

A Meditation on the Great Thanksgiving #1

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June 27, 2006

Christmas 3, Cycle B

We've covered the parts of the Eucharist through the *Offertory* in previous sermons; we're at the beginning of what's called the *Great Thanksgiving*. Things get complicated here. The Western Church, at least, has been in a theological uproar for 12-13 hundred years about what happens during The *Great Thanksgiving* and we haven't settled it yet. All those great long technical terms like Transubstantiation and Co-transubstantiation, and Memorialism, and so forth, which I'm not sure anyone understands, relate to different attitudes to this part of the service.

To put it bluntly, if we asked the question, "Just what happens in the Eucharist?" the answers of the Western Church would be various. The church has been uncertain about it. Were we to try for a simple foundational statement, it would have to be that Christ is somehow present to us by means of the sacrament, by means of the actions we do and the words we say, the process we experience here, Christ is somehow present. That's the foundation. Almost all, notice the caveat, mainline denominations agree on that. It's when you start analyzing what it means *to be present* that the trouble all starts.

Now, I want to back up a few steps from this too rapidly developing complexity. I tell my students in almost every introductory religious studies class I teach that the only thing you do the first term is learn the vocabulary of the field. That's actually a good part of what you do the second and third terms, also, but particularly during first term you need to learn vocabulary. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing, but it's definitely a real one. Episcopal worship is esoteric. Parts of it are given names you will never find outside the walls of a church or the process of worship. So if we wish to discuss it intelligently there is specialized vocabulary to learn. A good deal of this specialized vocabulary is in Latin, because we can't bear to give up tradition. During the Middle Ages all parts of the service would be referred to by the first Latin word or words of that part of the service. We've kept on doing this and so the statement we're about to make, "Lift up your hearts. We lift them to the Lord..." is called the *Sursum corda* because we keep the Latin title – *Sursum corda* means "Lift up the heart." So that's where the Latin title comes from and if you look at the *Book of Common Prayer* you will see that each Psalm is not only given a number but is also named in Latin, given a title which consists

of the first two or three words of the Latin text – even though you never see the Latin text. In fairly hoity-toity congregations you will see the Psalm of the Day denoted not by its number but by its Latin title. I've actually seen that.

So that's where the vocabulary about the different parts of *The Great Thanksgiving* comes from – mainly from Latin, but with enough Greek (like *Epiklesis*) thrown in to keep everyone off balance.

Now there are several distinct parts of *The Great Thanksgiving*, several pieces of vocabulary, I want to mention today. The first one is the *Sursum corda* which is the opening dialogue. "The Lord be with you. And also with you. Lift up your hearts. We lift them to the Lord. Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. It is right to give him thanks and praise." In this dialogue you will notice that the presider either issues orders or makes requests. The people's response always is, "Yes, that's what we're going to do." So this is a very formal dance of making sure that the community is agreed in its purpose. "It's time to do this." "Yes this is what we are going to do." Now there are other things happening in the *Sursum corda*, but this is enough to go on for a beginning.

The next part of the liturgy is deeply confusing to many newcomers to the Episcopal Church - - and to not a few long term members. This is something called the *Proper Preface*. (See pages 377-382 for the texts of the *Proper Prefaces*). You are attending your first Episcopalian Eucharist, reading down through the service following the page numbers in your bulletin and everything is going smoothly, the pages seem to be following one another in order and mesh with what the priest and the lay leaders are saying, but then, quite suddenly, the priest is saying something which isn't there. That's usually the *Proper Preface*. The "proper" in this case means, related to the particular day or season of the church year we're in now. "Proper" in the sense of being particular to something. And the "preface" means a readying for *The Great Thanksgiving*, for the *Eucharistic Prayer*. If the *Eucharistic Prayer* is a **great** thanksgiving then, logically enough, the function of a preface to that thanksgiving is to give a particular reason for giving thanks that has something to do with this day or with this part of the church's year.

So, first we all express agreement about our purpose in the formal dialogue of the *Sursum corda*: that we are going to give joyful thanks, as a community, to God. The next logical question is, "What's there to give thanks about?" And the job of the *Proper Preface* is to answer that question with some specificity. (Note that proper prefaces are particular to Western Liturgy. Eucharistic Prayers C (p. 369) and D (p.372), being based on Eastern models, don't have a Proper, but rather a fixed, Preface.)

The next step, and we're back to the Latin titles now, is called The *Sanctus*, which sounds much better than simply saying the Holy. But that's what the word "Sanctus" means. So that's where that tag comes from.

Now, what's going on in the Sanctus?

The really operative part is "... heaven and earth are full of your glory. . . ." That's a statement. It says, "OK, God's self-expression is universally present". God's glory is that of God which can be apprehended by us human beings. If heaven and earth are full of this glory, heaven and earth are full of that of God

which can be apprehended by us. Then the question comes of course, how do we become a part of that? How do we become people who see the divine glory permeating our existence and the existence of things around us?

If this claim is true, if heaven and earth are full of God's glory, why is it not more apparent to us? Or, why do I not feel the presence of that glory oftener? Most of the time, I have to confess, I don't feel the weight of that glory at all, I'm either being irritated, or anxious, or focusing on self-centered and immediate aims to the exclusion of the eternal ones, or *something* else is wrong. A sense of being infused with the presence of God is not usually, sadly enough, how I live my daily life. So there is an assertion in *The Sanctus* which requires some attention because it sets up great tension. Perhaps even a problem. We're supposed to give thanks. The world is full of God's glory. That's the reason for giving thanks. We are supposed to acknowledge that, live out of it, but, somehow, there is a problem and it's not happening. *The Sanctus* asks us to acknowledge a situation we feel at best in fits and starts.

The next step is called the *Prayer of Consecration*. Here an interesting thing happens which needs to be carefully noted. What I'm doing now is laying the groundwork with you people for the next revision of the *Book of Common Prayer*. What happens in the second half of the Eucharist is four actions. We take bread and wine off the back table and up to the altar. That's *The Offertory*, the first action. After it's up there, I bless the bread and wine, which means I set it aside for a particular purpose. That's all blessing really is, the naming and setting aside of an object for a particular purpose. That's the *Prayer of Consecration*. The bread is then broken, that's the third action, *The Fraction*. Then the broken bread and the wine are distributed back to the people who placed them on the altar in the first place. That's the fourth action, *The Reception*.

It doesn't make any difference where you are – Lower Egypt, Russian Georgia, Kerala in Southern India, or Grace Cathedral in San Francisco – it doesn't make any difference where you are or what words and language you use, those four actions will all be there. Those four actions are universal and have been in Eucharists since the beginning of Christian worship. These provide the unity of Christian Eucharistic understanding.

In the Eucharistic stories within the New Testament, such as the meeting between Jesus and the disciples on the road to Emmaeus, during which the disciples are sad because they think the story is over, meet but do not recognize Jesus on the road, travel with him and then invite him in to their house, in which he takes bread, blesses, breaks and distributes it and, as Luke says, he is then known to them in the breaking of the bread, you can find these same four actions. They are found in other Eucharistic accounts within the New Testament also. This New Testament evidence seems to say that the four-fold structure has been present since the beginning.

So, in any revision of the *Book of Common Prayer* the real question is, how adequate is the verbal commentary to the meaning of the four actions? You see, there is nothing particularly sacred or necessary about any way of verbalizing the Eucharistic process. The entire question is, do the words provide the right

kind of commentary on the four actions so that the meaning of those actions can somehow be grasped and incorporated into their lives by the congregations using the particular service? OK?

That's the end of my unpaid political announcement on behalf of flexibility in Prayer Book revision.

So the four actions are important to keep in mind because they carry the meaning of the Eucharist.

Comment: I want to back up to the Sanctus. At every church music conference I've ever been to they have said, "*The Offertory* is not the high point of the service, it is *The Sanctus*. It is your job to lead the congregation and help to make that a high point." Which is why even when there are only three people here you will hear me really go at it on *The Sanctus*. Now why is that considered the high point of the service?

Response: Well, it's a high point of the service for a couple of reasons. First, it is a clear statement of the goal we are after. That heaven and earth be full of God's glory is the goal we're after. What comes after *The Sanctus* in the service is the specific means by which that goal is attained. We say where we are going and, in a kind of odd way, what the facts of the case already are. What the church is about is to witness to those facts, to point toward that goal. I was noticing last night that the stars were out, at least early in the night. I look at those things and think, "Well, the universe is full of God's glory." And in some ways human beings may not be a terribly big part of that – the days when we could consider ourselves the center of everything are pretty much gone. So, thinking about sheer percentages, the percentage of the universe where God's glory is being fouled up by human beings may be pretty small. That doesn't mean it's not important to us, or to God. But by and large one might be able to say that most of the universe is doing its proper job in expressing God's glory. I think *The Sanctus* acknowledges that. The superhuman scale of *The Sanctus* restores a proper perspective on the relation between us and God. For that scale to come across properly, *The Sanctus* needs to be treated as a high point in the service.

We, on this what Madeleine L'Engle would call "shadowed planet," are still moving toward the expression of God's glory but we have considerable cleanup work to do.

Now the second reason why *The Sanctus* is a climax – well, it's easy to set it to wonderful music and that makes it a powerful piece of liturgy. But the real climax of the service happens in absolute silence because you can't say anything while you are chewing bread or drinking wine. And it is our incorporation into the expression of God's glory which is the true climax of the service – the theological climax, if you will. You will notice, by the way, that the process of climax keeps building dramatically through this second half of the service. First you have *The Sanctus* which says "Heaven and Earth are full of God's glory." The next musical piece is *The Acclamation* which, in this case, is "We remember his death. We proclaim his resurrection. We await his coming in glory." And it is in the remembering, the proclaiming and the awaiting that the process of our incorporation into the glory becomes active. If any one of the three is absent a

defective Christianity, a defective spirituality, results. Then, if you turn over to the next musical piece, it is *The Fraction*, and the point to that is that if we are going to share in God's life, share in God's glory, there is no life, even God's, which is not broken. To share in this community is to be willing to share broken life with each other. Even in the church, especially in the church, we do not have the luxury of sharing only smooth achievement, the adequate expression of love, properly run institutions, charitable and understanding communities, an absence of pain. If our love is to be expressed it must happen through failure, even the failure of love, through confused institutional purpose, through partially self-centered and ignorant communities and through a human existence which is always suffused with suffering.

And so, musically, what happens is that we have a series of building climaxes, each one of which is making a slightly different statement of what's going on in the service. Then, when we come to the absolute, simple operative moment, the music stops and there is just that silence of the circle around the altar. It is extremely effective.

So I have no objection to saying that *The Sanctus* is the musical climax of the service. But I think we need to be careful about saying it is the theological climax. Because I think it is just one of a series of high points building toward the climax. When we summarize each piece as we move through *The Great Thanksgiving* we break into song to do it.

Comment: I think there are some churches where *The Offertory* gets so much emphasis that everything that follows feels like anticlimax.

Yes. The key thing to remember is that the *Eucharistic Prayer* is a dynamic process and the process moves toward our incorporation into the glory of God. So you really can't say that one element is the essential piece because the whole process is what's essential. It used to be that people would argue about the exact point in the service where the bread and wine on the altar stopped being bread and wine and became the body and blood of Jesus. That used to be a matter of theological argument and, as I used to point out to students in my deacons class when I was younger and more irreverent, if we were using raisin bread for the consecration that would mean there's some point where the raisins, since they are presumably not consecrated, not being bread, start hovering a couple of microns above their matrix. If you follow out this business about there being some specific point in the service where the bread and the wine become the body and blood of Christ that's the kind of utter stupidity you will eventually get into. Transformation, of either bread and wine or of us, is not something which happens at a point in the process, it is a characteristic of participation in the whole process itself.

Now, I've talked for long enough and since I haven't finished what I have to say about *The Great Thanksgiving* this will be continued next week. But, to review. The key thing in understanding *The Great Thanksgiving*: four actions. (1) The offering of bread and wine. Its moving from there (back of the church) to there (the altar.) (2) The blessing of bread and wine – its setting aside for a special purpose. (3) The breaking of the bread – just so we're sure that we understand what's being shared here – not just escape from life, but life through

loss and death. Since the church tends to be rather triumphalist *The Fraction* is important. It reminds her that Christ gets broken before he is shared and that the same thing is likely to happen to us. Then, (4) the actual sharing, the actual incorporating into ourselves of that which has been offered, dedicated to a special purpose, whose true nature as broken has been recognized. This comes back to us and becomes part of us again. All the language we use is commentary on these four actions.

OK. Now, that's enough of that. On the back shelf you will find some written-out commentary on the Eucharistic Prayer. Feel free to take it home. Please stand for the creed.