



Food for Thought: a Pilgrimage through the Anglican Eucharist

Alan Brown

Requests for use or re-publication of this article should be made (via Shap if necessary) to the writer, who retains copyright. If re-published in part or full elsewhere, the article's publication in World Religions in Education 2009-10 should be acknowledged.

The transliteration of specialist terms and the opinions expressed in this article are those of the writer, not of the Shap Working Party.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Brown lectures at the University of Worcester and is a member of the Shap Working Party.

ABSTRACT

The author takes us on a brief personal pilgrimage through the various ways in which Anglicans perceive the Eucharist. He reflects on whether it can ever be a sacrament of unity and whether some priests have little acknowledgment of its place in sacramental worship.

As a child I was taken to the parish church my mother attended regularly and my father sporadically. I loathed Sunday school and it became my 'punishment' to attend regular Sunday worship. This meant attending Holy Communion at 8am on some Sundays then Matins, followed by Holy Communion on the third Sunday in the month. I used to look at the vicar encased in white from the rear and wonder about the 'chicken' exercises he was doing when we had come back to our seats after receiving a blessing. It was a source of wonderment, though it took very little to gain my interest on such occasions as there was very little competition. It was many years later I realised he was cleaning the chalice and paten. Nothing very interesting at all really!

This little episode has become the focus for this article, for during the 60+ years since those early experiences I have attended many Eucharists, Masses, Lord's Suppers, worked for the Church of England and certainly wrestled with the variety of Anglican views on the Eucharist which appear to be as diverse as the number of priests who celebrate. So this is a record of my pilgrimage, a narrative of how Anglicans approach what has, in the last 50 years, come to be a central celebration.

In those far-off days in St. John's, Maindee, in Newport, South Wales, the main service was not the Eucharist at all. It was Morning Prayer and the Eucharist wasn't called the Eucharist either. It was Holy Communion. Since then, like many others, I have learned to read notice boards outside churches and can very quickly see whether the church is High Church, Low Church, Evangelical or in a few cases really doesn't appear to want to announce affiliation to the Church of England at all. The Communion service, at 8am, was rattled through at high speed as the vicar clearly had food in mind, but not the holy food being offered to the faithful. He taught his curates to celebrate in the same fashion and as a young child, I preferred to get up and go to 'the 8 o'clock' as it was shorter and we would be home well before 9 and I could look forward to the rest of the day. The Prayer Book version of Holy Communion was, I later thought, really only for clergy. I could hear the deep breath the vicar took as he began with the high speed monotone drone version of the Lord's Prayer. The laity were there of course,



but invited to do very little, merely passive participants waiting on the vicar. It was the clergy who were in charge, even though breakfast beckoned.

I grew up with that experience and would, in teenage years, attend Communion with my mother, though now it was less of a punishment and more an attempt to keep my mother at peace. I was confirmed in my early teens by the Archbishop of Wales in a service I still remember. Unfortunately, I remember it because of his long and excruciatingly boring sermon. 'I didn't come all this way for a 15 minute sermon; you can have the benefit of 45 minutes'. So we did. Again in later years I realised he was noted for the length and impenetrability of his sermons.

At Leeds University I read Theology. Hebrew and Greek (I'm sure it was not made clear in the prospectus) were on the curriculum and after a few weeks I thought I would go to Holy Communion. I decided not to go to the University church as the chaplain taught us Greek and it seemed wise to avoid him. I went to a nearby church. During the service there were smells and bells, young boys carrying the thurible (though at the time I didn't know what it was), the congregation were crossing themselves and genuflecting at regular intervals and during the sermon I heard the priest urging the Church of England to return penitent to Rome. It was, I thought, obviously a Roman Catholic Church and I had not read the notice board properly. Outside in the smog-ridden air of 1960s Leeds again, I re-read the board. It was indeed an Anglican church, but so different from St. John's. I am told by those who know that both the church and the priest were well-known for their 'Romanite' leanings.

My point is that in 'my' church in South Wales the sacrament was treated with care but it was bread and wine handed out in a matter of fact manner not unlike collecting your school meals, but in the Leeds church the sacrament was indeed 'holy food'. There was a heightened sense of occasion and the ritual made the chicken impression of my youth evaporate into insignificance. It was my first experience of the sacrament where the sharing of bread and wine was placed within an evocative ritual and emotive liturgy and it transformed my Eucharistic experience. Yet there I was, an Anglican born and bred. Why did no one ever tell me of this variety within Anglicanism?

These thoughts re-surfaced at Easter 2009. I attended an Anglican church for the first service of Easter Day while on holiday in Cornwall. The elderly priest stood with his back to us and rattled through the service. Maybe his mind too was on a good Cornish breakfast or maybe an Easter egg. As he turned to walk down the church he wished us, in rather a grim and unjoyous tone, 'Happy Easter', the only reference in the service to the central Christian festival. My mind was thrown back nearly sixty years to South Wales, a memory made more acute by the stale wafer we had been offered and received. Clergy must eat a lot of stale wafers, I thought. Should the Church of England not have standards for this sort of thing? Ofchurch? It is extremely difficult at the most sacred and holy moment where one receives the body of Christ to have the staleness of that body inserted into one's mouth and mind.

In 2001 the House of Bishops of the Church of England published *The Eucharist: Sacrament of Unity*. It is a worthy document, it is, really. The major thrust appears to be to demonstrate the common understandings that exist between the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches. There is no doubt that some Anglican bishops would agree with every word written on the pages but it is not easy for the outsider to see what is meant by 'Unity'. Firstly, there are different names for the Eucharist, Holy Communion, The Lord's Supper, the Mass - and what theologies do the different names imply? There a range of theologies that sit easily within the practice of the Anglican Communion and yet pass by the members of many congregations. So what's in a name? Suggestions of diversity and difference and also, in a paradoxical way, a sense of unity.



Who can receive this sacrament? On one level in the Anglican Communion all are welcome to 'The Lord's Table/Altar' if they are in good standing within their own church, In this case what is called by some 'The Open Table' is a genuine offer of unity. The recipient does not need to be confirmed. So why have confirmation? Is it to give the bishops something to do? Children of church-going parents in some parishes can receive the bread and wine through a special dispensation and once they receive in this fashion they cannot be refused in other parishes where the said dispensation is not enacted. I heard an interesting discussion in a CofE secondary school in the north of England when some Year 7 students realised that some could receive bread and wine while others couldn't. I did suggest to the diocesan bishop he might like to explain this trivial, meaningless anomaly to the children but....

In Taizé when I went several times in the 1970s there were two celebrations of the Eucharist, one was the Roman Catholic Mass, the other was the Anglican Eucharist. Brother Roger, the founder of Taizé, was a Protestant, and saw the Mass as divisive, for all could take of the Anglican 'food' but the Mass could only be received by Roman Catholics. He made a point of the divisiveness of the Eucharist in the worship in the church for it starkly revealed the broken body of Christ.

In 1998, *One Bread, One Body* was published by the Roman Catholic bishops of England and Wales, Scotland and Ireland. Ignoring any ecumenical sensitivities, it called into question the validity of Anglican celebrations of the Eucharist, the Anglican orders of ministry and the integrity of the Church of England as part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. *One Bread and One Body* but only if it is mine, yours is invalid and our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters cannot receive it nor can non-Roman Catholics receive ours. Quite ironic really! Then there are the Orthodox who also draw rings around who may receive and who may not. So in the Mass, Holy Communion and the Eucharistic there is the sacrament of unity but where are the boundaries of unity to be drawn? Why do churches circle their wagons? What is there to fear?

On my personal pilgrimage, I visited a C of E secondary school in the South of England. Most of the pupils never went near a church of their own volition but the Chaplain built up a group of about 30 or so students who came regularly to his fortnightly Eucharist. None were confirmed so none could receive the bread and wine. He asked a bishop in the diocese what he should do. The bishop was not a high church Anglican; in fact he was one of the more evangelical bishops of that time. He just agreed that all who came and presented themselves in good faith should receive. So they did. It was a very successful chaplaincy. But other bishops, maybe even the diocesan bishop if he had known, would have objected. I appreciated this pragmatism which has always struck me as essentially Anglican.

I worshipped for a number of years in Chichester Cathedral surrounded by smells and bells, heavenly singing, excellent preaching and a richly choreographed service. At times I would think, 'Have I died and am now standing at the pearly gates?' It was a million Anglican miles from the little parish church I attended a few miles away. At that parish church I went through a similar ritual to my mother and have spawned one atheist (but at least that is a committed position) and one confirmed but lapsed Anglican. One Sunday three men came in from the local institution. During the service one of them crossed himself vigorously (mostly at the wrong times) and bounced up and down genuflecting as if he was meeting the Pope. When the time came to go up to the altar, I asked the churchwarden, a very senior civil servant, if the three men should go. 'I don't think so,' he said. I ignored him and up they went as I knew he would not dare stop them. As I queued along the choir stalls, the genuflecting man received bread and wine and stood up to return to his seat. His eyes caught mine and with a big thumbs up sign he shouted, 'GREAT'.

Anglicans, my experience tells me, have a variety of views about the Real Presence in the bread and wine. Some regard the Eucharist, as I suspect did the priest of my youth, as a memorial. Whatever may be the theology of the Church, for them and for many it is a



memorial of the Lord's Supper given a special place and reverence through the words, 'This is my Body' and This is my Blood'. The Eucharist may not be celebrated every week in every Anglican church as for some it is not the 'food of life'. Traditionally, Anglicans believe (or some of them do) that Christ is present spiritually in the bread and wine, while some will see this as not being present in bodily form, others would regard the presence as a reality but in some mystical sense. In this case, it is more that a memorial, but less than the Real Presence of traditional Roman Catholic theology.

So where does this leave the Anglican view of the Eucharist? Pretty much where you came in. There are a variety of views and forms of the Eucharist. Some priests have a sense of occasion and celebrate with power and feeling; others have a different set of priorities. In an East Yorkshire parish I attended during the 1970s, the vicar would preach for 30-40 minutes and then belt through the rest of the service to finish within the hour. Time does not wait for Yorkshire farmers. When I pointed out that he appeared to be celebrating the Eucharist (or Communion as he called it) as if it were a burdensome afterthought, he replied the power of the Holy Spirit was in his preaching and not in the sharing of bread and wine. He added he had been converted to Christianity during his second curacy and people like me should come off the fence. I wasn't sitting on a fence; I was on the other side to him. It made me wonder why bishops do allow people like him to be priests. Priests and laity share all the human flaws but some priests celebrate the Holy Mysteries as if it was all that mattered in the world. The words are not enough: the Real Presence has to be in the reverence and ritual that finds a place in the worshipper's heart.

As a little boy perhaps the greatest lesson I learned about Holy Communion was to watch. Watch the priest, watch other people, and watch what they do, how they speak to each other. If you haven't been to a variety of Eucharists, go and watch and take the sense of the moment and receive the bread (hopefully not stale) and wine (if offered). For if there is a God, a Christian God, then at least you have been prepared to engage with the story of the Christ-event and will not have been excluded by those who are driven by fear and closed minds.

References

One Bread One Body: a teaching document on the Eucharist in the life of the Church, and the establishment of general norms on sacramental sharing (1998) Catholic Bishops' Conference of England, & Wales, Ireland and Scotland.
The Eucharist: Sacrament of Unity (2001) Church House Publishing