From Liturgy to Life – Leader’s Notes

# Week 4: Blessed and Blessing

Each heading below relates to a slide

## Prayer

## Some Major Themes – Creation

Let’s briefly look at some of the ways some major theological themes feed into our understanding of the sacrament, and the implications this might have for us in daily life. We begin with Creation which is especially noticeable in prayers F & G – in various ways prayers F and G (and especially F) owe as much to some Eastern prayers. The Western tradition has a much narrower focus on the Cross. The bread and the wine are, as the BCP puts it, “These your creatures” which Eucharistic prayer C translates “these gifts of your creation”. Christianity is a very materialistic religion: water, bread, wine, oil, its main rituals see “created stuff” as fitting vehicles for God’s Spirit, God’s life. To celebrate any sacrament is to be challenged about the value we place on the creation we inhabit.

## Creation – Biblical texts

Think of some biblical texts: this week’s handouts have both texts from the Eucharistic Prayers and texts from the Bible on the same cross-shaped grid. Christ is portrayed as fundamental to creation in Colossians, for example, and in the prologue to John, and we need to let him be fundamental to our understanding of the creation.

## Hopkins

One of the most powerful ways of putting it comes from the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, for example, did? Hopkins poem, God’s Grandeur is about a sense of creation that despite all humanity does to it, God is still sustaining and renewing his universe. [Read the poem, or invite another person to read it – it needs reading well]

Judaism is not an evangelistic tradition, but it does see the Jewish people having a universal calling. Jewish tradition speaks about their calling, as God’s people, to be engaged in “Tikkun Olam” – the repair of the world. That theme seems particularly resonant today: isn’t that something we need to be urgently engaged in: the repair of the world?

## Incarnation

There is always a sense that even more than God’s good creation, the incarnation of Christ is the basis of all the sacraments – indeed that Christ himself is the primary, the archetypal sacrament, in whom the fullness of God is found in created matter, in human flesh. So it is – at the least – highly appropriate, or at the most – absolutely necessary – that Christ’s life continues to be available to flesh and blood humans through the receiving of material things.

Even if your focus is primarily on the death and passion, as much Western theology is, that Christ takes flesh is, if you like, the necessary condition for the cross to be effective. It is because Jesus is God in the flesh that his offering of himself changes the whole world. He is not just another in a long line of martyrs dying for their cause.

## Incarnation – Bible

Hebrews puts that particularly clearly: “Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect.” (Heb 2:14,15,17) The church – and individual Christians often seem tempted to make spiritual the opposite of material: spirituality can seem like an escape from daily life, rather than an orientation to the value of the ordinary. Biblical and traditional Christianity insist that to be truly spiritual is to fully engage the material world. How do we embrace the world that God so loved?

## Cross, Resurrection and Ascension

We noted last week in passing that we would group these together, as St John’s gospel does. The Western church’s Eucharist has been mainly focussed on the death of Jesus, and certainly the whole service, and the whole Eucharistic Prayer pivots around the narrative of these gifts becoming “body and blood” – Jesus interpreting his death as his sacrifice. In fact, if you leave out the Creed, the Book of Common Prayer manages to celebrate Holy Communion without a single explicit reference to the resurrection. Most of us think that needs rebalancing! As you see, contemporary texts group them together as well, as do a number of biblical statements. [Refer to the handout as time permits]

## Cross, Resurrection and Ascension – Bible

Think of the way, throughout the gospel, John refers to Jesus being glorified – a word that encompasses the whole process of Jesus being “lifted up” on the cross and to God. In time, these things happen sequentially, in theology, John holds them together. You also have that extraordinary concept in Hebrews in which the living Jesus enters the heavenly Holy of Holies bearing the sacrifice of himself that he offers: priest and victim, living and dead. “He entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption” (Heb 9:12) While Christ’s death in history is a single and unrepeatable event, it is also an eternal event that happens before God, the means by which at all times in an all places we are able to receive our life from God, and give our life to God.

So many of the words of these prayers, hold these things together. Let’s look at two ways in which holding them together makes us people of good news. First, we can be both honest and hopeful about suffering and death, in a world which increasingly seems to want to avoid speaking about them. Second, we are given a most profound sense of everyone’s value to God, and the redeemability of even the worst that we meet.

## Kingdom / End

In our earliest account of the Eucharist, Paul orients the memory of Jesus’ institution, and the celebration of the church, firmly towards the consummation of all things: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” (1 Cor 11:26) It is difficult for us to put this picture into words, because what a world truly transformed in the eternal presence of God might be is beyond our imagination and vocabulary.

## Kingdom / End – Bible

The quote from Revelation does it in terms of what is not to be found in such a world – no more tears, or mourning. The texts of the liturgy mix metaphor with abstract virtues: vision of splendour, a feast, justice, mercy, perfection. How does this sacrament stretch our imagination of what a perfected universe might look like? What would it mean to the world if everyone got the same share of the world’s resources in the way we – whatever our social status – have received the same gifts placed into our outstretched hands? Freely you have received, freely give. If we receive the life of Christ through the transformation of the ordinary stuff of life to be a vehicle of God’s presence, then we are called – perhaps we are compelled – to seek the transformation of ordinary life so that it is more and more open to God’s presence.

## Groups

These are big questions that pick up where we left off last week. Which of these four themes resonate most with you, or challenge you to think in new ways about your daily life? Which one(s) do you think your church would benefit from paying more attention to in looking at your mission in your community and your engagement in daily life? (20 minutes – try to think of some practical examples, so e.g. paying attention to creation might challenge us to create a conservation area and open classroom in our churchyard for the use of the school and community)

(If in Zoom, remember your room number, and come back prepared to share one thing in answer to each of those questions)

## Post-Communion

For the next section we’re sticking with those themes, and seeing how they’re present in our longer post-communion prayer. What we’ve seen as significant aspects of our sacramental praying become part of our going out – our orientation towards daily life. While technically the post-communion prayers are treated as part of the Liturgy of the Sacrament, they are pivoting us towards our dismissal, to what we shall do in the week.

## Four themes revisited – Creation

We have creation: “Father of all” – I want to go back for a moment to that text from John in your handout: The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. Jn 1:9 – This can equally well be translated as the King James Bible has it “This was the true light who enlightens everyone who comes into the world.” Even though you can find the view elsewhere, this is the strongest statement that no-one is without the grace of God in their life. What makes it possible for each human being – whatever their faith or lack of it – to live, think, relate, love, is being God-made, God-enlightened. I think that makes a difference to how we treat each other, and how willing we are to learn about truth, about God, even from those who claim not to know God, or to know God differently. How do you meet God in the people you come across?

## Four themes revisited – Incarnation

The prayer picks up incarnation with a metaphor from the parable of the prodigal son. “that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home” You might want to think back to our first week, and the emphasis on the welcoming Father who runs down the road before any sign of repentance has been offered. The great Swiss theologian of the 20th century, Karl Barth, puts it even more strongly. In Christ’s incarnation, God journeys into the far country to sit among the pigs with the lost son. It is one of the big reasons Anglicans put so much emphasis on the parish: this is the place we are called to put flesh on our faith, to get out of our church and draw alongside those God puts in our neighbourhood.

## Four themes revisited – Glorification

As we’ve been noting, there is a sense in which incarnation and exaltation are inseparable, and one leads into the other ‘Dying and living, he declared your love, gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory.” Another way of putting these two themes together is to say that “Christ meets us where we are, he doesn’t leave us where we are. He takes us as we are, he doesn’t leave us as we are.” Have you noticed how people will sometimes talk about how difficult it is to watch the news? Well, yes, it can be. Or how people will increasingly talk about someone’s “passing” and avoid the mention of death? We go out, I think, as people fortified by the courage of Christ, to look the world’s needs and ills in the face, because we know that suffering and death are never the last word, but that love and life are God’s last words.

## Four themes revisited – the transformation of all things

What we have done in our celebration with the bread and wine is that we have celebrated God’s working to transform the ordinary stuff of human life into vehicles of divine life. What we have remembered in our celebration is the transforming power of God to turn death to life, and promise the perfection of creation. What we go out to do is look for ways in which we can be both recipients and agents of God’s transforming love. We gather to dream what the world can be like, we go to see how that dream might be realised.

## The Dismissal and the Mass

The dismissal brings us to the blessing: we have celebrated God’s blessing of us and God’s world in Christ. The theme of blessing the world was central to St Paul’s understanding of God’s call to Abraham: “In you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.” (see e.g Gal 3 and Rom 4) For him it is how the Jewish vocation leads to the blessing of all nations. God blesses us, so that through us, God might bless others.

There’s a quotation on your handout from a 2007 Post-Synodal Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* by Pope Benedict XVI, reflecting on the old Latin dismissal “*Ite, missa est*” literally “Go, it’s the dismissal” It’s the phrase that led to the whole service being known as the Mass. “In antiquity, *missa* simply meant ‘dismissal.’ However in Christian usage it gradually took on a deeper meaning. The word ‘dismissal’ has come to imply a ‘mission.’ These few words succinctly express the missionary nature of the Church.”

We’ve said all along that worship and mission are two sides of the same coin, the two lungs of the church. Now, with this dismissal, we’re again invited to ask how what we have done together shapes the different lives we will live in the coming week. That old name Mass may be mainly associated with Catholics, whether Roman or Anglican, but it’s intimately linked with mission, with being sent out by and for God. Perhaps sometimes we should use it, just to remember that God brings us together to equip us to be sent out: even if we are sometimes very small churches, we are always a Mass movement.

## Groups

In the previous discussion you were asked to consider which of the four themes might be underemphasized, both for you personally, and for your church. Look back at which theme(s) you identified then, and ask “How could paying attention to this theme enrich my sharing in God’s work in daily life / my church’s engagement in our community?” (15 minutes – again try to think of some practical examples and see if you can bring one back to the whole group.)

We’ll have brief feedback so remember your group number.

## Prayer

Closing prayers.

Music for Bless the Lord <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zqHgbWO0wQ>