours at all times and in all places. The habit of participation in the Holy Communion is the way we receive the grace of God from outside our faith, objectively.

And by objectively I mean this. First, we come to the Lord's table in obedience to His command, "Do this, in remembrance of me." And doing this, we turn the inward eyes of faith outward and open our empty hands to bread and wine, consecrated by the Priest through the prayers of the Church.

The Church and her ministers are the way that God provides for the means of His grace to be administered to His people. The purpose of the Church is not merely to exist as an institution, but rather as an institution, entrusted with the Gospel, to offer the grace of Christ to our desperate human condition.

And so the Body and Blood of Christ Jesus are given objectively through His ministers in the Church. With the open hands of faith we feed upon the holy mysteries and ascend in the Spirit to the throne of God.

There is more, however, to the objectivity of the Sacrament. As we receive the Lord's Supper, we receive the true reality of Jesus given us in His humanity. To say that we feed upon Christ objectively through the bread and wine and subjectively by faith is not a theological abstraction. We really do so.

And the way that we do so begins with the memory. We remember

who Jesus is and what He did. The holy mysteries of our Lord's Body and Blood that are given to us, and that we receive spiritually by faith, are those of the very same Savior who died on the cross making "a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world." The content of our remembrance and of our reception of the sacrament depends on nothing else but who Jesus really is, and what He really did upon the cross. And so we remember, "This is my Blood of the New Testament, which is shed for you, and for many, for the remission of sins; Do this, as oft as ye shall drink it, in remembrance of me." Moreover, we remember also that this same Christ, whose passion has brought us near to God, now sits at the right hand of God in glory, and His glorified humanity nourishes us with eternal life. These are the "innumerable benefits" conveyed to us in the holy mysteries.

It is this content of our remembrance, who Jesus is and what He did, that makes us prepare ourselves to participate in the holy mysteries. Before we can receive His most precious and holy gift, it is necessary that we confess our sinful state and our sinful acts, both those we recall and those we do not, those of which we are aware and those which lie beneath our con-science. And having confessed our sins to the very best of our ability, and with the firm intention of repentance, we accept the forgiveness of God through the absolution of the Priest. And thus we are made ready to receive.

What a wonderful thing it is, when we take the time, to prepare ourselves to come to the holy mysteries. We acknowledge who we really are, with all the dirt and shame of our wretched souls, and having accepted God's absolution through His minister, we receive the Holy Communion and come away cleansed and forgiven, even down to our bold and presumptuous sins.

But there is more than forgiveness, great as that is, in the Holy Communion. There is participation. Indeed, participation is what communion actually means. We become one with Christ through His body broken and His blood shed and given to us in bread and wine. When in the prayer of Consecration we offer and present to God "ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice," we do so as we are incorporated into Christ. We are offered to God in Him, because we have been made part of His mystical Body. Through participation in the Blessed Sacrament, Christ Jesus continues to dwell in us and we in Him.

Perhaps the best summary of the true blessing of the Holy Communion is in the incomparable prayer of Thomas Cranmer, which we know as the Prayer of Thanks-giving. We give thanks that God has "vouchsafed" (meaning graciously condescended) to feed us with these holy mysteries. He has assured us of "His favor and goodness toward us," and that we are "very members incorporate" in the mystical body of His Son. We share in Him with all the saints, "the blessed company of all faithful people," and we are with them, "heirs through hope" of His everlasting kingdom. All that is left is for us to pray that we might continue, that we might persevere, in the holy fellowship which His Communion has made, and that we endeavor to do all the good works that God, in his mercy, has "prepared for us to walk in." Of all that we do in this life of ours, what can be more important, more precious, or more demanding of the purposes of love than to come to Church to obey the blessed command of Jesus, and to be made one with Him.

And so it is, with our friend who gave the last of His strength to partake of the Blessed Sacrament, having no confidence in ourselves, we come to receive the grace of the Sacrament. Our confidence is solely in the abundant goodness of God given us in Christ Jesus, whose life is ours now and forever, if we shall only receive Him.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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