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The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.38 No.35

The Eighth Sunday after Trinity

07/29/07

THE HOLY COMMUNION (I)

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As in Israel under the Old Testament, so in the Church under the new, the corporate worship of God according to his Word has involved ritual actions and sacred ceremonies of various kinds. In the western church the most important of these came to be known by the name of "sacraments", and, following Augustine, were defined as sacred and efficacious signs of God's grace. That is, in the sacraments God not only shows (signifies) us what he does but also does (effects) what he shows us. These two sides are given in the classical Anglican definition given in the Prayer Book Catechism. First, a sacrament is "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace" – in it God shows us what he does. Second, it is "ordained by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive the same [grace]" – in it, God does what he shows us.

That the sacraments are means of grace, effecting in the receiver what they signify, is not the claim of an irrational faith for a materialistic, quasi-magical power. The sacraments effect what they signify by signifying: that is, they have their effect in us by speaking to our hearts and minds of spiritual realities we should otherwise very easily ignore.

We may understand this better by analogy with the Incarnation. The Word of God was made visible, audible, and even tangible to bodily senses, so that we, who had forgotten God in our subjection to bodily and material and transitory things, might be lifted up to his eternal and spiritual reality through his Incarnate Word. Likewise, in the sacraments, God accommodates himself to our embodied state, our immersion in things visible, audible, and tangible. Reclaiming things visible, audible, and tangible from our idolatry, he makes them the means of a spiritual ascent to things invisible and eternal. Through these sacred signs he stirs up and deepens in us the faith whereby we come into possession of all the benefits of his grace and mercy, given to us through the cross of Jesus Christ.

In a broad sense, therefore, all the church's ceremonies, indeed, the whole of creation, may be read as a symbol of the new and spiritual creation in Christ. But following the teaching of Thomas Aquinas as rigorously applied by the Protestant Reformers, Anglicans give special pre-eminence to those sacraments for whose institution by Christ there is an explicit warrant of scripture. Of these "Dominical Sacraments"

there are two: Baptism and

Holy Communion. Baptism marks the beginning of spiritual life, the regeneration of those born in sin as the children of grace. In Holy Communion (also known as the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, and the Mass) those thus reborn to spiritual life through the remission of sins are nourished and sustained in it.

Over the centuries various liturgical forms for the administration of the sacraments have been developed. (In the Eastern Orthodox churches, for instance, the ancient and beautiful Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom is used, from which comes the Prayer Book's "Prayer of St. Chrysostom" at the end of Morning Prayer.) Those which we are blessed to use in the 1928 American Prayer Book follow very closely the forms devised by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer and published in the first four Prayer Books (1549, 1552, 1559, and 1662). Cranmer's work is both catholic and reformed, maintaining essential continuity with the Latin rites received in ancient times in the Church of England, yet honouring the pastoral and evangelical needs for instruction, edification, and devotion in the English language, and in emphatic conformity with the Word of God in Scripture. In Cranmer's work we see the balance of reformed and catholic tendencies, which is essential to Anglicanism. It is customary to see these as opposed tendencies, and certainly there are tensions between them, although I think often overstated on both sides. In Cranmer, however, we perceive not only the tension, but also the coherence. As within the catholic tradition there have always been movements of reform, so protestant orthodoxy is to be understood as a clarification and restatement of catholic tradition.

For Cranmer, as for other Protestant Reformers, it was of first importance to reclaim from quasi-materialistic practices the spiritual character of the sacraments. In accord with his purpose, over the next few Parish Papers I shall be looking in some detail at the theological and spiritual significance of the service of Holy Communion as set forth in the 1928 Prayer Book. It is my hope that in better understanding what it signifies, we may more fully partake in its great benefits.

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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