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HOLY COMMUNION (V)

With the Prayer for the Church the Ante-communion comes to a close, and with it the general preparation for the Sacrament. Our repentance and desire for grace has been awakened in the rehearsal of the Law; our faith in God's grace has been awakened and strengthened in the preaching of the Word; our love and charity, the marks of a living faith, have been exercised in the Offertory by the offering of gifts and prayers, offered in love for the work of the Church and the relief of those in need. When the Ante-communion stands as a service by itself, it is concluded (in its original design) with the Lord's Prayer, a collect (such as those on page 49), and Blessing. But when (as is usually the case) the Ante-communion is followed immediately by Communion (that is, the administration of the Lord's Supper), bread and wine are also prepared and placed upon the Holy Table at the Offertory, for eventual consecration, "that by them" (as the Offertory prayer of the English Coronation rite puts it) "we may be made partakers of the Body and Blood of thine only-begotten Son Jesus Christ, and fed unto everlasting life of soul and body".

Unusually for the Prayer Book, this presentation of bread and wine is not explained verbally by some accompanying prayer, but the act itself is nonetheless highly significant. We present them to the Lord in the hope that God, in virtue of his Son's sacrifice, would consecrate us also who will be partakers of his body and blood, and make us - in all our choices and with all our goods - living members of his mystical body, the instruments of his gracious will.

After the conclusion of the Ante-communion we turn from a general to a particular preparation for the Sacrament. After the Prayer for the Church (p. 75), one of the longer Exhortations (see pages 85-89), may be read at this point (we read the first of these on the first Sundays in Advent and Lent and on Trinity Sunday). These are full of sound practical counsel for those coming to Communion and make excellent private reading before the service.

More often, the rite of Communion begins with the shorter exhortation, often called the Invitation: "ye who do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbours, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways; draw near with faith, and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort". The Invitation presupposes the dispositions already exercised in the Ante-communion, repentance, faith, and love, the marks of those who have heard and received the

new life which Christ offers us by the gospel. It is to comfort – strengthen, support, and sustain – us in this new life and its dispositions that the Sacrament is administered. Apart from them it speaks only to our condemnation: it shows us what we are not, and what we have refused to become.

Already in the Invitation we perceive a feature of Cranmer's liturgy that irritates contemporary liturgists. They are a tidy-minded lot, who like to move in straight lines from A to Z with no repetitions, returns, or revisiting of items they have already ticked off their lists. It irritates them that Cranmer's approach is rather different, full of returns to themes already touched on, not only repentance (although this is the one that really irritates them) but also faith and love. The rite of Communion repeats the threefold cycle already run through in the Ante-communion, and does so at least twice: repentance (Confession), faith (Absolution and Comfortable Words), love (Preface, Sanctus, Prayer of Consecration); and then again: repentance (Prayer of Humble Access); faith (Communion) and love (Post-communion and Gloria in excelsis).

There is such no gainsaying that the Prayer Book moves forward through such returns and recapitulations. Yet, as Rowan Williams has perceptively pointed out in his recent sermon in commemoration of Cranmer's death, similar things could be said of the structure of gospel of St. John. Like an eagle his gospel wheels about his central themes in an ever-ascending spiral, revisiting and recapitulating themes already touched upon, yet each time from a slightly different angle, each time with something new to say about the wondrous mystery to which he bears witness. For all the deceptive simplicity and directness of his language, St. John's gospel shows us that we cannot pin God down to a few straightforward sentences, we can only ever approach the reality which in a sense remains ever beyond us. When all has been said, there is yet more to be said, and they can only be said when the former have been said first.

The Prayer Book's service is something like that: we return to themes already touched but, but the return is no repetition: it is rather a deepening of what has been begun, a return to them at a higher level, and with a more immediate application to the matters at hand. The exercise of repentance, faith, and love in the Ante-communion provided a general preparation for the Sacrament; in our return to them in the Invitation and Confession we find a more particular preparation for the sacrament. The exposure of our sin and need for grace by the rehearsal of the Law now finds its counterpart in a fulsome general confession; the grace proclaimed in the Word finds more particular expression in the Absolution and Comfortable Words; the faith exercised in the offerings of money and prayer for the Church finds its counterpart in the offering of praise and thanksgiving in the Preface and Sanctus. We are, as it were, eagles in our hearts, ascending up to heaven in ever-rising spiral, towards that central mystery of our faith, of which this Sacrament is the memorial and effectual sign, the life-giving death of the Son of God upon the cross, and his all-sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction of himself once offered for the sins of the whole world.

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