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The King's Banqueting House

A Devotional Review of the Lord's Supper

BY THE REV. D. K. DEAN, M.A., B.D.

IT has been repeatedly noticed that all too often the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper has become the battleground of contending views and diverse opinions. That which was given as a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves one to another has become the signal for an ever-recurring blast of bitterness. This is inevitable, since it was around the Sacrifice of the Mass that the chief battle of the Reformation raged. Ridley and Latimer, Cranmer and a host of others, suffered at the stake for their denial of this, the cardinal error of Rome; and it is really astonishing that out of such a furious controversy there should have issued the beautiful Form which has been handed down to us in "The Order of the Administration of the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion". Whilst, much as we love our Prayer Book, we can see quite clearly the need for a careful, prayerful, scriptural revision to make it even better adapted to our modern situation, it would appear that after 400 years the Holy Communion Service could scarcely be improved.

Our present purpose is not to examine in detail the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, but the Liturgy in which the sacrament is brought to us; and to do this not historically but devotionally. Doctrine cannot be divorced from devotion of course, nor liturgy from history. These aspects will not therefore go unnoticed, but will be commented upon so far as they appear to affect our main object, which is to grasp afresh for ourselves and others the precious truths set forth therein, to enjoy again the wonder of familiar words of which we can never tire, although we may sometimes allow constant use to make us forgetful of their meaning. It is a melancholy fact that many church members have let slip the thrill of the sacrament—often, it may be, because they have grown over-familiar with its setting. We may be able to help them re-capture something of their first love as we approach it again along old but half-forgotten lines.

Here, O my Lord, I see Thee face to face ;
Here faith can touch and handle things unseen ;
Here would I grasp with firmer hand Thy grace,
And all my weariness upon Thee lean.
Here would I feed upon the Bread of God ;
Here drink with Thee the royal Wine of heaven :
Here would I lay aside each earthly load,
Here taste afresh the calm of sins forgiven.

Here are six features of the Church of England Order of the most comfortable sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ.

(1) *Reality of Worship*. It is this which permeates the whole service and dominates all other features. As in the case of the whole Prayer Book we are conscious from the outset of the deep devotion

which has inspired its composition. "They that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth." No mere form of words confronts us here, as some clever combination of finely turned phrases. We are in the sanctuary with the saints who have walked with God, and the prayers they have prayed and passed on to us find an echo in the depths of our own hearts. It was when Jesus was praying in a certain place that His disciples came to Him with the request: "Lord, teach us to pray". They had not known prayer quite like this, and they yearned to know it as He knew and practised it. And we seem as we approach His Table to be learning to pray with those who have first learned from Him.

(2) *Beauty of Form.* "O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness." In general structure our order is very much older than the Reformation period in which it took final shape. Based upon ancient forms, the framework was there already. But at that time it was altered, enlarged, pruned, purged, re-arranged, adapted, by a master hand. The first step was taken in 1548, and a thrill must have swept through many on the historic Easter Day when, in the midst of the Latin Mass, there was suddenly heard the first English ever spoken to them as part of their public worship. The Long Exhortation, Invitation, Confession and Absolution, Comfortable Words, Prayer of Humble Access, and Words of Administration, marked the beginning of a new era in public worship. And this proved to be but the first step to the English Prayer Book of 1549 and its fully reformed successor in 1552.

Yet still the thing which surprises us is the wisdom and the restraint which retained so much that was good in the old form whilst rejecting all that was corrupt. With all the ability which the passage of time brings to stand back and view from a distance, the verdict of evangelicals at all events, and not of them alone, is fairly unanimous that the choice between good and bad could hardly have been better made. The Collect for Purity, Nicene Creed, Proper Prefaces, Sursum Corda, Ter Sanctus, etc., were all carried over, and further use made of such continental sources as Hermann's Consultatio (to which, incidentally, we owe our Confession and Comfortable Words). An example of careful treatment is the way the old Roman Canon was carved up, the clearly guided distribution of the parts, and the exclusion of unreformed doctrine.

From the whole, numerous directions for crossing, kissing, bowing, censing, washing, raising eyes, clasping hands, were omitted. Now minister and worshippers are carried together reverently, peacefully, unhurriedly, through a service which inspires an atmosphere of charm, beauty, and devotion. Little wonder that it has been copied and borrowed by religious bodies outside our own communion!

(3) *Dignity of Ceremonial.* Genuflections, ambulations, osculations, ablutions *ad nauseam* give way to a quiet dignity which aids instead of distracts, and the rubrics bear witness to the rationale of the many changes made in this direction. The altar has gone, and in its place stands the Lord's Table. There are no altar lights, but the Table is to have a fair white linen cloth upon it. Instead of priestly vestments there are the same seemly robes as at other services. The

sacrificing position has gone—"The priest humbly standing afore the midst of the altar" (1549) being changed to "The priest standing at the North side of the Table" (1552)—for all the contemptuous description by one brother of another as "a beastly north-ender"! There are no wafers, but the best and purest wheat bread that conveniently may be gotten; no Latin, but the best and purest English that conveniently may be spoken; no elevation of the Host, no prostration and adoration, but the kneeling posture for reception to avoid profanation and disorder and to signify humble and grateful acknowledgment of the benefits of Christ; no *epiklesis* upon the elements, but an *anamnesis* of Christ Himself and of His death; no reservation but a reverent consuming of the surplus consecrated elements; no hearing Mass but a partaking in a true Communion; no witnessing of a sacrifice but a simple demonstration in the manual acts of what took place in the upper room; no Corporal Presence of Christ's natural Flesh and Blood, but the Real Presence of the Risen Saviour Who has promised: "Where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them".

(4) *Piety of Spirit.* The opening Collect sets the tone of the service. In it we pray that the very thoughts of our hearts—that is, the deepest motives and innermost springs of action—may be cleansed by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; and the purpose of this radical operation is that we may love Him perfectly and worthily magnify His holy Name. As the Ten Commandments are recited (and there can be no mistaking the direction to rehearse distinctly all the Ten Commandments) the simple *kyrie* after each one drives home the lesson of the collect that we have broken every one of them in spirit if not in letter, and that only God Himself can incline our hearts to keep them by writing them all in the place where they have all been disobeyed. Our Giving is raised to the same level of spiritual devotion, with Offertory Sentences dealing with almost every aspect of this great subject. The Exhortations challenge our consciences in such terms as:

Therefore if any of you be a blasphemers of God, an hinderer or a slanderer of His Word, an adulterer, or be in malice, or envy, or any other grievous crime, repent you of your sins, or else come not to that holy Table. . .

Judge therefore yourselves, brethren, that ye be not judged of the Lord . . . so shall ye be meet partakers of those holy mysteries . . . submitting ourselves wholly to His holy will and and pleasure, and studying to serve Him in true holiness and righteousness all the days of our life.

The Invitation follows naturally upon the third Long Exhortation, being extended to "Ye that *do* truly and earnestly repent . . . and *are* in love and charity . . . and *intend* to lead a new life". The Confession, Absolution and Comfortable Words take us to our sin, the fact of forgiveness and the ground of our assurance—the Bible says! Even after the burst of praise which all pardoned sinners must want to join, in company with the whole host of heaven, we are brought again to the humble acknowledgment of our own utter unworthiness and of our dependence on God's mercy alone.

To receive the Communion "all meekly kneeling" seems too obviously appropriate to need a great deal of explanation were it not that the simplest actions may be misconstrued (and not without some reason), whilst both the post-Communion Thanksgivings breathe the humble desire to yield ourselves wholly to God's service and to do those things which please Him. The Gloria in Excelsis itself breaks out into cries for mercy.

Side by side with repentance is faith. In fact, the former without the latter is but a meaningless wail, no better than a mournful dirge. Article XXV states of both sacraments: ". . . in such only as worthily receive the same they have a wholesome effect or operation". Article XXVIII: ". . . to such as rightly, worthily and with faith receive the same, the Bread which we break is a partaking of the Body of Christ; and likewise the Cup of Blessing is a partaking of the Blood of Christ". So the Long Exhortation "Have a lively and stedfast faith in Christ our Saviour"; the Invitation: "Draw near with faith"; Words of Administration: "Feed on Him in thy heart by faith" "Drink this in remembrance that Christ's Blood was shed for thee". The emphasis throughout is on the faith of the worthy recipient, who is trusting not in his own righteousness but in God's manifold and great mercies.

(5) *Fidelity to Scripture.* A Free Churchman recently said: "I defy anyone to point to any service which has more scripture in it than a service of the Church of England". The standard in regard to scripture laid down explicitly in the XXXIX Articles and implicit in the whole Book of Common Prayer is maintained throughout the Order of the Administration of the Lord's Supper. It begins with the Lord's Prayer (from the Gospels) and ends with the Blessing (from the Epistles). The Decalogue, the Epistle and Gospel, the Offertory Sentences (except two), the Comfortable Words, are all taken from the Bible. And there are many other references to scripture passages and subjects. The Prayer of Consecration contains the recitation of the Lord's words of institution spoken in the upper room. The Prayer for the Church Militant contains the petition "Grant that all they that do confess thy holy Name may agree in the truth of thy holy Word". Or to quote the first Long Exhortation: ". . . so that ye may come holy and clean to such a heavenly feast, in the marriage garment required by God in holy Scripture . . ." "If there be any of you who . . . requireth further comfort or counsel, let him come to me, or to some other discreet and learned Minister of God's Word, and open his grief; that by the ministry of God's holy Word he may receive the benefit of absolution . . ." How different is this, incidentally, from the old so-called Sacrament of Penance, with its auricular confession and perfunctory absolution, of which Hooker writes: "The careless manner of their absolution hath made discipline for the most part among them a bare formality, yea, rather a means of emboldening unto vicious and wicked life".

(6) *Centrality of the Cross.* Perhaps the bitterest of all denunciations in the XXXIX Articles is that in XXXI, in which the sacrifices of Masses (the plural in contrast not with the Sacrifice of the Mass but with the one Offering of Calvary) are described as blasphemous

fables and dangerous deceits. The reason for the malediction is to be found in the first part of the Article, with its description of the Offering of Christ once made as "that perfect redemption, propitiation and satisfaction for all the sins of the whole world" "and there is none other satisfaction for sin, but that alone". Cranmer, in his *Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ* says: "The greatest blasphemy and injury that can be against Christ . . . is this: that the priests make their Mass a service propitiatory, to remit the sins as well of themselves as of others . . . and to make such an oblation and sacrifice as never creature made, but Christ alone, neither He made the same any more times than once, and that was by His death on the cross". "The Mass" says Ridley "is a new blasphemous kind of sacrifice, to satisfy and pay the price of sins . . . to the great and intolerable contumely of Christ our Saviour, His death and passion, which was, and is, the only sufficient and everlasting and available sacrifice . . ." So Cranmer again, in well-known words: "The very body of the tree—or rather the roots of the weeds—is the popish doctrine of Transubstantiation, of the real presence of Christ's flesh and blood in the sacrament of the altar (as they call it) and of the sacrifice and oblation of Christ made by the priest, for the salvation of the quick and the dead; which roots, if they be suffered to grow in the Lord's vineyard, they will overspread all the ground again with the old errors and superstitions".

So it would be true to say that the whole of our service of Holy Communion revolves around the necessity and sufficiency of the sacrifice of Calvary. The Ante-Communion is a careful building up to this great and central theme: the Collect with its recognition of God's perfect knowledge of the sinful human heart; the Decalogue with its emphasis upon God's unswerving standard for human conduct; the Creed indicating our acceptance of the Truth about Himself; the Epistle and Gospel forming the proclamation of His Word and demanding our reception of His revelation and message. "Who for us men and for our salvation" we confess in the Creed "came down from heaven . . . And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate". Each of the Exhortations has similar references:

" . . . to be by them received in remembrance of his meritorious Cross and Passion; whereby alone we obtain remission of our sins, and are made partakers of the Kingdom of heaven".

"And as the Son of God did vouchsafe to yield up His soul by death upon the Cross for your salvation; so it is your duty to receive the Communion in remembrance of the sacrifice of His death, as He Himself hath commanded."

"And above all things ye must give most humble and hearty thanks to God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, for the redemption of the world by the death and passion of our Saviour Christ, both God and man; who did humble Himself, even to the death upon the Cross, for us, miserable sinners, who lay in darkness and the shadow of death; that He might make us the children of God, and exalt us to everlasting life."

The Comfortable Words are four key Gospel texts; and the Proper

Preface for the Easter Octave, although heard only at this one season, gives in a nutshell a very satisfying account of the Atonement. The Proper Prefaces are amongst the inspired retentions from the Sarum Missal, and the insertion of the clauses "which was offered for us" (after "the Lamb") and "to us" (after "restored") brings home in true Reformation style the truths of the Gospel and benefits of the Cross to the believers themselves.

The Prayer of Humble Access not only sees in the Incarnation God's gracious purpose and plan in the redemption of our bodies, but also looks to the shedding of the precious blood of Christ for the cleansing of the soul—although, of course, in another sense the two are inseparable, as is also clearly implied. It is to be expected that the Prayer of Consecration should start from the Cross as the means of our salvation, for this is the very climax, objectively (as the reception of the elements is the climax subjectively) of what is described in Article XXVIII as "a Sacrament of our Redemption by Christ's death". All the same, opportunity is taken here, too, to reiterate that He "made there (by His one oblation of Himself once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world". The application is made to the individual communicant who is reminded: "The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . was given for thee"; "The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . was shed for thee"; "Christ died for thee"; "Christ's Blood was shed for thee". And after Communion the theme is continued as if to make it a never-to-be-forgotten anthem, like the new song of Revelation v:

" . . . most humbly beseeching thee to grant, that by the merits and death of thy Son Jesus Christ, and through faith in His blood, we and all thy whole Church may obtain remission of our sins, and all other benefits of His passion";

" . . . heirs through hope of thy everlasting kingdom, by the merits of the most precious death and passion of thy dear Son".

So as the strains of the Gloria in Excelsis die away, in the midst of which we have cried afresh for mercy to the Lamb of God "that takest away the sins of the world", we hear with beating heart yet strangely rested spirit the benediction which whispers a peace that passes all understanding.
