

Come and Eat

Draw near with faith

Come to this table, not because you must but because you may,
not because you are strong, but because you are weak.

Come, not because any goodness of your own gives you a right to come,
but because you need mercy and help.

Come, because you love the Lord a little and would like to love him more.

Come, because he loved you and gave himself for you.

Come and meet the risen Christ, for we are his Body.

The words are taken from a Baptist service book, adapted I think from the invitation to communion from the Iona Community. The words are an invitation within an invitation. The Lord and the Church invite us to come and eat: to share in the rich banquet which is the service of Holy Communion.

As we regather physically as the Church, we are regaining a sense of how rich this whole banquet can be. Yesterday I arrived in the University Church in Oxford for a confirmation to the sound of church bells ringing: the first time for many months. I am valuing the beauty of our buildings more for not having been in them. It is a privilege and joy to be with the people of God in person again.

There are many elements to the service as we have seen. We praise God. We listen to the Scriptures and reflect on them together. We confess our sins and declare our faith again in the living God. We pray for the needs of the world. We are reconciled to one another as we exchange the peace.

The president takes bread and wine, gives thanks, breaks the bread and pours the wine and shares both with the people, in normal times. The banquet looks back to the last supper, to the miracles of feeding in the gospels and further back still to the manna in the desert and the Passover. And the banquet looks forward to the great party which will last for ever: the great feast in the kingdom of heaven.

So the feast is rich indeed, engaging our minds and our bodies, our senses, our memories, our identity, our hope. But at the very centre comes this invitation within an invitation to come and eat and drink at the table of the Lord.

These are the more familiar words from Common Worship:

Draw near with faith. Receive the body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he gave for you, and his blood, which he shed for you. Eat and drink in remembrance that he died for you and feed on him in your hearts by faith with thanksgiving.

Here, in the very heart of the service, each person makes a response of faith and comes to receive the bread and, in normal times, the wine, holding out empty hands. We each return to our places and kneel in quiet devotion, in holy communion with the Lord, every person receiving in faith what is needed in this moment.

These words and actions, as we have seen, were not invented by the church. These words and actions were given to the church not by the apostles or by any Christian ministers. They were given by Jesus himself. We have seen how Jesus at the Last Supper gave meaning to his death and gave this command to the church: do this in remembrance of me.

We know that in John's gospel after the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus describes himself as the bread of life. There is something here greater than manna, he teaches them. Moses gave the Israelites manna to eat each day in the wilderness to sustain them, to keep them going through the desert. But Jesus does more than provide bread. Jesus himself is the bread – and not just bread that sustains, but bread which gives life in all its fulness. When Jesus invites us to come and eat, we are not being invited simply to eat and drink in his presence and to remember and look forward. We are being invited to eat and drink Jesus himself, to share in his life.

These words are the final part of John 6, the part even his disciples find it hard to understand:

“Very truly I tell you, unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them”.

As we share in Holy Communion so we are united with Jesus our Lord and with his death and his resurrection. We share in the forgiveness of our sins and the hope of eternal life. In the midst of the storms and uncertainties of this world and our own restlessness, there is in this simple act a moment of deep peace: we abide and rest in Jesus. Jesus abides and rests in us. Holy Communion. The same word used here for abide is used in John 15 for the branch resting and growing in the vine. Jesus is present, living in us. Our identity and our life rests in and with him.

The first disciples find these sayings and these truths challenging, and so do we at many different levels. It's challenging certainly to understand what is happening and to trust the words of Jesus. Christians have often disagreed, sometimes violently, about how to understand the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. But the words are challenging at other levels as well: to our self-sufficiency and pride and the forging of our identity apart from God. Can we really not live out this Christian life on our own? Are we really like everyone else? Do we want to be part, closely part, of this wider body of Christ?

The invitation from Common Worship is our guide as we respond to Christ's invitation to come and eat – the invitation within the invitation. Every line is full of meaning.

First we are invited to draw near: this means come close to God, to the place where God has promised to meet with us in the bread and in the wine. Because we are physical beings, flesh and blood, it can be helpful to get out of our seats and move – not because God is more present at one end of the church more than the other, but because our moving signifies a desire to respond to God's grace and presence with us.

We are invited to draw near with faith: believing the words of Jesus that Christ is here and will be near to us. To receive the body of our Lord Jesus Christ which he gave for you and his blood which he shed for you: these are the words the president has recalled in the great prayer of thanksgiving, echoing Christ at the last supper. We are here because of what God has done for us, because of all that Christ has given to us. We come hungry and thirsty for God. We come with empty hands needing the gifts of forgiveness and new purpose and life which are in these simple actions. And Christ comes to us in the bread and in the wine through faith.

We are invited then to eat and to drink the bread and the wine in remembrance that he died for us: to hold in our minds, as we receive Holy Communion, Christ's gift of himself on the cross and all this means for our salvation. And finally, we are asked to feed on him in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving. Although the physical portions of bread and wine are small, we are invited to abide here, to savour this sacrament, to feed on him in our hearts by faith and with thanksgiving. And this is the place to focus our hearts and our devotion as we return and kneel to pray: a simple act, an inner prayer, of thanksgiving.

At the present time, because of the pandemic, Holy Communion cannot be shared in the normal ways still. Some of us remain vulnerable to infection and cannot meet physically so receive spiritually, without the physical elements. For those who can be present, we receive mostly in one kind only, the bread. We cannot as yet share in the Common cup. All of us want our normal practices to be restored as one day they will be. There are debates across the Church about how the present situation should affect our normal practice. Those conversations need to happen, but must not take away from the central truths that Christ is present in the Eucharist to the Church, whether we receive spiritually or physically, in one kind or both kinds: God's grace is sufficient to overcome any limitation.

As we eat and drink these holy gifts, Christ is present in us. As we receive his body, together, we become his body. We are transformed together into his likeness, each refracting a different part of the rainbow grace of God. Celebrating and receiving Holy Communion must always be more than an individual action. As we are united with Christ, so we are united with one another around the table of the Lord. Our wounds are healed and our fellowship mended:

As the president breaks the bread, they will say:

We break this bread to share in the body of Christ

And we respond:

Though we are many we are one body because we all share in the one bread.

Through these very simple actions, the scattered and dispersed Church is drawn together as one. Through receiving Holy Communion, we ourselves are changed from within, through faith, to be a more Christ-like Church to become more holy. Through this response to the grace of God in one place, our worship and life are joined to the life of the Church in every time and place. Through the Eucharist, we become, more and more, one holy catholic and apostolic church.

And this word apostolic prepares us for the final act of the service. As disciples, Jesus calls us to be with him and to be sent out. The word *apostello* means, in Greek, I send. In Latin, the word is *missio*. Calling the service the Mass, from that word mission, stresses this dimension of being sent out in God's mission.

After we have shared in Holy Communion together, there are moments of quiet reflection as our lives are joined again with Christ's life and with one another. But there is then the moment in the brief but vital prayers at the end of the service when we offer our lives afresh to God's mission in the world. And this prayer is a vital part of our worship:

"Almighty God, we thank you for feeding us with the body and blood of your Son Jesus Christ."

In this first movement of the prayer, we each offer our own thanks, our eucharist, in words and then in the dedication of our lives.

"Through him we offer you our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice."

The biblical reference here is to Romans 12.1:

"I appeal to you therefore brothers and sisters by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship."

Worship, especially in the Eucharist, is not something which can be done in isolation from the rest of our lives, like a hobby or a spare-time activity. There must be a deep continuity between our worship on Sundays and our daily lives from Monday to Saturday. As Christ has given his life for us, so we offer our lives to him, week by week, in every part. The prayer continues:

"Send us out in the power of the Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory".

Each week, God renews us our engagement in God's great work of Christian mission, in our everyday faith, in our homes and families, in our workplaces, in our ministry in and through the church and in our wider society. After the blessing, the minister sends us out Sunday by Sunday to be the body of Christ in the world with these key words:

“Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.”

These words mean far more than ‘it’s time to go home now’. We are being sent out to live and work for Christ and to carry the love of God into every part of our communities, renewed in our faith and in our discipleship and restored in our Christian fellowship.

Thank you for sharing this journey through these four podcasts as the Church regathers around the table of the Lord. This is the meal through which God will build up his tired and depleted church after all of the demands of the last 15 months. We need to come and eat and be restored.

This is the meal through which God reminds us Sunday by Sunday of who we are, the people of God, called and formed by the risen Christ and especially by his death on the cross for our sins. We need to come and eat and to remember whose we are.

This is the meal through which God summons us Sunday by Sunday to the banquet of the kingdom, to remember the needs and imperfections of the world around us and to look forward to the great banquet in heaven. We need to come and eat, to have hope and justice rekindled in our hearts.

And this is the meal where Jesus Christ is both the host and the banquet: where we come and receive grace upon grace as we receive his presence and life in bread and wine, and feed on him in our hearts with thanksgiving. We need to come and eat, to abide in holy communion and then to hear afresh God’s call to dedicate our lives to God’s service.

Listen again as we end this series to George Herbert’s beautiful poem Love III and to these tender words of grace:

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lack’d anything.

‘A guest,’ I answer’d, ‘worthy to be here:’
 Love said, ‘You shall be he.’
‘I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
 I cannot look on Thee.’
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
 ‘Who made the eyes but I?’
‘Truth, Lord; but I have marr’d them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.’
‘And know you not,’ says Love, ‘Who bore the blame?’
 ‘My dear, then I will serve.’
‘You must sit down,’ says Love, ‘and taste my meat.’
 So I did sit and eat.