



The Seven Sacraments

Eucharist

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Genesis 18: 1–8 Mark 14: 12–26

‘You are what you eat’

Such is the power of marketing, that from a very young age my children have known by heart the straplines for many of the major retailers. Echoing around the walls of our inner-city vicarage, you can often hear, ‘*Tesco – every little helps*’, ‘*Sainsbury’s – live well for less*’. In discussing this sermon with them, and with a little help from St Augustine, we’ve decided that should the Church of England ever decide to branch into selling groceries, its strapline should be ‘*The Church of England – You are what you eat!*’

Putting aside the rather gruesome reality TV show which goes by this same title, let’s turn to St Augustine’s sermon, *On the nature of the Sacrament of the Eucharist*.¹ In this sermon, Augustine explores how the bread of the Eucharist can be Christ’s body and the cup contain his blood. ‘My friends’, he states, ‘these realities are called sacraments because in them one thing is seen, while another is grasped. What is seen is a mere physical likeness; what is grasped bears spiritual fruit.’ The latter he explores by directing his listeners to the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 12: ‘now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it’.² In other words, as members of the church, we make up Christ’s body, and yet at the Eucharist we also receive His body. So, Augustine says, ‘you are saying “Amen” to what you are’. Hence, he encourages his listeners to ‘be what you see and receive what you are’: be the body of Christ which you see, and receive the body of Christ which you are. He might as well have said, ‘you are what you eat’.³

Eating what we are is at the heart of what it means to be members of the body of Christ and to receive the sacrament of the Eucharist. Augustine goes on to cite Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians chapter 10: ‘Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread’.⁴ Augustine continues, ‘What is this one bread? Is it not the “one body”, formed from many? Remember: bread does not come from a single grain,

¹ Sermon 272, http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/public/augustine_sermon_272_eucharist.htm

² 1 Corinthians 12: 27

³ See Elisabeth Beattie, ‘Behold what you are, become what you receive’, <http://www.stmarymagdalene.ca/behold-what-you-are/> 18 March 2015.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 10: 17

but from many ... And thus it is with the wine. Remember, friends, how wine is made. Individual grapes hang together in a bunch, but the juice from them all is mingled to become a single brew. This is the image chosen by Christ our Lord to show how, at his own table, the mystery of our unity and peace is solemnly consecrated.' In other words, at the centre of this sacrament is our togetherness, our fellowship, the shape of our community as the Body of Christ. Being the body and receiving it, is not something I can do alone as an individual, but only with others, literally, in 'communion'.

In his concise yet insightful book, *Being Christian*, Rowan Williams explores further the nature of the Eucharist as an act of communion. He states, 'For that short time, when we gather as God's guests at God's table, the church becomes what it is meant to be – a community of strangers who have become guests together and are listening together to the invitation of God'.⁵ In the Eucharist, Christ, the host, welcomes us around his table as his guests. Williams continues, 'we are there because he asks us, and because he wants our company'.⁶ The starting point is Christ receiving us as his guests. The invitation is then that we might receive him in return and welcome all that he wants to give to us of his very self, in his body and his blood. So, hands outstretched and open, battered by life's work, we approach the table to receive what we already are, his Body, and to give our lives back to him. And in this dance of welcome and invitation, giving and receiving, we encounter the hospitality at the very heart of God Himself and enter into the 'divine generosity'⁷ which sustains the life of God who is the community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Given the name of your college, I'm sure you all know well Andrei Rublev's famous icon of the Trinity, also called 'The Hospitality of Abraham'. It depicts tonight's passage from Genesis in which Abraham welcomes three visitors by the oaks of Mamre. In our more inclusive era, we might do well to rename it 'The Hospitality of Abraham, Sarah and their household', given the roles that Sarah and the servant are described as playing in hurriedly preparing the meal for their guests! Nevertheless, Rublev beautifully portrays this as the Holy Trinity sitting around a table with the cup of sacrifice in the middle – the sacrifice of the calf which was killed to feed the visitors, but also the cup of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. At the front of the table is a space, a space which invites us into the hospitable community of the Trinity, the relationship of love and generosity at the heart of God. Here is the God who welcomes us as guests to His table, not because he needs us to complete Himself, but because the very nature of his love is that it cannot be contained within an exclusive relationship. It can only and ever be a self-giving love which overflows to the other, to the other persons of the Godhead, and to the other who accepts the invitation to enter the space at the table.

And so, as we gather as friends and strangers to be what we see and receive what we are; as we gather with those we love deeply and with those we struggle to love, what we hold in common is that we are all Christ's guests, we are all equally welcome. Whatever the state of our faith, whatever the state of our life, we are welcome, just as Judas, the betrayer, was welcome at the table of the Last Supper, the night before Christ died. As Rowan Williams puts it, 'we take Holy Communion not because we are doing well, but because we are doing badly. Not because we have arrived but because we are travelling.

⁵ Rowan Williams, *Being Christian* (London: SPCK, 2014), p. 58.

⁶ Williams, p. 43.

⁷ Williams, p. 59.

Not because we are right, but because we are confused and wrong. Not because we are divine, but because we are human. Not because we are full, but because we are hungry.’⁸

Perhaps it’s little wonder, therefore, that the Lord’s Supper quickly became known in the Early Church as the ‘Eucharist’, which in Greek means ‘thanksgiving’. For how can our response to this invitation be anything other than gratitude? Jesus, of course, at the Last Supper, takes the bread and gives thanks before he breaks it. He then takes the cup and gives thanks before he shares it. Knowing that the horror of death is imminent, he identifies his own broken body and shed blood with the bread and the wine, and yet roots this in thanksgiving. In so doing, he makes clear that his death is ‘the final, the definitive, sign of God’s welcome and mercy’.⁹ It also means that there can be no situation too dark, or too broken, in which we cannot meet to give thanks to the one who poured out his life for us and now welcomes us to sit and eat with Him. As at the supper at Emmaus, in giving thanks and breaking bread, we will once again recognise Christ who is present in our midst, no matter the circumstances we face.

My own church is in Southall, a vibrant and diverse suburb of west London, a home from its inception for migrants from within the UK and Commonwealth, then the traditional centre of the Asian community in this country, and now a place of refuge for those fleeing the war zones of Somalia, Iraq, Syria and Iran. Hence many in our congregation face deeply challenging situations. From those who’ve had a family member murdered, to an increasing number of refugees and undocumented migrants threatened with deportation; from those who have been cut off from their families because they have converted to Christianity, to those who face the daily battle with mental illness.

In the midst of all this, there is a profound commitment to gathering weekly to give thanks around the Lord’s table. When faced with so much loss and struggle, paradoxically, there seems to be a clearer perspective on the gift of God’s faithful abiding. John, or so we will call him today, has a very serious mental health condition, so he only comes to Sunday worship when he feels up to leaving the safety of his home. But when we do see him, his response to receiving the bread and wine is not the standard, prescribed, ‘Amen’, but a loud and resounding, ‘thank you very much’! There is much to be learnt from the depth of his thanksgiving. At the very least, it reminds us that it’s not only a case of ‘you are what you eat’ but also ‘you are *how* you eat’.

That eating is far more than what’s on the plate in front of us is, we might assume, the basis of Tesco’s new ‘Food Love Stories’ marketing campaign. According to the retailer, a meal is more than just a bunch of ingredients instead, ‘behind every meal we love is a story’. Behind the Eucharist is a story: the story of a man who ate with friends and strangers during his ministry, who broke bread and poured out wine in an upper room the night before he died, who cooked and ate fish on the beach after he was raised from the dead. But this story is far from past its use-by date. In the book of Acts, Peter describes the disciples as the ‘witnesses ... who ate and drank with [Jesus] after he rose from the dead’.¹⁰

⁸ Williams, p. 54.

⁹ Williams, p. 47.

¹⁰ Acts 10: 41

This is what we continue to be, every time we receive what we are in the transforming presence of the risen Christ. This story is for now and will be forever in the perpetual delight of the great banquet, the feast which will be at the centre of the new heaven and the new earth.

In that mystery of the now and not yet, Jesus wants our company. The table is laid and we are all invited. We are his honoured guests, we are welcome. As Isaiah's beautiful invitation expresses it, 'Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread ...? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good.'¹¹ In answering that invitation and eating what is good, may your hearts be full of thanksgiving, and may you be ever more deeply what you receive, as you live, work and worship as Christ's body in this place. Amen.

¹¹ Isaiah 55: 1-2