

**John 6: 24-35 5/8/18**

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Trivia question: list as many miracles of Jesus as you can in 30 seconds.

Okay. I'm sure you've thought of a few. Some would be obscure – the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, for example. Others would be more familiar, like the raising of Jairus' daughter. Each list will be different, with some overlaps. One miracle that I suspect pretty much everyone will have included is the feeding of the 5000. All four gospels record this miracle, but only John follows it with a lengthy monologue which we read over four Sundays every third year. In these 38 verses, Jesus speaks about himself as the bread from heaven. The Church reads this discourse as Jesus' teaching about the Eucharist, or Holy Communion. This is a good opportunity for us to revisit what we, as Anglicans, actually believe about receiving the consecrated bread and wine as we do each Sunday.

We're pretty clear about what we *don't* believe. We do not believe that the elements are physically Christ's flesh and blood. We know that if we put the elements under a microscope, we will see molecules of bread and wine, not flesh and blood. We don't believe in the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation.

On the other hand, we don't believe that the elements are just symbolic. The verses in John 6 are the basis of our belief that the consecrated elements are more than simply bread and wine.

For Anglicans – and for Catholics, Lutherans, and the eastern churches – holy communion is a sacrament, an act of God in which ordinary things become the vehicle through which we receive the grace of God. In baptism, water is blessed and poured, and we receive new life. This is an act of God, not dependent on us in any way; it is grace, gift. In holy communion, bread and wine are blessed and consumed, and we receive Christ's body and blood, sustenance for our spiritual life. This too is gift, grace.

The Anglican understanding of sacraments goes back to Richard Hooker, a sixteenth century English priest. In his day, the Church of England was establishing itself as distinct from both Puritans and Roman Catholics. For Puritans, communion was a memorial only, just a recollection of Christ's death. Any leftover elements could be discarded – they were no different to normal bread and wine. For Roman Catholics of that time, the bread and wine literally became flesh and blood. The elements could be worshipped as Christ himself.

In this context of strongly opposing views, Richard Hooker enunciated a middle way that became distinctively Anglican. Sacraments, said Hooker, are more than symbolic; they genuinely confer the grace of God. The physical signs – bread and wine – participate in the reality, the body and blood of Christ. The signs are linked to what they signify. The bread and wine are 'means of grace' – vehicles through which we receive the grace of God.

The elements are not physically Christ himself so we do not worship them. On the other hand, the elements are far more than ordinary bread and wine; they convey the real presence of Christ to us.<sup>1</sup> So, we treat them with great reverence. Some of us bow or bend the knee, not to the bread and wine in and of themselves, but to Christ's presence which they communicate to us.

Richard Hooker lived more than four centuries ago. His description of the real presence of Christ is dependent on Elizabethan language which most of us now find quite difficult. The previous Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, describes the Anglican doctrine of the real presence in contemporary language. He reminds us that God was really present in the human body of Jesus of Nazareth. That same reality, says Williams, is present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. It is the nature of Christ that is in the elements, not his literal flesh and blood. Nonetheless, his presence, his nature, is real.<sup>2</sup> In Williams' own words,

We should hear the words 'This is my body' as Jesus saying of the bread, 'This *too* is my body; this is as much a carrier of my life and my identity as my literal flesh and blood.' ... the bread and wine ... bear and communicate the life of Jesus, who and what he is. By eating these, the believer receives what the literal flesh and blood [had] within them, the radiant action and power of God the Son, the life that makes him who he is.<sup>3</sup>

Rowan Williams takes this a step further. In the Eucharist, the life of Christ not only 'passes over' into the bread and wine, but also into the faithful who consume that bread and wine.<sup>4</sup> We become a new creation, the body of Christ. We carry Christ's life into the world.

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<sup>1</sup> *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, V, lvii, 5.

<sup>2</sup> *On Christian Theology*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 215, 218.

<sup>3</sup> *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief*, Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2007, 116.

<sup>4</sup> *On Christian Theology*, 218.

Let us return to this morning's Gospel reading.

The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

Jesus identifies himself with this bread, saying 'I am the bread of life'. Later in the discourse, Jesus adds,

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life ... [they] abide in me, and I in them.

In Communion, we do precisely what Jesus said: we eat his flesh and drink his blood in the bread and wine. We receive his life. But we are not cannibals! The bread and wine remain bread and wine, but, through the action of the Holy Spirit, they are infused with the very life of Christ, 'the radiant action and power of God the Son', in Rowan Williams' words. As we receive Christ's life, so we become his body in the world, called to live as he did in love and service of all.

So let us come, take, eat, and go out to love and serve each other and the Lord.

Amen.