

FROM PRIVATISED HABIT TO SACRAMENTAL LIVING

“The Eucharist has been preempted and redefined in dualistic thinking that leaves the status quo of the world untouched, so congregations can take the meal without raising questions of violence; the outcome is a ‘colonised imagination’ that is drained of dangerous hope.” Walter Brueggemann

1. Sacraments Beyond COVID-19

The current COVID-19 crisis has changed the life of the Church radically. The traditional worship gathering of the Church, alongside other similar gatherings have been prohibited. Many churches have creatively introduced E-Worship services with audio and video recorded sermons. The challenge has however, been with the celebration of the sacraments, especially Holy Communion.

The current murmurings and agitation around Holy Communion have been more on what people has referred to as a doctrinal debate. The debate has focused more on the digital or virtual or online technical administration of Holy Communion. The protagonists in the debate have, importantly and yet narrowly, focused on the “technicalities” of the doctrine as they argue such concepts as the transubstantiation or co-transubstantiation- and asking questions that want to know at what point are the elements consecrated and made sacred and who has the right to preside and distribute the elements. This has advertently brought in the issue of ordination to word and sacrament.

The whole debate begs the question that a clergy friend of mine asked: What do we mean by doctrine? Is the debate, on Holy Communion reduced a nostalgic retrieval of some fossilized denominational heritage or institutional ritual or privatised habit that has been archived or preserved in some form of dogmatic museum that only the theological elite can understand? Or is there a possibility to go further, deeper and focus the debate on the sacraments and Holy Communion in particular, as a dynamic, organic, radical and prophetic practice with spiritual efficacy for daily living?

The same must be asked about ordination to Word and Sacrament. Is it a mere call to go on an ecclesiastical safari of dispensing the sacraments? Or is it about being God’s agent in the systemic and structural transformation of the lives of God’s People? COVID-19 has sharpened and made the need for the reflection, with the rediscovery of sacramental living, more urgent.

The reaffirmation of the theology of sacraments and rediscovery of the spirituality of sacramental living calls us to;

- live visible lives that speak of the invisible sacramental faith and hope that inspire us
- live lives that make us carriers of grace to those around us
- live our Baptism and Holy Communion out in a practical and transformative way

Sacramental living, counsel the Vogels, happens when we go beyond the logical explanations and embrace mystery; “Paths of sacramental living lead us beneath the surface to a sense of real presence. We are led to a deeper and more holistic appreciation and appropriation of life.” (Vogel and Vogel 1989:138)

2. Doctrine of Sacraments

The Wesleyan Theology and Methodist practice of Sacraments is steeped in the tradition of the Church which is itself rooted in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Writing on Sacraments in the United Methodist Church, Stamm traces this tradition to the time of Jesus with the Apostles; “Paul reminded them (and us) that the sacraments are always ‘handed on’ to us... So, the sacraments did not begin with us, or with the first Methodists; but they began with Jesus and the apostles.” (Stamm 1989:14) St Paul reminded the Corinthian elitist group; “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and said; “This is my body that is for you...” (1 Cor 11:23ff)

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), like all protestant churches acknowledges the two Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. Baptism is viewed as “an outward sign of the new life which God offers to all people through the work and marks the entry of the person baptized into God’s family, the Church.” Regarding the Lord’s Supper, the MCSA teaches; “In Holy Communion the people of God of every time and place become united with God and with each other.”

3. The Radical Origin of Holy Communion

There is so much evidence that COVID-19 has sharply exposed the socio-economic contradictions of the society we live in. We have seen how in essence the scandalous realities of poverty, unemployment and inequality. It is more embarrassing and shameful that the Church of Christ, despite the liberating Gospel of the Reign of God [Kingdom] that Christ taught, lived and modelled for us, reflects the same racial, gender, ethnic and class divisions.

The concept of sacramental-prophetic living implores us to live a life alternative to the dominant culture that our society is finding thrives on. The liturgy of the Sacrament of Holy Communion carries within itself certain focus practices that must remind us what the essence and authentic meaning of the Eucharist for radical daily living.

3.1. Communion in a Divided and Exclusionary World

We must establish and rediscover, in a world characterized by the “heresy of individualism” and “cult of private religion”, what the value of Holy Communion is. There is evidence in both the bible and the Christian tradition that Holy Communion was a corporate and communal feast.

Part of the fundamental essence of this sacrament is that it is a Holy Communion Table set to unite rather than divide and to include rather than exclude. We should ask ourselves; in a world that is so divided and exclusionary along race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation and disability, what is the radical nature of the Holy Communion. The Table that Christ set for his disciples is one that is meant to be of deep koinonia – a radical fellowship that demonstrates deep love and solidarity that seeks to undermine stereotypes, prejudices and cross boundaries.

These divisions and exclusions around the Last Supper were observed by St Paul in the Church in Corinth where the rich wanted to exclude the ordinary poor people and turn it into a mere

social gathering for purposes of entertainment. Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf.” (1 Corinthians 10:17)

It is therefore the radical spirituality of the Holy Communion that must make us establish who is it that society has excluded and marginalized. How do so the spirituality of the Holy Communion afflict us with discomfort to seek to include into fellowship

3.2. The Subversive Memory of Holy Communion

It is unfortunate for the Church to impoverish, dilute and reduce the power of Holy Communion by only debating the ritual act of consecration and distribution. In the institution of this Sacrament Christ proclaimed; “Do this in remembrance of me.” (1 Cor. 11:23-25; cf. Mat26:26-29; Mk 14:22-25; Lk 22:14-20) The Last Supper “...is the memorial (anamnesis) of the crucified and risen Lord that proclaims and makes effective in the present one, perfect and sufficient sacrifice...” (MCSA Book of Order 2016: 16) That memory is not just a sentimental but a liberating act.

“The memory of Jesus Christ is a dangerous and liberating memory that continues to question what is reigning over the present and opens up our envisioning and moving into the future. Seen in this way, Christian faith becomes dangerous, subversive memory, which is at the core of critical consciousness.” (Bloomquist 2016:66)

Furthermore;

“A sacrament re-members us, puts us back together, heals our individual and corporate fragmentation. As such, sacraments are curial, even in the specific forms they take, for our effort to embody the universality of our personhood in away that transcends culture, countries, class, society and temporal history.” (Cavanaugh 2006:157)

Our memory of the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ must link us to the suffering, death and with hope, the resurrection of the ordinary people of God. This must locate the Church squarely in the agenda of social justice and ministry of healing and transformation of the world.

3.3. Passing the Peace in a Violent Society

One significant part of the Holy Communion liturgy is the act of passing the peace. This an important element in the context of the violent nature of the society that we live in. Whereas David is proud, in Psalm 23, that the Lord sets the table in the presence of his enemies, Holy Communion is set for peace and reconciliation with enemies. Our liturgy includes the opening of our hearts as we share in the peace; “Peace of the Lord be with you.” And we receive the response; “And also with you.”

In his chapter titled; Table Manners for Peacebuilders: Holy Communion in the Life of Peacemaking, MCSA elder and Theologian, Rev Dr Peter Storey writes;

“The Holy Table is truly a site of peacebuilding and in our search for ways to break through conflict, alienation, and hate, we need to ask how this central act of our worship informs and resources our work. What are the ‘table manners’ that we learn in order to be effective peacebuilders.” (Storey in Porter 2006: 57)

3.4. The Sacred Meal in the Midst of Hunger

Prophetic theologians have understood Holy Communion as a meal that signifies abundance in the context of scarcity. Jesus Christ 's miraculous feeding of the multitudes as recorded by the Gospel in [Mk 6:41; Mk 8:6; Mt 15:36; Lk 9:16 and Jn6:11] have been understood by theologians as an event pointing out to the Eucharist.

“When we think of the signs of the Eucharist, we generally limit them to the consecrated bread and wine. But the sign goes beyond the simple elements of food and drink. It extends to the entire giving event which Jesus Christ initiated and made possible. The sign of the Eucharist lies in the human experience of a meal wherein is accomplished Jesus' ability to feed and nourish.” (Berner 1981 :72)

Similar to the liturgical formula of the Last Supper, the words of the feeding of the multitudes are repeated. Jesus *took the bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it*. Thus, central to Jesus Christ's Last Supper is the ministry of solidarity expressed through the bread broken and shared. The greatest sacramental and eucharistic liturgy that the Church can express is to offer and distribute food to the needy and hungry.

“Christians have a need to celebrate not simply the past mystery of Jesus, or the memory of the risen Lord, but the daily presence of Christ in the life of the Church... The more authentic our commitment to mission, to sharing the broken bread, the more will Christ's presence be recognized.” (Berner 1981:78)

Sacramental living is when we allow God to take, bless, break and give us to humanity in order to transform the systems and structures of the world for abundant life. In a world marked by selfishness, corruption and greed, sacramental living is about leading a life whose values are sacrifice and selflessness.

4. Conclusion

The debate on the doctrinal mechanics and technicalities may produce what some may excitedly consider as the so-called New Normal – with online or digital ways of consecrating and distributing Holy Communion. The COVID-19 Kairos may also be a Kairos - the moment where God is calling us to the Original Normal and authentic meaning of the sacred ritual of the Church of Christ.

It is my submission that both sacraments and especially Holy Communion offers the original counternarrative and countercultural reality – the Original Normal that we must rediscover, retrieve and appropriate to what those have forgotten may accept as the New Normal. This is for me, where the intensity of our focus must be. This God-moment, ushered in by the harshness of COVID-19 affords us a rare opportunity to appropriate the Christian faith and its doctrines, practices, rituals and liturgy for meaningful and egalitarian daily life. We dare not fail.

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