

How do we receive a gift? Do we like receiving gifts?

I recently had a friend staying with me who bought me a gift – I felt quite embarrassed that I had received a gift for offering a space to stay for 2 nights when I know that when I next travel to Sydney, he and his partner will host me. I said so. My friend was very wise and said – you know you never receive gifts well – sometimes people want to give you things but it feels like we can't.

I was quite confronted by this, but it led me to think about this culturally and also within the church. I think my friend is right – I am not good at receiving – I like to be giving the gift. I suspect that I am not the only one like this.

In the context of faith however this has implications – God wants us to receive our faith – accept our faith as a gift. God is not expecting us to labour hard – there will be challenges – but at the heart of our faith is the gift of love – which we are invited to receive. The symbols and rituals of our worship encourage us to be reminded of this, and invite us to engage in this blessing of a gift each week.

At its heart our weekly Eucharist is about our need for the Bread of Life. In the moment of the Eucharist we share in the intimate life of God and of each other. At the moment of the Eucharist we share from the depths of our souls with God throughout all time and space. No matter what our feelings or personal circumstances at that time. We are not asked to do anything, or be 'worthy' we are just asked to receive God's gift, embrace it and live with it.

The sharing in the Eucharist together is not about our immediate needs, or the satisfaction of our immediate hunger (this is what Paul is trying to address in the letter to the Corinthians today)– it is about the fulfilment of eternity – the promise of the fullness of God in all our lives – forever.

So often I encounter individuals who will say – I do not feel worthy to receive communion – and yet that misses the point of the Eucharist and the gift of the sacrament. When we share in this sacrament - God welcome us - Just as we are – into the one body and into one faith.

Earlier we heard the words of the institution of the last supper as recorded in the letter to the Corinthians – in these words we are reminded of the gift of the Body of Christ . In the institution of the last supper we 're-member' , that is we bring together the body of Christ – the people of God. The early church struggled with this too and Paul in this letter is trying to outline to the community in Corinthian how they are to receive. When we consume Christ – in word and action; Christ becomes part and parcel of who we are. Christ energizes us to do God's work. It is not magical, and it is not a real body – but it does change us. The bread of Christ is empowering – a real presence in our lives.

It is this presence which calls us to an active faith. Traditionally on the Feast of Corpus Christi, there would be a procession. It would begin with the host being placed in the Monstrance (a vessel which displays the host (bread)) and then us all following in procession – however we would have brought to church today symbols of our trade – symbols of our daily work and we would have followed the monstrance out of the door and into the street carrying these symbols. The procession of all the people of God following the enshrined host – the bread of life – recalls our procession through life and reminds us that the Eucharist is our food for the everyday journeys of life.

Our faith is not just for the quiet corners of this church – our faith is lived out in everything that we do every day of our lives.

The symbolism of the Corpus Christi procession highlights this – we go into the work place – into our homes – into our social situations with the body of Christ in our midst. When we hold onto this we can be reassured that firstly we are not alone in what we need to face – but also we have our faith at the centre of all that we do and think and be – the ultimate communion – which is a gift.

One of the reasons we in this church reserve, or set aside some of the bread each week is so that we have a place to come back to. I am not sure how many of you know, but in Trinity Chapel at all times is a small ‘reserve’ of the bread, with a candle burning beside it. The candle tells us that God is in this place, and the reserve is there – firstly incase someone is ill and requests home communion (so it is a practical thing) – but also when life is hard, or we need refreshed or reminded that we are not alone, we can go and sit before the ‘bread of life’ and be reminded that in God’s eyes we are always worthy and always part of something bigger.

Each week we bring this remainder up into the church, and it sits here to our right. We then use what is left from last week and replace it. It reminds us that Communion is part of our life style – the centre of who we are.

This is also why there is a note in the service sheet today about the way that we receive communion. We each are invited to receive as we feel able, but the Church of England prefer that we receive the host (the bread) in our hands, and that we drink from a single chalice. These are for theological and hygienic reasons. We receive communion because it is a gift from God. There is a great deal of symbolism in this. It is one of the reasons in our tradition that others ‘give us’ communion—we receive it as a gift, rather than take it. It is a symbolic expression of our understanding of what God is offering us. This means 3 things in practice.

1. We are all welcome to receive—because it is God’s gift to us and we do not need to be worthy to receive, we just need to accept the gift.
2. We hold out our hands to receive the bread, because we are accepting the gift.
3. We receive the cup, rather than dip (instinct) because we are receiving

rather than taking.

The Church of England strongly discourages the dipping (intincting) of bread into the chalice for three reasons, firstly because of our theology above about receiving, secondly in our actions we are re-enacting the symbolism of Jesus and disciples all drinking from one cup as we heard on the night of the last supper. Thirdly, it is much less hygienic than drinking from the cup, the cup is carefully wiped after everyone has drunk from it and silver is a natural purifier – we can't do the same when fingers enter the cup of wine!! Not everyone receives the cup – and that is also a choice. The main thing is that we are sharing together.

It is always our choice how we receive, and there are different traditions, but this is the tradition within the Church of England and sometimes it is good to remember why we do things the way we do.

However we receive, we are in Communion with Christ has always been a mark of the follower of Christ. To feed on Christ all the days of my life is to be in communion with Christ – and we are in communion our in work places as much as we are in this church.

Today we celebrate that we are the people of God in this place who are called to both adore Christ, to share in Christ and to follow. And this means we are also the people of God in the places that we go when we leave here – in our work place, in our homes – everywhere. And in all of these places we are called to be Christ Body – to have confidence in our faith – to share our faith and to live by the values which this communion calls us to. This is what we committed to again at Pentecost as we reaffirmed that we are ambassadors of Christ.

As we share in this Eucharist today – we will sing one of the most beautiful hymns in the hymn book. It reminds us of the beauty and wonder of the sacrament that we share in week after week. One of the verses invites us to rest in the sacrament – rest in God and allow ourselves to receive what God is offering us.

*Sweet Sacrament of rest,
ark from the ocean's roar,
within thy shelter blest
soon may we reach the shore;
save us, for still the tempest raves,
save, lest we sink beneath the waves:
sweet Sacrament of rest.*

Amen.