



The Holy Eucharist

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Preparation

To understand the place of Eucharist in our lives as Anglicans, one should be familiar with the basic biblical texts relating to the sacrament. These include: Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:17-26; Luke 22:7-27; John 13:1-15,34-35; 1 Corinthians 11:17-32.

A Definition

The Eucharist is the Christian's family meal. In it we say "Thank You" to God for His blessings, and, through bread and wine, God touches us with His loving presence and assures us of good things yet to come.

It is a proclamation of the mighty acts of God in history, culminating in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (see 1 Cor. 11:26) and therefore a reminder of the identity of God's family, the Church. It is the means by which God nourishes and strengthens us spiritually, through the Scriptures and through Christ's Body and Blood, to be His faithful followers. And it is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, when all of God's purposes will be fulfilled in the life of the age to come. When we gather for this, we can almost breathe the air of heaven.

Origin

The center of the Eucharist is, as one scholar wrote, "a thing of absolute simplicity—the taking, blessing, breaking, and giving of bread, and the taking, blessing, and

giving of a cup of wine and water, as these were first done with their new meaning by a young Jew before and after supper with his friends on the night before he died," (Dom Gregory Dix)

When Jesus met with His disciples on the night before His crucifixion, He shared a sacred meal with them. That meal commemorated the Passover, the liberation of the Jewish people from their slavery in Egypt. (See Exodus 12:13-14:1-30.) Perhaps the closest thing in American culture to the Passover would be Independence Day, although Jews, like Christians, are deeply conscious of their relationship with God, and would not use the word "independent."

A New Meaning

In a bold act of redefinition, Jesus directed that the meal henceforth be celebrated "*in remembrance of me*" (1 Cor. 11:24, KJV). In so doing, He proclaimed that He is the true liberator of His people. In the first Passover, God set people free from political oppression. In this new "Passover," God offers the grace to set us free from those destructive behaviors which harm or destroy God's vision of human society. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God sets His people free from their sins, and from the power of sin to oppress and enslave. As St. Paul wrote, "Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: therefore let us keep the feast" (1 Cor. 5:7-8, KJV).

Centrality

This new understanding gave the celebration a new meaning and a new prominence. Rather than once a year, this thanksgiving meal, or "Eucharist," ("thanksgiving" in Greek) quickly became the focus of the weekly gatherings of the early Christian community.

In a commemoration of the Resurrection, these gatherings were normally held on the first day of the week, "resurrection day;" and were commonly referred to as "the breaking of bread." Describing the life of the apostolic community, Luke says, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42, RSV). "Hence, the Eucharist has been, from the first century down to the present time, the Church's central act of worship.

In Remembrance

The phrase, "in remembrance of me" in both Hebrew and Aramaic, carries a meaning far deeper than that of simply "calling to mind." It implies the presence, in power, of the event, or person, remembered. Two disciples who encountered the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus on that first Easter day told their friends "how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35, RSV).

If we participate regularly in this sacramental meal, our experience parallels that of these disciples. Although Christians have not always agreed on just how it happens, they have from the very beginning testified to the fact that we meet the presence of the "living Christ in the eucharistic celebration. (See Rev. 3:20.)

The Liturgy

The manner in which the Eucharist is celebrated varies widely from congregation to congregation. So also the symbols and ceremonies may vary widely. It is helpful to understand that, in all of the variations, the basic pattern remains the same.