

Sermon

The Origin and Meaning of Christian Worship and Holy Communion (also called the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper)¹



Year B 2021, Pentecost 9, John 6:1-21



One of my favourite television shows as a child growing up, along with 'Play School', 'Sale of the Century', and, it should go without saying, 'The Sullivans' – remember Dave and Grace? - Family Feud is a game show in which two families compete to guess the most popular answers to a survey question.

This morning I thought we'd begin with a quick round of Family Feud. To the survey question, what is the one thing that the parish of St Peter's values most? I'll give you a moment to consult with other family members at home...

Now that you've had a chance to lock in your answer at home, let's see what the most recent National Church Life 'Survey says'!

¹ With acknowledgement to the Protestant theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg

Coming in at number 4, 33% of people surveyed identified 'praying for one another' as a parish activity that they valued the most.

Coming in at number 3, with 36% of people surveyed, is 'practical care for one another in times of need'.

Coming in at number 2, with 56% of people surveyed, is 'sharing in holy communion, the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper'.

And coming in at number 1, with 58% of people surveyed, is a 'traditional style of worship and music'.

The studio audience, and ourselves at home, go wild! A traditional style of worship and music, and sharing in holy communion, the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, is the most important thing in our life.

Like anything in life, to do it well, we must understand what it is that we are doing. And so, inspired by Jesus' words in the Gospel of John chapter 6, in coming weeks we will reflect on what it is we are doing, in traditional worship, in the celebration of holy communion, the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper. Beginning with our question today: What is the origin and meaning of traditional Christian worship and holy communion, the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist?

From the very beginning, the celebration of the Lord's Supper stood at the heart of Christian worship. And this was due to the fact that Jesus himself stood at the heart of worship, of the Supper. The earliest disciples became aware of continuing table fellowship with Jesus after his death, at the breaking of the bread. We see this in Luke's Gospel, on the Road to Emmaus. We see this, too, in John, on the beach, over the charcoal fire.

Jesus' disciples knew that for this awareness, they had the authority of Jesus himself. Who, on the night before he died, promised his disciples continued table fellowship with himself, after his death. Who fulfilled his promise, by his resurrection from the dead, and in his appearances to the disciples, on the Road to Emmaus, on the beach by the charcoal fire. Where the disciples recognised him, as he shared the bread with them.

In the Old Testament, the central symbol of the Jewish hope for the coming kingdom of God, was the banquet. With Jesus coming, in his earthly life, and in his

resurrected life, at the breaking of the bread, the kingdom of God, has now come into the world. The Jewish hope, has been fulfilled. The hope of the world, is here.

To each person whom Jesus grants fellowship with him at the banquet of the kingdom of God, there is the forgiveness of sins. The removal of all that separates people from God. The prodigal son came home to a banquet celebration. The prodigal world comes home to the Supper of the Lamb.

In the Old Testament, God covenanted with Israel through the blood of an animal sacrifice. To celebrate, Moses and the elders of Israel climbed a mountain, where they saw God, and ate and drank (Ex 24.8, 11). In the NT, God entered a new covenant, with the world, by the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God.

The Lord's Supper is the meal of the new covenant. The meal of the kingdom of God. The new covenant, the kingdom of God, that is sealed by the death of Jesus. His sacrifice, for human sins. His righteousness, for human unrighteousness. Made once. For all people. A sacrifice, a salvation, a 'Marvelous Exchange'. A cause for mighty celebration. For worldwide celebration. For Christian celebration.

The Last Supper was the founding, not merely of Christian worship, but of the worldwide Christian church. Gathered at the table of the Lord, at the Lord's Supper, the Christian church is the sign and the instrument of the future unity of the human race in the kingdom of God. The sign and the destiny of the human race, in the future of the kingdom of God, at Christ's return.

In holy baptism, and holy eucharist, there is the church. As in holy baptism, our identity is outside ourselves in Jesus Christ, so too in holy communion, the church is essentially what it is, not in any legal or institutional form, but in Christian worship Eucharistic celebration. Wherever this celebration takes place, by the real presence of Jesus himself, there is the Christian church.

Because of our fellowship with Christ in Christian worship, the church exists within the liturgical life of the local congregation. Each is defined by its local place of worship. For in this local, place-related, liturgical life, are the roots of the worldwide fellowship of local churches that celebrate the Lord's Supper: the body of Christ.

The fellowship with Jesus that each Christian receives in the bread and the wine, unites all Christians for fellowship with one another. Just as each member of the one body has specific gifts and functions that complement one another. As baptism establishes our identity as individual Christians, it also integrates us, with our

separate gifts, and individualities, into the body of Christ. The body of Christ that is represented, renewed, and restored, in each celebration of the Eucharist.

In Christian worship, we do not celebrate our own fellowship. Wherever this happens, distortions arise within the church and its life. Jesus Christ must be permitted to stand at the heart of the celebration, with the promise of his fellowship with each one of us, and with all of us. Because of this fellowship with Jesus, human fellowship in which Christians feel already related to one another by another bond is, stands in need of constant correction and renewal.

The celebration of the Lord's Supper stands at the heart of Christian worship. And Jesus Christ himself stands at the heart of Christian worship. As the Lord, and the Head, of the Church.

'Take, eat: this is my body.' The Lord's Supper is Jesus' fulfilment of his promise, made at the Last Supper, to be with his church, as it gathers around him, as he is present in the bread and in the wine, indeed, throughout the whole of the Eucharistic celebration. Jesus' guarantee, inviolable, of his own presence with us, in Christian worship, at the Lord's Supper. A promise fulfilled, by the failure of death to hold Jesus. The Holy Spirit is the force of the celebration. The Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead.