

Holy Communion at a Time of Closed Churches and Social Distancing Information and Questions to Help us Grow in Understanding

Introduction

This paper is written at a time of great challenge. Restrictions on movements and the imposition of social distancing mean that Christians are not able to enter churches or gather physically to worship. Of course, there is much to be grateful for. Thanks to hugely expanded use of the internet, the witness of the church is extended in a variety of innovative ways and there is potential for the good news about Jesus to be shared more widely. However, in not being able to meet and worship together physically, we have lost a great deal and we need to be honest about the frustration and grief we are experiencing.

The incarnation reminds us of the fundamental importance of both our physical bodies and the act of gathering together to receive bread and wine in memory of Jesus' giving of himself for us; things that we can break and share, touch and taste, eat and drink; spiritual food to sustain us on the journey. We might argue that when the going gets as tough as it is now, the need for this spiritual food is greater than ever. We may find ourselves wondering why, at precisely the time when we perceive that we need it most, this comforting gift of Communion is taken away. This quickly prompts us to think hard about what it is we have lost. What is the essence of this gift? Can we receive it in new ways? Where do we look for guidance? What does scripture have to say about it? What does the Church of England teach on the matter? This last question is important for those preparing to exercise public ministry as ordained ministers!

A theological training institution such as Ridley is precisely the place to be seeking deeper understanding of these things. In what follows, some important background information about Holy Communion is followed by five brief descriptions of ways in which Christians are approaching the Eucharist at a time of social distancing. Each section includes some questions which are offered to frame your own thinking. I have not attempted to offer answers. My intention is to help us *begin* to think *together* about some of the important questions facing the Church at this time. The challenge and opportunity to think and pray about this is doubtless one of the surprising gifts of this season.

As you read and pursue greater understanding in relation to difficult questions, I encourage you to do so in an attitude of prayer. We need the wisdom that comes from God and He will give this to us as we ask in faith.

Important background

Since the earliest days of the Church, Christians have gathered together to bless, break and share bread and to bless and share a cup of wine in obedience to the Lord's command, given on the night before He died, to 'do this in remembrance of me.' The Church of England has maintained the centrality of the Eucharist in its account of Christian living. Along with Baptism, Holy Communion is a 'Sacrament ordained of Christ' (Article XXV). The definition of a sacrament in the same article includes the affirmation that they are 'effectual signs of grace'. In Anglican understanding, sacraments are signs that point to and embody the things to which they refer. They direct our attention to the ascended body of Christ, and they also make the 'benefits of his passion' available to us here and now.

The Canons of the Church of England teach the importance and centrality of the Eucharist. Canon B14 requires the celebration of Holy Communion in at least one church in every benefice on all Sundays and principal Feast days, as well as on Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday. Canon B15 teaches that it is the duty of all who have been confirmed to receive Holy Communion regularly, and especially at Christmas, Easter and Pentecost.

What, though, of the present circumstances in which, however eager they might be to attend Holy Communion, the faithful are prevented by secular and ecclesiastical authorities from doing so? Is this a rule with no

exceptions? And what about the issue of how many people, if any, other than the minister, are required to be present in order for the Eucharist to be celebrated? Rubrics at the end of the Communion office in the Book of Common Prayer declare that, 'there shall be no celebration of the Lord's Supper except there be a convenient number to communicate,' a number which is further defined in a parish of twenty persons or less to be 'three at the least.'

This reflects a 'rule,' which should be followed in normal circumstances, that there should be communicants other than the minister at every celebration of Holy Communion. The Church of England teaches and holds this position in common with Christian tradition reaching back to apostolic times: the Eucharist is intended, normatively, to be a corporate, not a private act.

- Why, theologically, is it important that the church teaches and practices Eucharist as a corporate act? Since we are certainly not in 'normal circumstances', what exceptions to the 'rule' do you think could be appropriate? What risks might the Church inadvertently be taking with these exceptions?

Celebrating alone / watching

In recent months, it has been well publicised that some priests have been celebrating communion alone, watched by their congregation via live stream or at a later moment if recorded. Sitting at home, the congregation listen to familiar words, pray and perhaps sing. At the distribution, however, only the priest receives the bread and wine. At the end of March, Giles Fraser wrote about his enjoyment of presiding in this way but he also reflected, 'It felt odd, giving the Eucharist out to nobody but myself'. This practice has evolved quickly in some obvious directions and these are discussed below.

- In light of the 'important background' comments, above, what is your response to the priest celebrating and consuming alone with the faithful watching online? Is this something in which you would feel comfortable participating? What theological issues might this practice raise?

Remote Holy Communion

The church-in-mission is called to be creative and innovative. The restrictions have prompted a good deal of this and there are hopeful signs of fruitfulness. Among all the creativity is an approach to the Eucharist known as, 'remote Holy Communion'. Here, consecration is believed to come from priestly intention rather than physical proximity to the elements or direct touch. Worshippers at home indicate their participation *before* the service begins and at the appropriate time they place their bread and wine in front of the screen. The priest then consecrates all that *s/he intends* to consecrate. This includes the bread and wine in front of him/her and the bread in the homes of the dispersed community.

- What is your response to this approach? What does it imply about the action of the Holy Spirit and that of the priest? What do you think is implied about those who receive?
- Do you believe that communicants need to be physically present to one another? If St Paul can be "absent in body (but) present in spirit" (1 Cor 5.3), could this also be true for participants in Holy Communion?
- In 1 Cor 10.17 we read: "because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." The unity of the church is expressed by the partaking in 'one bread'. In an act of remote Holy Communion, when worshippers at home are widely dispersed, with many loaves and different cups, is it hard to see how there can be 'one bread and one cup'? Is something missing here? If so, what?
- The Church of England is committed to offering public worship which, in theory, is open to any and all who wish to attend. In view of this, what, if any, are the practical difficulties with this approach?

It is worth noting that the Church of England's official guidance on live streamed Holy Communion is currently: *"Participants in a streamed service of Holy Communion should not be encouraged to place bread and wine before their screens. Joining together to share in the one bread and the one cup as those physically present to one another is integral to the service of Holy Communion; this is not possible under the current restrictions, and it is not helpful to suggest otherwise. Any idea of the 'remote consecration' of the bread and wine should be avoided."*¹

Joining in

Some churches – in a range of traditions - have encouraged those worshipping at home to have bread and wine to hand while they watch the priest/minister celebrate online. When the priest/minister consumes the bread and wine, those following at home do likewise. This differs from remote communion in as much as the bread and wine that worshippers consume at home are not regarded as 'consecrated' in the same way in which those being consumed by the priest are. We might argue that this approach appears to satisfy a deep need in many Christians to share physically in Holy Communion even if it is not the 'whole thing'.

We read that in the earliest churches, Christians "broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2.46). This practice of breaking bread in homes along with domestic meals (presumably without a priest?) is arguably even earlier than doing so in church buildings. Of course, we should remember that households in the first century were likely to include a larger number of people than a typical family in twenty-first century UK.

- What do you think about the idea of the domestic church being revived during this period of physical distancing, even if it cannot replace the wider gathering?

What happens during a celebration of the Eucharist is multifaceted. Lots of things are going on, many images are employed. We feed spiritually on the body and blood of Christ; we remember Christ's sacrifice for us; we engage in an act of thanksgiving, the "partaking with thankfulness" (1 Cor 10.30); we are bound together in community around Christ through sharing in one bread and one cup; we join in as an echo of the worship of heaven; and we do this as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet which still lies ahead of us, when all nations and tribes will come to sit and eat in the presence of the Lamb. In a 'normal' service of Holy Communion when the church is gathered in one place around the Lord's table, all of these elements are brought together. However, at present it is not possible to hold a 'normal' Eucharist. The practice of bringing bread and wine together and sharing it with members of the household at the same time as others do elsewhere, simultaneous with the priest/minister who celebrates, cannot capture all of this, not least the sense of sharing in the 'one bread and one cup'. Perhaps it can capture some of it, however?

- In your view, what does this approach capture and what is missing? When we are able to meet together again, will this practice naturally and normally cease?
 - Even though this is not the full experience and reality of the Eucharist as we know it, can you see value in this approach in exceptional circumstances? Would you be prepared to participate in worship like this? If not, why?
 - Below are some 'safeguards', that bishops are likely to communicate to those asking for guidance about this approach to communion. What are your responses to these?
1. No firm impression should be given that the bread and wine at home is consecrated in the way that is true for the 'one bread and one cup' before the priest at the common communion table.
 2. This is provisional and exceptional for this period.

¹ <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-parishes/holy-week-and-easter-2020>

3. This practice would normally cease when it is possible to come together again in face to face meeting around the Lord's Table, except for those for whom it remains the only way for them to access any form of Holy Communion.

Fasting from the Eucharist

It seems as though restrictions will be in place for many months. This means that most of the people of God will be unable to participate in Holy Communion for a long time (baptisms are also not possible). At Ridley this Easter term, we gather each day in small groups on Zoom to pray the Offices and each week as a whole College to participate in an act of worship and celebration. None of this is Eucharistic. Essentially, we are fasting from the Eucharist. Like many of you, I long to receive bread and wine as part of the gathered people of God and I am finding enforced abstinence difficult.

- Do we believe that we are nurtured on the 'spiritual food' of the Eucharist? If so, in what way? If the answer is 'yes', does it follow that months of abstinence puts the people of God at risk of a form of spiritual malnourishment? In what sense might it be helpful to see this as a time of fasting from the Eucharist? If so, how long can a fast be sustained before it becomes detrimental?
- Is there a question to ask about how we engage with what God is doing at this time? If participation in the Eucharist is not possible for a season, how do we allow God to shape us for the present and the future? How might we receive that which He could not have given in any other way?

Agape meal

One of the bishops that I spoke to when preparing this paper said, 'I do think that we need a recovery of the agape in some form. A form of agape meal – with fuller instructions than we currently provide – might help to provide some sort of fellowship meal distinguishable from the Eucharist.'

The Love Feast, or Agape Meal, is a Christian fellowship meal recalling the meals Jesus shared with disciples during his ministry and expressing the *koinonia* (community, sharing, fellowship) enjoyed by the family of Christ. It is not the same as Holy Communion or the Eucharist. The Love Feast has often been held on occasions when the celebration of the Lord's Supper would be inappropriate—where there is no one present authorised to administer the Sacrament, when persons of different denominations are present who do not feel free to take Holy Communion together, when there is a desire for a more informal service or some other setting to which it would be difficult to adapt the Lord's Supper. One of the advantages of the Love Feast is that any Christian may conduct it. Congregational participation and leadership are usually extensive and important, especially involving children.²

The Church of England website states, 'In some churches a communal *agape* meal is shared on Maundy Thursday. It should be emphasised, if this happens, that such meals, whether conducted online or in the home, are distinct from the celebration of Holy Communion, which must be presided over by a priest. *Lent, Holy Week, Easter* (SPCK, 1986) shows how this can be done.'

- Might a wider recovery of the agape meal - shared easily at home – be a helpful introduction? In your view, would this be simply to comfort and sustain us during a fast from the Eucharist, or something that the Church of England should consider using in the longer term?

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² From *Discipleship Ministries, the United Methodist Church* <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/the-love-feast>