

*'That they all may
be one'*



Until He come - Eucharist and Eschatology

We celebrate the Eucharist in *memory*, in remembrance of what Christ has done for us, at Calvary through to his Ascension into heavenly glory. But merely to look back is only part of the picture, however much we might claim that liturgical recalling involves actually bringing the past into the present. There is more still. Not only is the past made present for us in the Eucharistic mystery but, paradoxically, the future comes to us as well. The Kingdom, the power and the glory, definitively achieved and entered into by our incarnate and ascended Lord, are timeless. In every Eucharist we rise with Christ, return with him to the Father in his eternal self-offering, receive the Spirit, enter the new creation in the heavenly kingdom . . . The 'not yet' is already tasted.

Is this pious fantasy? No, it has been the universal experience of Christians throughout the ages and is actuality. In the Western Church it has tended to get itself rather side-lined because of a sometimes excessive stress on the looking-back-to-Calvary aspect of the Eucharist and quibbles over whether or not the Eucharist is a sacrifice, or the exact nature of Christ's presence in the sacred elements. The Eastern tradition has fared better. However, things are changing in the West and the balance is being redressed. Ecumenical contact and dialogue, infiltrated by the working of the Holy Spirit, is bearing fruit.

The Protestant, Reformed tradition never really lost an awareness of the eschatological - the promised ultimate consummation of all things, encapsulated in the longed-for return of Christ in glory. We have only to look at the wealth of material in 19th century non-conformist hymn books to recognise this. That this yearning and aspiration should make its way into a Eucharistic context is hardly surprising. George Rawson's Communion hymn, found in the Congregational Hymnary, and similar books, is a case in point. The biblical text, 1 Corinthians 11:26, Cf vv23-26, gives it its refrain: *UNTIL HE COME.*

*By Christ redeemed, in Christ restored,
We keep the memory adored,
And show the death of our dear Lord
Until He come.*

Verses two and three bring Calvary into the present, as we might expect:

*'His body broken in our stead Is here, in this memorial bread . . . His life-blood shed for us, we see; The wine shall tell the mystery' . . .*but all of this is **UNTIL HE COME**. The concluding verses are even more explicit in their turning towards the future:

*And thus that dark betrayal night
With the last Advent we unite,
By one blest chain of loving rite,
Until He come.*

Deep though this insight is, however, there is still a sense in which the hymn writer doesn't quite make it. He is still looking **towards** the future, waiting. **Has** he sensed that that future, like the past, is actually, somehow already here? Not quite, it would seem.

*. . .Until the trump of God be heard . . .
And with the great commanding word
The Lord shall come.

O blessed hope! with this elate
Let not our hearts be desolate,
But, strong in faith, in patience wait
Until He come.*

It would be churlish to expect **more** than we have here. There is amazing insight as it is and the way is opened for us to probe further. Would it be equally churlish to expect more of our recently revised Western liturgies? There is certainly some emphasis on the eschatological nature of the Eucharist in these rites, which is pleasing. Even if somewhat self-consciously done, at least it is a start.

Most of the Acclamations, now inserted after the Consecration in the Roman Catholic and some Anglican rites, affirm belief in and desire for the return of Christ in glory: *'Christ has died;*

Christ is risen; Christ will come again’ ‘We acclaim your death, Lord Jesus until you come in glory’ . . . In the revised Roman rite there is also a significant addition to the *Embolism* after the Lord’s Prayer, (ie the traditional elaboration of the concluding phrase ‘*Deliver us from evil*’). As in previous usage, God is asked to deliver us from evil, give peace in our day, keep us free from sin - and even to protect us from all anxiety. Then, happily, comes the newly-added part: ‘as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Saviour Jesus Christ’.

In Eucharistic Prayers three and four of the same rite a change is made at the actual *anamnesis*, the point when the celebrant recalls specifically the saving events of Christ which are actually meted to us in the Eucharist. Reference is made there to the **return** of Christ, the only one of these events which still lies ahead, from the point of view of historical time that is. We quote the anamnesis of Prayer 3:

*Father, calling to mind the death your Son endured for our salvation, his glorious resurrection and ascension into heaven, and **READY TO GREET HIM WHEN HE COMES AGAIN**, we offer you in thanksgiving . . .*

But here again the eschatological aspect is still sensed as something yet to come, though perhaps we are splitting hairs. It is extremely difficult to express the simultaneity of the already-but-not-yet of eschatology in logical terms. It is experienced rather than described.

The situation in the Church of England rites is similar. The Book of Common Prayer did actually incorporate our Lord’s words, as recorded by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11. Just before the Consecration Jesus is addressed as the one who ‘*did institute and in his holy gospel command us to continue a perpetual memory of that his precious death, until his coming again*’ . . . But it is only with the revised Alternative Service Book rites that more explicit eschatological awareness is manifested. In all four Eucharistic Prayers, at the *anamnesis*, the second coming is referred to, but, as with the Roman rite, it is still very much ‘in the future’. eg Eucharistic Prayer 1: . . . *as we look for his coming in glory we celebrate with this bread and this cup his one perfect sacrifice.* and, Prayer 2 *looking for the coming of his kingdom . . .*

So, if we want to see this eschatological approach in its fullest and richest form we must look to the ancient liturgies, and indeed to those of the present Eastern Churches who have been able to maintain the tradition virtually untarnished. The whole of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom is eschatological, from the opening invocation ‘*Blessed be the Kingdom of the Father*

and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit', to a prayer nearer the end: 'Hear us, O Lord Jesus Christ our God out of thy holy dwelling-place and from the throne of the glory of thy Kingdom, and come and sanctify us, thou that sittest above with the Father, and art here invisibly present with us'. The words at the anamnesis in the same rite are significant:

We, therefore REMEMBERING the Cross, the Tomb, the Resurrection, the Ascension, the Session on the right hand and THE SECOND GLORIOUS COMING AGAIN . . .

It is all of a piece. Since the Eucharist really takes place outside time we are already in the eternal. We can actually speak of **remembering**, of bringing back to mind, the glorious and already achieved but **future** event of the second coming! That is where we are meant to be in our Eucharistic celebrations, in the Kingdom, the new creation. Only in the grace of the Holy Spirit can any of this be realised and recognised.

Two modern Orthodox writers express these concepts for us:

*In the worship of the Church . . . it is necessary for us to recall (and this means to comprehend and realise) that what was accomplished in the creation of the world, and its salvation in Christ, together with the kingdom of God, which is **coming** in glory, but in Christ is **already** revealed - all of this has already been granted. We **recall**, in other words, both the past and the future as **living** in us, as given to us, as transformed into our **life** and making it life in God.*

(Cf. Alexander Schmemmann: *The Eucharist*. St. Vladimirs Press 1988 p129-30)

In a different context John Zizioulos says, expounding Maximus the Confessor:

*The truth of history is identical with that of creation itself, both being oriented towards the future. Perfection is not an original state to which creation is bidden to return but an 'end' (fulfilment) which summons from ahead . . . the truth of history lies in the future . . . and history is true, despite change and decay, not just because it is a movement **towards** the end, but mainly because it is a movement **from** the end, since it is the end that gives it meaning.*

(Cf. John Zizioulos 'Being as Communion' St. Vladimirs Press 1997)

As Zizioulos shows us elsewhere, this truth about existence is meted to us, and hence experienced by us, in the Eucharist - the Eucharist, we might say, as 'realised' eschatology. *

The traditions meet, Orthodox, Anglican, Catholic, Reformed, in the one Eucharist and the one Kingdom.