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The Eucharist: yesterday, today, and tomorrow

(2496 words, including notes)

Thomas O'Loughlin

Christianity is a religion of memory. We look to the future – indeed to beyond the future – and so we live today in such a way as to build that future, but we do so while recalling our past. Our past is significant because it identifies us, affirms that we are a community in a covenant with God, and provides us with a key to what is significant in that relationship. The journey we are on is always looking forward, but we understand it by looking at where we have come from. We must start from here, but for better and for worse, this ‘here’ is not some ideal spot but a result of the winding paths of the Christian pilgrimage – and for this reason historical enquiry is a valuable starting point in our theological reflection. This can nowhere be seen more clearly than when we consider that central moment of our gathering as the Church, when we become visible as the People we are, at our weekly celebration of the Eucharist.

When we consider this gathering – what it has been and what it has become – we attend to something precious, but also see how the work of a human community can become confused, misdirected, and even, at times, the very parody of what we claim is our reason for gathering. The history of the liturgy is, therefore, not an optional extra but a central means by which we can perform the constant task of reform and refocusing, and attend to the challenge that we ‘renew all things in the Christ’ (Eph 1:10).

Blessing and thanking the Father

So *why* do we gather? We give so many complex answers to this question that we often lose sight of the verbs that the first churches recalled to explain their gathering. They recalled that Jesus ‘blessed’ and ‘thanked’ – the two verbs were virtual synonyms at the time – God his Father. The fundamental sacrifice of the covenant – day by day – was the sacrifice of thanksgiving: we praise God for all that he has done, we thank him for our being, his love and care, and our thanking, our blessing him, are an expression of our love.

Blessing God was so fundamental an aspect of Jewish prayer that everyone was familiar with a variety of such prayers of praise, thanksgiving [eucharist], and blessing. All would have known the blessing after a meal, the *Birkat ha mazon*, which would mutate to become the earliest Eucharistic Prayer we can link with the followers of Jesus:

Now this is how you should engage in giving thanks, bless God in this way.

First, at the cup, say:

‘We give thanks to you, our Father,

for the holy vine of David, your servant, which you have made known to us.

Through Jesus, your servant, to you be glory forever.’¹

¹ *Didache* 9:1-3. Translation from T. O’Loughlin, *The Didache: A window on the earliest Christians* (London 2010); and see pp. 85-104 for more on their eucharistic practice.

But many would have known more elaborate prayers, such as those that were part of the daily liturgy of the Temple in Jerusalem such as:

Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of our ancestor Israel, forever and ever.
Yours, O Lord, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours;
yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all.
Riches and honour come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might; and it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all.

And now, our God, we give thanks to you and praise your glorious name.²
We think we know the Last Supper texts like the back of our hands, but do we? The strange fact is that if we could transport ourselves back we would want to know *the prayer to the Father* that Jesus uttered: but that was not recalled! Such knowledge was taken for granted: all knew the blessings! What they recalled was what was distinctive about the way Jesus acted at meals: so what they recalled were his words addressed to the group, in effect, his rubrics!³

So a basic element for the future is to recall that the central action of Jesus was blessing the Father, and that is the purpose of our assembly.

The Meal of the Church

We have a tendency to imagine that we have been ever so faithful to what has been handed down to us: nothing important has been lost! But the fact that Jesus used that most human of situations – the sharing of a meal – as the place where he wanted us to thank the Father, perform a new set of relationships of sharing and mutual love, and to image our view of our destiny, the heavenly banquet, has all but been lost to us. Instead of a great, shared community meal, we have a token affair: just a morsel (if that) of the shared loaf and, perhaps, a sip from the common cup. But unless we recall that the Eucharist was originally a meal we fail to see how it can be central to human life. Most of the time of most of the people who have ever lived has been spent obtaining, preparing and eating food. Moreover, we humans do not simply eat food or ‘take on nourishment’: we – and this is uniquely human – share meals.

Why did the meal disappear to be replaced with our tokenism? Imperial Rome was a highly stratified society and the idea of equality around the table was subversive. Do you really want to share your food with your slaves? Women at table was socially contentious and hesitations about purity were quickly re-established. A common meal was expensive: sharing with one’s equals was one thing, but providing for the down and outs was quite another! While common meals continued among the wealthy, the focus moved to the early morning and the banquet became but a vestige. But it is always worth recalling that Jesus was a most ‘impure’ Jew who ate with losers, sinners, women, and outcasts. The bitter criticism recalled as levelled at Jesus: ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them’ (Lk 15:2) must be a watchword for us as we seek to renew liturgy so that it speaks to a world hungry for insight and hope.

² Preserved in 1 Chron 29:10-13.

³ See T. O’Loughlin, ‘The “Eucharistic Words of Jesus”’: An Un-noticed Silence in our Earliest Sources,’ *Anaphora* 8,1(2014)1-12.

Likewise, recalling the Lord's meals should dispel from us any complacency that our liturgy 'is what it should be' or a mindless atavism that imagines the shrine-cult of the pre-1970 liturgy was some sort of 'golden age.'⁴

The loaf of gathering

The distinctive features of Jesus' eucharistic practice were not his words but his actions. The early communities showed no interest in his words of blessing / thanking the Father, but detailed interest in his actions and it is these words on what to do at the meal that we constantly recall. 'The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread – *note it has to be translated as a 'loaf' rather than 'bread' as it was something that could be broken*⁵ – and when he had given thanks, he broke it' (1 Cor 11:23-4) and all at table were to take a broken portion and eat it. Why was this significant?

Paul sees the loaf – a unity that can be shared – as pointing to the unity of all the followers in the Lord: 'Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all share in the one loaf' (1 Cor 10:17). From around the same time the *Didache* sees the loaf as something that is made up of many grains transformed into a unity, a unity that can then be shared. It sees this in terms of scattered Israel being re-gathered to the Lord:

For as the broken loaf was once scattered over the mountains and then was gathered in and became one, so may your church be gathered together into your kingdom from the very ends of the earth.

Yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever (9:4).

Sharing in the loaf is our union in the Christ, our community with one another, and the union with God we proclaim as our destination.

We often invoke the saying – relying on this theology on union – that 'the Eucharist makes the Church' and then elegantly preach the theme. However, such fine theology need to be matched with equally accurate action – 'eucharist' is after all derived from a verb! The continued use of individual wafers – whose very roundness symbolizes completeness rather than being broken shares of a whole which is for the community – obscures a basic element of the Christian Eucharist. If our words and our actions are to be in alignment (the most basic test of honesty and integrity) then we need to move to a real loaf of bread – such that we can recognize it as such by sight, touch and taste – and then rediscover the significance of Jesus' action. This is not a challenge for some future tomorrow: it is urgent for in a world of false signs, fake news, and fast food, we must ensure that our liturgical practice has integrity, reality, and is worthy of the Christ we follow.

The cup of discipleship

⁴ See T. O'Loughlin, 'Eucharistic Celebrations: the Chasm between Idea and Reality,' *New Blackfriars* 91(2010)423-38.

⁵ See T. O'Loughlin, 'Translating *Panis* in a Eucharistic Context: A Problem of Language and Theology,' *Worship* 78(2004)226-35.

Jesus' other distinctive action in his eucharistic practice was that he invited those at table to drink from a single cup.⁶ This action is not only unparalleled in any ancient religious ritual – either Jewish or gentile – but contrary to basic human practice. We all share meals, we all drink at them, but we assume a separate cup for each! In even the simplest situation this is taken for granted: if I invite you for 'a cup of coffee,' then both of us expect our *individual* cups! The idea of sharing a cup – with someone impure sitting beside you (Mt 23:25), with a gentile opposite you at table, perhaps even taking it from your own slave – was deeply repulsive to those who encountered the followers of Jesus (the practice probably stands behind crisis echoes in Jn 6:66) and has remained so ever since. Indeed, the whole history of the Eucharist can be described in terms of the 'work-arounds' developed to avoid following Jesus' command and then the theology invented to justify it. Work-arounds have included spoons, straws, dipping, thimble-sized individual containers (now mini pre-packed and sealed plastic pots), and, most famously, complete denial except for the presider. Since this went flatly in the face of a command to all – *piété ex autou pantes / bibite ex hoc omnes* (Mt 26:27), it had to be 'justified' by creating the 'doctrine of concomitance'!

The reference to 'memorial' in the context of the cup indicates that this common drinking was to be understood as an action whose parabolic meaning was to be teased out in reflection.⁷ So what was that meaning? Drinking a cup – whether by the disciples (Mt 20:22-3) or the Lord himself (Mt 26:39) – is always connected with accepting the demands of discipleship and being willing to share the common destiny of the New People and their Christ. In an age where the transmission of faith from one generation to another is no longer the assumption it once was, and where each is called to make a personal decision about discipleship, this sharing of the cup assumes an importance for today and tomorrow it has not carried for well over a millennium. To each, at every celebration, is posed the challenge recalled as being offered by Jesus to the sons of Zebedee: 'Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?' (Mt 20:22).

The table of the Lord

Every religion asks where the divine is to be encountered. Usually the answer is in a place apart – be it a sacred temple, a place that is *tapu*, or in some distant lonely place. And in each of us this idea still resonates as can be seen in the preference for a language of 'otherness' that has inspired the 2011 translation. But this instinct comes into conflict with our encounter with Jesus in the wonder of the incarnation. Where is Jesus encountered as the one who established the presence of God? The affirmation of the first disciples was clear: in their meals and banquets and so they told the stories of his meals, his feedings, his breaking down of barriers that kept people apart. Salvation came to the house of Zacchaeus when there, at that man's table, the Lord sat and ate for he too was now to be recognised as a son of the covenant (Lk 19:9). The table is the place of our encounter as a community with the Lord and around it we offer praise to the Father. Potentially every table at which two disciples sit is such a place – we

⁶ See J.P. Meier, 'The Eucharist at the Last Supper: did it happen?' *Theology Digest* 42(1995)335-51.

⁷ See B.M. Bokser, 'Ritualizing the Seder,' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56(1988)443-71 at 447.

can recall Emmaus – and most specially is the community’s table: there we rejoice, there we praise, there we are fed.

But we tend to refer to the table as an ‘altar’: why? By the mid-second century we were being accused of atheism because we neither visited the civic altars (common in every Greco-Roman town) nor had altars to the gods in our homes – as every other house had. In reply,⁸ we declared that our tables were our altars! Alas, the image was so strong that we forgot that where we gather is first and foremost a table – but can be *explained to outsiders* as ‘our “altar.”’ God has entered into discourse (*logos*) with us in Jesus, he is tabernacle pitched in our midst (Jn 1:14), and so we can be elbow to elbow with the Anointed One at the table where we gather. So the task facing us is to gather, actually, around this table at our weekly Eucharists, and to recognise that every table at which two or three disciples gather the Lord is also present (Mt 18:20), and so there we should bless the Father.

Further Reading:

T. O’Loughlin, *The Eucharist: Origins and Contemporary Understandings* (London, 2015).

⁸ T.D. Barnes, ‘The Date of Ignatius,’ *Expository Times* 120(2008)119-30.