

The Great Thanksgiving, Part II

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Epiphany Day

Last sermon I gave you a general introduction to the form of The Great Thanksgiving. It consists of four actions: the action of offering, the action of blessing or setting aside for a special purpose, the action of breaking and the action of receiving. All Eucharist services, of whatever denomination or whatever Christian community, consist of those four actions. All the words which we say are merely commentary on those actions, explanations of their meanings.

Now, a few details. First, a comment on a word which means more than it might seem to mean in English. Its classic use is in the part of The Great Thanksgiving called the Narrative of Institution, which is the story of the last Supper. “On the night he was handed over to suffering and death, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had given thanks to you, he broke it, and gave it to his disciples and said, ‘Take, eat: This is my Body which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me’” That and the following section dealing with the cup of wine have that little formal title, The Narrative of Institution. You might as well call it How It All Got Started.

Now the word “remembrance” is the word which is at issue. What does it mean to do “X” in remembrance of “Y”? Well, the way we think about it now is that remembering something is a mental action, a calling to mind of that which is past while retaining a sense of its pastness. To remember is, thus, to conjure a mental image as a substitute for a reality. Past events can be mighty important things, so it makes some sense to call them occasionally to mind. But today to remember implies a real absence of that which is remembered.

The translation, “Do this is remembrance of me,” would be a bad translation were there a better one in English. But since it’s hard to find a better in English we have to let the inadequate stand as the best we can do. The Greek word for “remembrance” is anamnesis, and anamnesis has a very particular meaning in non-religious, perhaps I shouldn’t say non-religious, I should say pagan, Greek. The meaning is the re-creation of an event so that it is again alive for the spectator or participant, not alive as a mental image, but as a recreated meaning or impact of the event itself. It is as if one were present as the event is snatched out of the past in order to be experienced again. If you were an Athenian of the great days of classical Greece and you went to a play by Sophocles you

might say, upon leaving the theater, “That play had a good anamnesis. ” You would mean that the play caused you to re-experience, to experience again, the fundamental meanings of those basic mythic events the play presented. So an anamnesis of Jesus, to do something in remembrance of Jesus, means to do it in such a way that the presence of Jesus, here and now, is made a lively reality. In anamnesis, the meaning of Jesus becomes not something which we look back to as a past event, but as something which arises out of the present event we experience. That’s what anamnesis means; it’s a little heavier word than to merely remember. It’s a little fuller of meaning than that.

Now the question, of course, is, always, well, how? How do we do this? There is no real answer to that because there can’t be a cut and dried formula for how it happens. Relationships, whether with God or somebody else, are peculiar things. They both are and aren’t at the same time. I’m in a relationship with my family and my friends and the Christian community which gathers in this place, and the categories do overlap, but all those relationships exist and yet there is no way they can be understood as finished or completed. And if there isn’t a sense of incompleteness about them, a sense of longing that they be more than they are, then I think there is a defect in the relationship. So to do something in anamnesis of Christ does not mean that we expect to participate in anything which is finished right here and now. In its incompleteness it escapes from all possible formulaic approaches. We don’t expect to be able to do that in ordinary relationships, much less in relationships with God. That is why more than one Eucharist is needed in a person’s life. We always go back, not to that which has been already achieved and finished and perfected, but we go back in order to experience again, among other things, a hope for that which hasn’t yet been achieved.

An aspect of Christianity that I would recommend to everyone, especially these days, is this anamnesis, this remembrance, of hope. It is, after all, an easy thing to forget. The vision of God seen face to face, or any of those other metaphors we use because we don’t quite know what we are talking about – it is easy to forget all that and take the world “as it is” and jog along with the present outlines and assumptions and make do, if I can put it in an old fashioned and mythical way, with no hope of glory. The Eucharist, in all its stylization, in all its mythology, encrusted with all its archaic symbols which seem to come from so long ago that no one knows what they mean anymore, still aims toward the remembrance, the anamnesis, of hope for the sake of glory. It is one of the few things in my life which affirms the unfulfilled promise, still real despite its unfulfillment, of glory for the sons and daughters of God.

Now, maybe we could find an instrument which could do a better job of it, but I can guarantee there are any number of easily available instruments which would serve us worse. Or, to use a more homely image, I’ll keep both baby and bath water, both archaic and obscure symbols and the window on the eternal, until I can tell which one I’m throwing out and which one I’m keeping.

So that’s a bit about that word, “remembrance.”

If we look just before the Narrative of Institution, we find an interesting paragraph: “We give thanks to you, O God, for the goodness and love you have

made known to us in creation. . .” There’s the beginning, in creation. “. . . in the calling of Israel to be your people; in your Word spoken through the prophets . . .” There’s the Old Testament. “. . . and above all in the Word made flesh, Jesus your Son . . .” There’s the New Testament. “For in these last days you sent him to be incarnate from the Virgin Mary, to be the Savior and Redeemer of the world,” an expansion of the New Testament idea. “In him, you have delivered us from evil. . . In him, you have brought us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life.” And, if things were to go the way they ought, those two sentences would be the summary of the history of the church. The church exists to be the means by which the presence of Christ delivers us from evil, makes us worthy to stand before God, brings us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life. The function of the church is to do nothing other than to stand back and point at Jesus. By the church his presence is increased, but salvation comes through him and not through the church.

I tell my deaconal students an odd thing: ordained clergy need to keep in mind that their relation to the church is analogous to that of a tail to a dog. Tails don’t do anything essential. Dogs can, and do, live without them. But tails are also indices of how dogs happen to be feeling. They are useful communication tools. Don’t give them too much more importance than that. That’s also true for the clergy, don’t confuse the tail with the whole dog and don’t make the clergy into the whole church. Clergy are to point to the presence of Christ in the church, foster an awareness of that presence, encourage a response to that presence. They are not to be the presence, attempting to usurp the function of that for which they are, at the very best, only heralds.

It’s the same thing, you see, with the relationship between the whole church and Christ. The church articulates Christ, but the church does not create the reality or the presence of Christ. The Last Supper was recorded in the gospels before Leonardo Da Vinci ever put it on a wall in paint - - and it existed as historical event before that too. It’s meaning for salvation was present before Leonardo picked up his paint brush. Nevertheless, the relationship between artistic presentation on a wall and the original is an important one and, even for those people who had experienced the original reality previous to that painting, the seeing was felt as an enlargement of their vision and experience of the saving event. That’s the relationship the church has to God.

Or, to do something quite unusual, to actually take the day’s Gospel into these discussions of the liturgy, remember that those three wise men got where they were going, to Jesus, not by means of scripture, nor by means of a church teaching them about God, but by means of a star. There may be something yet, you see, to finding God in nature. The wise men arrived by means of God’s manifestation in nature. Now it might happen in all sorts of other ways, that God might be out there in the universe, seeking us. It makes no sense to limit God’s action to the church – in fact, it’s stinking arrogance to do that – but the church’s job is to paint for God the Last Supper on the wall of the refectory at Santa Maria delle Grozia. That’s what the Eucharist is about, symbolizing things which are going on all around us and in us anyway. After all, Christian

existence consists of offering, blessing, being broken, being received; offering, blessing, being broken, being received; offering, blessing, being broken, being received, over and over and over again in ordinary life, day by day, month by month, year by year, life by life until God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

So we don't just offer ourselves to God once. Christian existence is a life of offering every moment to God. Every moment. And it is here that people run into brick walls: every moment is blessed. Why? Because God takes it and says, "Yes! You person who doesn't know what you are doing, I can take this moment, whatever it is, and do something with it. It can be incorporated into the design of the Kingdom. I may have to change the design to do that, but that's what I'm here for." That's what God is good at, changing the design and yet keeping it a design. Everything, ultimately, gets worked out in love. God is the one who can take whatever is offered and craft from it the possibility of a future expressing love. That's the tough one to accept.

So we offer and then we accept the fact that whatever we are, we are set aside, so that love can come of what becomes of what we have been. Whatever our past has been, once we are here, once we go through the Eucharist, that allowing love to come becomes the purpose of our past because we have allowed the love of Jesus to enter our being in the shared bread and wine.

And then, that which is offered is also broken – which is merely another way of talking about the reality of what we are and what we have to offer. There is no offered life which isn't broken life because that's the human condition. It means that there is no shared life which isn't broken life because that's the human condition. And when we share in the Eucharist, if that sharing makes us a community, it is a community which is whole only by means of its shared brokenness and not by means of anything else.

And then, we get it back, bread and life returned by God, we receive not some strange thing but the transformation of what we have offered. The bread, which I will give you from the paten, is bread which you first brought to me to bless at the altar. What you get back is yourselves. But you get yourselves back reincorporated into that design of God's which says, "I can work everything out in love. Even what you are." To come to the Eucharist means to accept that about yourself – that you are included in the design of love and glory.

So the fourfold action – the doing in remembrance of Christ, the engaging in the act of constantly offering all that we are, constantly seeing God set that aside to become part of his design of love, constantly accepting the brokenness with which God is capable of working out that design, and then constantly being willing to receive ourselves back after that happens, and not say, "I have to start over with an absolutely clean slate." To say so is to wish one's death because to lose one's story is to lose one's life. Human beings simply can't dump their histories like that. But Eucharist says, "I can start over with what I have been, what my family has been, what my community has been. And it is possible, from and by means of the ruin of my past, to express fully and perfectly, the purposes of God."

That's the Christian life. Its claims are outrageous, nevertheless that's what

it is. And that's what the Eucharist is about, that's what the symbolism of the four-fold action is about, this constant recreation of who we are by means of our acceptance by God, our acceptance, if you will, by Being itself. That's the foundation. What the Eucharist is, is the Sunday by Sunday pointing toward the, if you will, Leonardoization, of life. The symbols allow us to grasp and be grasped by the reality. The Eucharist is our artistic imitation of God's reality which moves us out of our lowlands and into the mountains where our sight becomes that of eagles and we dimly see the purposes of love.

What's going on in this Eucharist isn't something which isn't going on in your life all the time anyway. There is no way that you can't offer what you've been to God to be used in God's constant recreation of creation. That's happening anyway whether you want it to happen or not. That's just the way it is – and the idea that the only life which is to be shared is broken life is just the way it is. We can choose to accept or reject, more or less consciously, more or less completely, what God has to give back to us, but we have to accept it partially simply because we go on living and life is his gift.

So on the one hand the Eucharist is a way of recognizing what's happening, but any self-consciousness which recognizes one's true identity and what one really is, also allows us to transcend that. And that is the purpose of the Eucharist, that in recognizing our true condition we are allowed to cooperate with God in working that condition out and that means we can transcend simply being at its mercy.

OK. Down at the root of it, I think that's what's going on in the Great Thanksgiving. That's enough of that. Please stand for the creed.