

Proper 15 (Year B)

16 August 2009

Saint Mark's, Tampa

✠ I speak to you in the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

“The gifts of God for the people of God. Take them in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on him in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.”

We hear these words every Sunday, and like a lot of the words we hear every Sunday, they are extraordinary and explosive and mysterious and wonderful.

They are also very, very Anglican. One of the big fights of the Protestant Reformation was over the nature of the Eucharist. The one thing everyone could agree on was that the Romans were wrong. Transubstantiation was right out. But if the Romans are wrong about the Eucharist, what's the right view? Some people went all the way in the other direction. The Lord's Supper, they said, is nothing but a memorial of the death of Jesus. It is just a way of remembering him, of focusing our thoughts on his body, broken for us, and his blood, shed for us.

Other Reformers insisted that Communion is more than just a memorial, but they had all kinds of different theories about what that “more” is. If you signed up for one particular branch of the Reformation, you had to sign up for a particular theory of the Eucharist.

But Anglicans – eventually – settled on a different approach. It is the approach that has come to be known as “Anglican fudge.” Anglican fudge means finding a way to affirm every truth you can but to make no particular theory about that truth mandatory. If you like clear boundaries and a definitive list of what doctrines are in and what doctrines are out, Anglican fudge can be absolutely maddening. But when it's done with integrity, it allows us to maintain a middle way, as one of our collects says, “not as a compromise for the sake of peace, but as a comprehension for the sake of truth.”

That's such a great line, I have to say it again: “not as a compromise for the sake of peace, but as a comprehension for the sake of truth.”

Is the Eucharist a memorial? Yes, it is. After all, how many times in Scripture does Jesus say “Do this for the remembrance of me”? But do we receive Jesus in the Eucharist? Yes we do. For do we not read in today’s Gospel, “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you”? So we had *better* eat his flesh and drink his blood in the meal that he has given us. And what particular theory of how that works do we have to sign on for? None. Our Lord’s command was not “Take, theorize” or “Take, analyze.” It was “Take, eat.”

And so let’s hear those words again:

“The gifts of God for the people of God. Take them” – God in Christ is offering you himself. Take what he offers. You need not understand, you need not theorize, because Jesus calls you to the altar, not to instruct, but to feed you. Jesus says, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” Do you want to abide in Christ? Then take these gifts. Take them “in remembrance that Christ died for you.” Yes, this meal is a memorial, and we go to the altar to be reminded of what Christ has done for us. He says, “The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh,” and how can bread be given unless it is broken, as his flesh was broken and his blood poured out for us? We do well to remember that great sacrifice. But we should do more than just remember: “feed on him in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.” Feed on him. Jesus said, “whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

Thanks to Anglican fudge, that’s all there in those words: not as a compromise for the sake of peace, but as a comprehension for the sake of truth.

Another of my favorite examples of Anglican fudge is today’s collect:

“Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life.”

One strand in the history of Christian thought has emphasized the death of Jesus as a sacrifice for sin, and just as with the Eucharist, there have been lots of different theories about how that sacrifice is supposed to work, and at least some Christian

groups have required allegiance to a particular theory. Another strand in the history of Christian thought emphasizes Jesus as an example. By leading a perfect life, Jesus showed us how life should be lived.

If you go with the first strand, you say that our job is to accept the benefits of Jesus' sacrifice. If you go with the second strand, you say that our job is to follow Jesus' example.

So which is it? It's both: "Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life."

And what is the correct Anglican theory of how the sacrifice part works? Praise God, there isn't one. It *was* a sacrifice – "He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself, in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world" – but the nature of that sacrifice, and the way in which it accomplished our salvation, are things we are free to debate.

We are not called to unanimity, but to unity. And that unity is not guaranteed by any theological theories or Biblical interpretations. It is guaranteed by the one body given for us, the one bread broken for us. If we obey his commandment to "do this for the remembrance of me," if we feed on him in our hearts by faith, with thanksgiving, and then go forth into the world carrying that broken body in us and living like people in whom Jesus abides not merely as a pious memory but in very truth, strengthening our lives with his life – why then, any disagreements we might have over theories and interpretations are really beside the point, isn't it?

Wait. *Any* disagreements? I mean, can we really say that none of that stuff matters as long as we eat his flesh and drink his blood? Is it really all about what we *do* and not at all about what he *believe*? Well, no, not quite. If there are no limits at all, we don't even have fudge any more, just goo, and I'm not here to commend Anglican goo.

Take this business about the sacrifice of Jesus. I suspect many of you haven't heard this story, because unlike some of the things that happened at General Convention,

this didn't lend itself to being misrepresented by a secular press that is just looking to whip up anxieties and tell sensational stories, whether they're true or not. A certain priest was elected bishop in one of our dioceses. Now even though our dioceses choose their own bishops, the Church as a whole has to approve episcopal elections by a majority vote of all the diocesan bishops and a majority vote of all the diocesan Standing Committees. Usually this sort of thing proceeds without much attention being paid, but in this case, for various reasons, people started to get suspicious about this priest's theology, and more and more people began to think that he had gone too far, even by the rather generous standards of Anglicanism. One of the turning points in the whole process came when one highly respected bishop – who is very much on the liberal side of things – wrote a public statement saying, basically, "I can't see that this guy believes that Jesus' death was a sacrifice, or that it accomplished something for us that we couldn't do for ourselves, in any way whatsoever. So I can't consent to his election." In the end, a majority of both bishops and Standing Committees said no.

Though I grieve for the diocese that now has to go through the election process all over again, I rejoice – you have no idea how much I rejoice – that our beloved Anglican fudge was not allowed to melt into Anglican goo. After all, how can we really accept the gifts of God for the people of God – how can we feed on Jesus in our hearts by faith, with thanksgiving – if we do not acknowledge in some way that Jesus gives his flesh to be broken for the life of the world?

There have to be some core elements somewhere, to keep our Anglican fudge from melting into a pile of goo. But what are they? They are the essentials of *believing* without which our *doing* makes no sense. When a theory or interpretation or theological speculation empties the meaning from our liturgy and strips our actions of their purpose and significance, then that theory or interpretation or theological speculation must be rejected. Then there can be no compromise for the sake of peace; there must be a rejection for the sake of truth.

Those essentials of belief, the ones that give meaning to our worship and prevent Anglican fudge from going all gooey on us, are stated in the creeds. To our shame, we Episcopalians haven't always respected those boundaries – don't ask me to explain Bishop Spong, because I can't – but the story I've just told you is a heartening sign that we are returning to a proper Anglican balance of freedom, yes,

but freedom within boundaries. We will not require unanimity, but we will require a unity that is enacted at the font and the altar and given shape and meaning by the creeds.

And that brings me to the stuff you probably *have* heard about: our last General Convention. The media made it sound as if the Episcopal Church had taken some huge step. But let me tell you: when you read the actual resolutions – which are classic examples of Anglican fudge – you find that we haven't taken some huge step. We haven't even taken a small step. What we've done is raise one foot and say, you know, I'm going to look around a bit and see if it's safe for me to plant this foot down a little further along the path. That's it.

Some of you, I know, don't like the direction of the path along which the Church is contemplating moving a little further. Others, I'm sure, wish we'd quit dithering and get on with it. Still others have not made up your minds, or don't really care.

Now I have my views on the subject – as I have my views on the nature of Christ's presence in the Eucharist and my views about the nature of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. But my views are entirely beside the point. I have chosen to focus today on the words of Invitation to Communion, and on the words of our Collect, because I want to urge upon you, not my own views, but my conviction, which is the conviction of Anglicans down through the ages, that we are called not to unanimity, but to unity, a unity that is enacted at the font and the altar and given shape and meaning by the creeds.

I *rejoice* to be part of a church where people disagree with me about the nature of Christ's presence in the Sacrament but still go with me to feed on him in our hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.

I *rejoice* to be part of a church where people disagree with me about the nature of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross but still join me in praying for "grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work."

And I *rejoice* to be part of a church where people disagree with me about sexuality but will stand with me and proclaim the essentials of the faith: "We believe in one God . . ."