



The Sacrament in One Man's Ministry

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The invitation to write about the place of Holy Communion in my ministry has suggested to me that I may take the liberty of presenting what I have to say in a fairly autobiographical way. I have been the minister of two parishes, Portree between 1969 and 1973, and St Giles' Cathedral since 1973.

The preacher at my ordination in Portree on the Isle of Skye on the 9th of May 1969 was Kenneth Macpherson, the minister of Duirinish, who preached on the words from 1 Peter, '*Ye are ... a royal priesthood.*' Macpherson had been ordained in the 1930s, had a parish in Lanarkshire, and then became a music teacher, mainly in Fort William, where he was also the organist in the Episcopal Church. From that background he came to Dunvegan, where they had only one Communion Sunday in the year. He had been there some years, and that infrequency had not changed. I asked him why, with his churchmanship, he was not altering things. His reply has remained printed on my memory. It was that if you did not have the sacrament as your chief diet of worship every Sunday, it was a matter of relative unimportance how often you had it. That point, that the distinction between weekly celebration and celebration other than weekly has a significance greater than that of more or less frequent celebration, carries for me great cogency.

I grew up mainly in Appin, where my father was the minister. There were two Communion Sundays in the year. I helped deck the front pews with the white cloths, and sensed an air of special occasion. The memory of earlier times lingered, as when I was told by a local joiner, 'You should not be going to school today', and felt troubled, at the age of 8 or 9, why I was being so informed. It was the Thursday before Communion, the Fast Day, and in the joiner's youth the school was closed on Fast Days.

My father kept the custom of having guest ministers at Communion, and he himself was from time to time one of the guest ministers at

a Communion season in the farther west, where the season could include a dozen services, and something of the atmosphere of the old Lowland Holy Fair be found. I remember taking a great interest in my father's recounting the events of the season when he came home, and so I suppose I can say I grew up on the fringe of the old Highland Communion Season.

Two things about our Communion in Appin remain strongly with me. The Manse Pew was at the front of the church, at right angles to the other pews, and so we sat there, in front of the communicants in their linen-decked pews. It never occurred to me that I was being excluded. I have often wondered if that early experience has had some effect in my taking the exhibitive features of the fraction and elevation with great seriousness. It may be the case that the participation of the congregation has fitted in with educational perspectives of our time, and with movements in other churches (the Parish Communion in the Church of England, and the influence of the Second Vatican Council in the Roman Catholic Church), but that need not diminish the importance of the powerful communication of the minister taking bread and breaking it, and raising the cup, in full view of the gathered people.

The other feature of my childhood memory of the sacrament is that while most of the communicants sat at the prepared pews from the beginning of the service, some waited in their customary places further back until the minister invited them to come forward, just before the elements were brought into the church by the elders. The church had been built about sixty years earlier, replacing an older church. Might it have been that the custom of going forward to sit at the table persisted, passed on through the generations? Certainly that action of moving forward, common throughout Christendom, remains a strong image in my memory, and has stayed with me as something worth preserving in some form or other.

Also, I recall very little, if any, emphasis on denomination of church either in church or at home. There was a small Episcopal church, the Rector living in the neighbouring parish of Duror. The parish church

was simply the local church, and my father everybody's minister. I do not remember any great emphasis on the Church of Scotland, or being Presbyterian, or Protestant.

My seven years as a student in Edinburgh, from 1960 to 1967, were the years of *aggiornamento* in the Roman Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council and Pope John XXIII, years also of John A. T. Robinson's *Honest to God* and Harvey Cox's *The Secular City*. Renewal and hope were in the air, talk of the coming great Church, new forms of old doctrines, SCM conferences – including one at Bristol when Michael Ramsey, Archbishop of Canterbury, held an open question-and-answer session. One question was, 'What does Britain need most?' The archbishop replied, slowly, and with great emphasis, 'What Britain needs most is to get back to God.' Immediately an African student leaped to his feet and called, 'Would it not be better to say that Britain needs to go forward to God?' These were the days of African decolonialisation, and the mood was of progress and liberty. The good archbishop did not disappoint. 'You are quite right. What Britain needs most is to go forward to God.' For me the questioning of claims and doctrines has never stopped, but neither has the conviction that our Christian heritage is the total heritage of the Christian Church, and not something which attempted to set aside everything between the Book of Revelation and John Knox. With that sense of belonging to the whole Christian story there comes an attachment to the liturgical treasures of all the centuries, and a deep suspicion of a liturgical pattern which reflects only one small part of the inheritance, or, most pointedly, which could justify such a title as 'Church of Scotland Communion'. Such a perspective was confirmed in my three years assisting David Steel in Linlithgow, a preacher of broad catholicity who bristled at any suggestion that the Church of Scotland was a post-Reformation 'denomination'.

Such exposure as I had to the fashions in philosophy of the sixties encouraged a critical attitude to religious language, especially leading to a suspicion that the word 'God' was increasingly being required to bear a weight which in earlier times had been shared among other words, and images, and ritual action. Terms such as Providence,

Creator, Thou, and of course the Trinity may have testified in a sketchy kind of way to a mysterious reality which we are not able to pin down, whereas ‘God’ is terribly like someone’s proper name, a clear indicator of some apprehensible specificity. I have long harboured the fear that the over-employment of that little word, while being a vehicle of confidence for some, has crystallised for many more their rejection of a clear, simple, anthropomorphic story as the reality to which religious believing bears witness. Whatever the reality is to which the word ‘God’ bears witness, that word is not, and cannot be, itself that reality. That seems almost embarrassingly a true statement; but it seems to be one that is not made often or clearly enough. The more one is aware of the fragility of religious language, however, the more one treasures little hints, tiny glimpses, and non-verbal affirmation, in gestures, music, environment, sacraments. Not only are scepticism and mysticism not enemies but friends; they are friends which depend on one another. Radical sixties theology and rich sacramental worship go very well together!

Rehearsing background and influences as I have been doing, I am reluctant to omit a reference to Norman Maclean’s first celebration of Holy Communion as a minister. I have often returned to his account, not least because the little church in Sconser was in the parish of Portree, and I conducted services there every fortnight, but also because it combines two emphases which are important to me – the connection with the natural world, and the impetus to promote freedom. Maclean was minister of St Cuthbert’s, Edinburgh, between 1915 and 1937, and one of the great Scottish churchmen of his time. His first parish, Waternish in Skye, had no communicants, and so it was in the year after his ordination that he presided at the annual Communion in Sconser, near his native district of Braes. So many people came that someone fainted, and they moved the Table outside, where the service continued.

An awed stillness fell on the worshippers on the slope; the Creator of heaven and earth was manifestly present in the beauty of earth and sky and sea which enfolded us, and there was the great additional Presence, that of the Love which emptied itself and endured the Cross, despising the shame. [...] For the temple in which the Bread was broken at that first Communion was not

a temple built with human hands. God Himself had erected the pillars, even the everlasting hills, and laid its flooring of jasper in the sea, and spread over it, as a canopy, fleeces of silvery clouds, and filled the whole air with the melody of winged choristers that answered each other from Glamaig to Ben Lee and from the Coolins to Dun Can. And in the midst of that beauteous and vast sanctuary, God proclaimed to His children that at the centre of the Universe, the most beautiful of all is the Love that stoops to a Cross and loves each as if he or she alone existed. It is the realisation of the meaning of the words: *Broken for you; shed for you*, that has for all the centuries inspired the hearts of men to heroic deeds for freedom. For the man for whom Christ died is of such worth that he cannot become a tyrant's slave.¹

The service was held in 1893. It is recounted in *Set Free*, the second volume of his memoirs, published in 1949. I think I can imagine the scene, and sympathise with the conviction.

Not long after my arrival in St Giles' I was in conversation with John Leith, Professor of Theology at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, a leading scholar and churchman of the old southern Presbyterian Church, the PCUS, and a doughty champion of the traditions of the Reformed churches and of the influence of John Calvin.

I asked him what he thought my aim should be in St Giles', and he responded that my aim should be to make St Giles' a place 'where Reformed worship at its best is found'. My reaction was silently to remove the word 'Reformed' from his definition, or at least to couple with it the word 'catholic' or similar. Yet how can 'best' be defined? Leith was no blind devotee of the Genevan inheritance – he gladly approved of my having a tablet removed from the plinth of John Knox's statue on the ground that it referred to Knox as 'First Minister of St Giles'. He was also aware of the roots of the Reformation in the New Testament and the Church Fathers, and of the adherence among the reformers to the centrality of the Lord's Supper and the place of the Creeds, and of Confession and Absolution. In *An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* Leith wrote:

There is no one Reformed liturgy. Just as there was no significant effort to impose any one creed so there was no effort to impose any one liturgy. This variety is rooted in historical circumstances and also in the understanding of the liturgy. Calvin gave high priority to the practice of the early church in the shaping of the liturgy, but he did not follow slavishly any one pattern in either the New Testament or the ancient church.

He wrote also,

While he wished the Lord's Supper to be celebrated each Sunday, he agreed to less frequent communion in Strasbourg and Geneva. He omitted absolution from the Genevan service, though he recorded in 1561 his desire that absolution should remain in the service.²

To some extent, therefore, we follow Calvin in St Giles', with Holy Communion as a main service every Sunday, and a declaration of forgiveness following confession in each of these services.

What is Christian worship 'at its best'? The answer is not to be found in one prescribed liturgical order, or even in several permitted orders, but in criteria and yardsticks which allow wide variety, and define by way of indicative suggestion rather than detailed prescription. I suggest that a good church service should offer things old and new, familiar and novel, with old formulae and fresh slants; and that regular weekly attenders in the same place should be able to receive such a balance, while the visitor from anywhere on earth, from any Christian background and allegiance, should also be able both to recognise familiar ingredients in the service and also to enjoy elements that are unfamiliar, local to the building and place or part of the special heritage of that branch or family within the Church Catholic. A living balance should, of course, be rather like a see-saw, the balance being in the accumulated impact more than in two halves weighed, measured, and attested as being identical. You would usually be invited to sing a Metrical Psalm at our Communion Service.

St Giles' had weekly communion for several decades, in a separate service after Morning Service, attended by few. On my first Easter, 1974, we began a service every Sunday at 9 – Holy Communion, with the people coming forward to stand around the Holy Table. The present Sunday pattern started on the First Sunday in Lent in 1983: Holy Communion at 8am, with sermon but no hymns or organ, Holy Communion at 10 and Morning Service at 11.30, both of these with choir, hymns, and sermon; the St Giles' at Six recital series at 6pm, and Evening Service at 8, with Communion once a month. From the early 1990s we had for about ten years Holy Communion every day, but that is now confined to two mornings, Wednesday and Friday at 8am. We therefore have no 'Communion Sundays', and the pattern is the same every Sunday, with three services every Sunday morning and on Christmas Day. At all Communion services, the communicants move to stand around the Table.

It is not my purpose here to attempt a full exposition of a doctrine of the Lord's Supper, but I wish to suggest these points. First, the wish to order the sacrament in a way which shares as much as is reasonable with the mainstream of church practice across the ages and the traditions is more than a desire to promote cultural inclusiveness. That we are in some unity with the great span of church practice today is an important part of what it means to be Christian. That there should be a strong note of catholicity in every celebration of Holy Communion in the Church of Scotland would be the wish of many Church of Scotland ministers and people.

Secondly, the involvement of physical action and the use of the senses – going forward to surround the Table, receiving and eating and drinking and sharing, greeting neighbours with a sign of peace, much of it accompanied and assisted by music, instrumental and sung, from a wide church repertoire, and much to see (including seasonal hangings) – allow people to participate 'with hearts and hands and voices', and to complement the intellectual side of hearing and thinking, in which not everyone is able to share equally. A corrective may also be supplied to the emphasis on individual conviction and personal commitment, by

setting forth in practice the faith of the Church and the value of ‘what we do’ as distinct from ‘what I think’.

Thirdly, the central significance of the Lord’s Supper is closely related to salvation, atonement, and the thinking behind such lines as Mrs Alexander’s ‘There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin.’ Perhaps ‘related’ may not be the right word, if it can be claimed that the sacrament supercedes theories of atonement, or renders them superfluous, though it might be less controversial to suggest that ‘paying the price’ and other such thinking represent images or metaphors which try to express the meaning of Christ’s death, while the principal way which we have of receiving and bearing witness to the consequences of the Cross is the sacrament. John McIntyre, in *The Shape of Soteriology*, writes,

I should like to argue that despite the immense variety of eucharistic liturgy, there lies at the very heart of such liturgy, even if surrounded by other doxological and dogmatic statements embodied in prayers, an interpretation of the meaning of the eucharist which derives from the mind of Christ himself.³

McIntyre goes on to quote Gregory Dix, in *The Shape of the Liturgy*:

The Messianic, redeeming, sacrificial significance which the whole primitive Jewish church unhesitatingly saw, first in His death, and then in His Person and whole action towards God, is the proof that this meaning was grasped by that church primarily through the eucharist, which arose directly out of what he had said and done at the last supper. There, and there alone, He had explicitly *attached* that particular meaning to His own death and office.

McIntyre continues:

Here Dix is echoing almost exactly words of the then Bishop of Derby (1930) [...]: ‘It was not the death upon Calvary *per se*, but the death upon Calvary as the Last Supper interprets it and gives the clue to its meaning, which constitutes our Lord’s sacrifice. The doctrine of sacrifice (and of atonement) was not read *into* the Last Supper; it was read out of it’.⁴

If the old liberal/evangelical distinction retains any value these days, those who hold the sacrament central to worship and believing share significant ‘territory’ with the evangelicals.

Fourthly, I have tried, over the years, in sermons and in speaking to First Communicants, to emphasise the action of the sacrament, even to the extent of saying that for me the ‘elements’ in communion are not the bread and wine only, or the bread and wine as material ‘things’, but rather the bread and its taking and its breaking and its sharing and its eating; the cup and its raising and its sharing and its drinking. It is in these acts that the communicant is identified with Christ, in his broken and poured-out life, and the meaning of love as giving and making whole is communicated to mind and imagination. It strikes me that a great deal of nonsense has been spoken about transubstantiation. John Macquarrie writes helpfully:

Contrary to the view of many Protestant polemicists, this doctrine is so far from embracing a magical understanding of the eucharist that it is in fact one of the strongest possible safeguards against such magical views. What St. Thomas is saying is that there is no change in the sensible accidents of the bread and wine, that is to say, precisely that there is no magic. His description of the real presence in the eucharist points to the same kind of ambiguity as appeared in our own analyses of miracles, providence, and even the incarnation itself. From one point of view, nothing can be seen in any of these events but just the natural phenomena, and there is no breach of the natural order that could be discerned by the senses. But the eye of faith may see the event “in depth,” [...] and be aware of God’s presence and action in the event.⁵

As to the setting of the sacrament, I feel sure that the world is not finished with priests and shrines, but our churches seem often to regard the significance of both as out of date or even mistaken. Some regard me as over fussy about treating the Holy Table with respect at all times. Some use their Tables as stores for an extraordinary mixture of bits and pieces. The heart of the Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist, the Mass is, however, testified throughout the diverse styles and orders

in which the feast is kept, and for that we may all give thanks to the blessed Trinity.

- ¹ Norman Maclean, *Set Free: Being the Second Volume of The Former Days* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1949), 184 f.
- ² John H. Leith, *An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community* (Atlanta, GA.: John Knox Press, 1977), 171, 173.
- ³ John McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology: Studies in the Doctrine of the Death of Christ* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992), 8.
- ⁴ Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1945), quoted in *The Shape of Soteriology* (p. 9).
- ⁵ John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1966), 424 f.