

This sermon is specifically intended to help the congregation in considering where to receive Communion – high altar, or around nave altar.

Readings Ephesians 1^{15-end}; Matthew 25^{31-end}

Christ the King

Our Collect and readings for today, when we remember that Christ is our King, call us to look outwards. Just in fact as Jesus did. You'd be more likely to find him talking to crowds on a hillside, eating with those whom society shunned, talking to the homeless – rather there, than in “church”.

However, at the end of that extract from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he reminds them – and us – that
“God has appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”

The body needs maintenance. It needs to be healthy. It needs to be comfortable in itself. So that it – we – *can* look outwards with suitable confidence and joy.

This is why we gather together for worship, and why it is important to do so. There are several strands to our worship, as the opening words to our service of Morning and Evening Prayer remind us:

*to offer our praise and thanksgiving,
to hear and receive God's holy word,
to pray for the needs of the world,
and to seek forgiveness of our sins.*

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We do that, the bidding concludes,
*that by the power of the Holy Spirit
we may give ourselves to the service of God.*

Looking outwards again!

There is of course a further strand in this service – Communion. The sharing of bread and wine. Whether it's Family, Parish, or Holy – it's still, Communion. (Have you ever wondered why a Parish Communion isn't Holy?)

Communion. What is it that we do? Why do we do it? *How* do we do it? And it's that last point that leads me to this focus, this morning, in this church.

Whenever we change liturgy, or change church layout, we have an opportunity to address how these changes impact on our inherited way of doing things. Do things need to be done differently?

And we aren't good at this, are we. We aren't good at it because we are creatures of habit. Each of us - me included. Take my dog collar from me and I bet I'd gravitate to the same pew each week.

Where and how do we receive the bread and wine?
Why?

But let's begin at the beginning....

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I ask of you a big leap of imagination. A huge leap. Pretend I'm Jesus.

Smaller leap – each of you is one of the 12 apostles. We are celebrating the Passover meal in the way we've done for as long as we can remember. Jesus prepares to share bread at the beginning of the meal. *Pick up bread.* Standard practice.

But then...

Walk to dais front –

“This is my body. Take, eat; remember me.”

What was all that about?

And then, again standard practice, at the end of the meal, Jesus takes the cup of wine *pick up chalice*

“This is my blood; the blood of the new covenant. It's shed for you and many others. Drink it: remember me.

What are you thinking? Has our leader had too much wine?

But you're used to his picture language. It is sometimes bizarre. Shepherd – yep: got that. Light of the world: OK, see the imagery there. Bread of life?

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Living water? Hmmmmmm... I am the bread of life...
This is my body.....

Jesus doesn't explain. Maybe, on that evening before his arrest, mock trials and execution, he has other things on his mind. Or maybe he's being very smart...

“This bread is my body. Eat it. Remember me.”

“This wine is my blood. Drink it. Remember me.”

If I were to ask each of you to write down on a piece of paper what you understand happens when I say those prescribed words in our Eucharistic Prayer – don't worry, I'm not going to – but if I did, I expect I'd get a whole range of answers.

The point is – and this is Jesus' smartness – it doesn't matter. What *does* matter is that we do it and remember him. And he gives us permission, I suggest, to have our own understanding.

And as we eat bread and drink wine together, in this context, Communion happens. “Com” = together with; “union” =, well, union.

We are, somehow, in union with Christ through that bread and wine.

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And because we do this together, we are in union with one another. “We are one body, because we all share in one bread...” Com-union.

We don’t need to get hung up on *how* this works: Christian experience from the word go tells us that it *does* work. It unites the gathered Christians; and it gives each of us something of Christ within – however we understand that, too. We are, in a sense, what we eat.

This is *what* we do, and *why* we do it.

But – *how* do we “do this”?

That has always been influenced by how our church understands “this is my body”, “this is my blood”. How we understand what happens to the bread, to the wine, as we set it aside for God’s use.

There’s a whole spectrum of understanding – of *belief* actually – from them being physically and chemically changed to Christ’s body and Christ’s blood, to them remaining simply bread and wine as we re-enact the Last Supper. Where we are on that spectrum will deeply, fundamentally, affect how we handle those elements, how we “do this”.

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50 years ago, our Church of England started to experiment with different liturgy to the Book of Common Prayer, the BCP.

Up to that point, since 1662, every Communion service in every church followed the same words, every time. For 300 years.

That gives a very deep, long lasting tradition. Very firmly embedded in our church culture and practice.

The BCP's theology gave the position on that spectrum for bread and body, wine and blood.

One of the central strands to BCP's thinking is that God is all-powerful, all-good, and in comparison we are pathetically weak, mostly bad, and need to put ourselves humbly at God's mercy for his undeserved and gracious forgiveness.

2 things follow. Firstly, we are going "up" that spectrum. The bread and wine represent the pure, good, amazing Jesus Christ, God's Son, who died for us; and we are not worthy even to gather up the crumbs from under his table.

(It is a very deep tradition isn't it – we still have those words as an option in our Common Worship service.)

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We treat the bread and wine with no little reverence.

Secondly, we are acutely aware that God's kingdom is still an awfully long way from being fully established, miserable sinners that we are. The kingdom is yet to come. It's going to have to rely on Jesus' return. It is *beyond* where we are.

Given all that, in 300 years of BCP Communion, *walk to high altar*

I'm up here. I'm leading the people *towards* that kingdom beyond. I face the same direction as you. I'm talking to God on your behalf – pleading for you, even. Not that I'm any less an unworthy sinner than you are: but I have been ordained, set apart, to “do this” on your behalf.

I enter the holy of holies, as it were, where you lot are not permitted to go. The closest you can get is the edge of the sanctuary – the altar step. The “foot of the mountain”, as it were. You approach with head bowed, kneel at the barrier rail, and receive.

For 300 years. *Walk back.*

After 35 years of experimenting with new liturgies for Communion, Common Worship was born.

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Its theology puts it on a rather different, “lower” point on the spectrum for bread and body, wine and blood.

It has a very different emphasis on the kingdom. The kingdom is amongst us. True, not fully established: but signs of it are around us. “The King is among us.”

And we share in Christ’s Last Supper: we share that together around the dining table as it were. I am talking to you, as Jesus talked to his disciples, rather than talking

away from you to God. I lead us in a re-enactment of that Passover Supper.

It is therefore much more appropriate for me to be doing this *with* you, not in a distant special place. Hence the nave altar.

The bread and wine thus become more like they were at that first Last Supper: an enigmatic, “this is Christ’s body”: “this is Christ’s blood”. We interpret that as we each best can.

Probably, just as did those first 12 apostles. And we share the bread, the wine, just as they did.

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It's still *Communion*. Through “doing this”, we are still placing ourselves in union with Christ, and in union with one another.

Pause

So.... Where and how do we receive the bread and wine? In this church, at this time?

I hope my words this morning have helped.

From my point of view, with this our Common Worship Communion service, the “how we do this” best reflects its theology when we feel we are sharing in that Last Supper around the table.

So, I hope you will indulge me this morning if I ask that you receive the bread and wine here, at the dais.

It may be that you, this congregation, need to give more thought beyond this morning to your preferred way of “doing this” as you remember Jesus our King.

But let's not lose perspective on this. The important thing is that we do as Jesus says – eat, drink, remember him. Eat, drink, remember him.

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However we understand it, we are thereby in Communion – together with, in union – both with Christ our King, and with one another.

Then, fed with this spiritual food – however we understand that – we are better equipped to look outwards, as today's readings and collect demand that we should. And as our King would wish.

Rev Christopher Etherton, 26th November 2017

