

*Chapter Six*

*The Eucharist*

*based on*

***A Theology of Sacrament***

**The Great Thanksgiving:**

As we come to the Eucharist we join with all creation in praising the Creator and recognising Christ's presence among us.

We praise God that Christ, who became part of Earth as human flesh, is now the cosmic Christ who fills all things, including the grain and the grape, as the body and blood of the Crucified One.

**Invitation:**

We are conscious of the poor of Earth and our kin in creation as we come to share this meal.

**Dismissal Blessing:**

We pray the blessing of healing that we receive through the Eucharist may flow through us to heal creation.

## *Chapter Six*

# **The Eucharist: A Theology of Presence**

In *The Season of Creation* it is appropriate to reflect on a threefold presence of Christ in the Eucharist, three ways we are connected with Jesus Christ. The classic image of Christ being present in, with and under the elements extends beyond the bread and wine. Christ is present in, with and under the elements, the worshippers and creation. The Eucharist may be a celebration of Christ's deep presence in all three domains as we eat and drink as one at the Lord's Table.

*These three modes of Christ's presence may be designated the sacramental, the communal and the cosmic. In each of these modes of divine presence, we are privileged to receive the gifts of forgiveness, bonding and healing. To celebrate the Eucharist is potentially to join with all believers and all creation in a moment of communion with our crucified God, a moment when the infinite and the finite meet at the table of our Lord.*

### **Sacramental Presence**

We have all heard the powerful words of institution spoken by Jesus on the night when he was betrayed, that shameful moment in the journey of God on Earth. The words ring in our ears and challenge our modern rational minds. 'Take and eat, this is my body which is given for you.' A remarkable gift! A stunning statement! My body!

The very idea of eating human flesh was anathema in Jesus' day. The suggestion that someone might drink blood was sacrilegious, to say nothing of drinking human blood. With these words Jesus was confronting his disciples and us with a spiritual challenge. He was asking them to connect with him spiritually through his flesh, his biological being. There is no hint of dualism here. Jesus does not suggest that his disciples view his body as a shell in which his spirit lives temporarily or his blood as the seat of his soul. Jesus invites his followers to take and eat—flesh and blood.

This challenge of Jesus recalls our earlier consideration of the deep incarnation of God, the word becoming flesh. The Incarnate One is not a piece of God residing temporarily in a piece of flesh. God incarnate is the Word ‘become flesh’, one with flesh, one with one piece of Earth called Jesus. God becomes an integral part of the biological process of being born, eating, drinking and dying. God joins the web of life.

It is this God—become flesh—who invites us to partake of this flesh, this body and blood. God is present in, with and under the bread and the wine, those biological elements chosen for this sacred meal.

The traditional expression ‘in, with and under’ reminds us of the famous axiom of Luther: *finitum capax infiniti*—the finite bears the infinite, the transcendent is totally immanent. Our transcendent God is not floating loose somewhere, but bound to creation, in, with and under Earth. God is not disembodied, but present in the bodies of creation. This axiom is especially significant in connection with the Eucharist.

*If God is present in, with and under the elements of creation, the same is especially true of the elements of the sacrament, the bread and wine that Jesus explicitly identifies as his body and blood. The finite elements of bread and wine have the capacity to hold the infinite, to bear the transcendent, to embrace God’s incarnate presence.*

What makes this ritual a true sacrament is that these elements not only embrace the presence of the Crucified One, they mediate his life giving power to us. We receive the infinite through the finite, the spiritual through the biological. We eat and drink into ourselves more than bread and wine. We partake of the spiritual power of Christ through his biological presence in bread and wine.

The specific life giving impulses that are mediated through this sacred meal include forgiveness, bonding and healing. The words of institution declare unequivocally that the blood is shed ‘for the forgiveness of sins’. In the context of *The Season of Creation*, we are conscious that this forgiveness also extends to the wrong we have perpetrated on creation both individually and collectively. Forgiveness is not restricted; it embraces all wrongs whether against God, human beings or creation.

The cup that participants drink is designated by Jesus as ‘the new covenant in my blood’ (Luke 22.20). The old covenant at Sinai was the binding of God to God’s people, a binding that was sealed with blood splashed on the altar and on the people (Exod. 24.3-8). The new covenant is a new binding or bonding with Christ, sealed with Christ’s blood. All who partake are united in Christ. That bonding is effected with blood, that biological substance that represents life—all of life. Through this sacred meal, we imbibe the life of Christ that renews our spirit and binds us to Christ, the source of life.

A many of our liturgies testify, the Eucharist is also a healing meal. The healing power of Christ’s body and blood is mediated through the bread and wine. This healing process is not confined to the spiritual domain; body, mind, memory and heart may all be touched

by the healing that comes through this sacred meal. In *The Season of Creation*, we celebrate those gifts from creation that provide the elements for a sacrament to be experienced.

The use of the term sacramental does not necessarily incorporate the concept of physical sacrifice. The Eucharist is not an extension of the practice of killing animals to appease God, a practice condemned by the prophets (Micah 6.6-8). Jesus does not die to appease a cruel God seeking a human sacrifice. Jesus is God in flesh and blood. Jesus is God suffering with us and for us.

### **Communal Presence**

The Eucharist also means communion, or as some traditions say, Holy Communion. The Eucharist means a common table, the sacred meal where we all share communion as members of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10.14-18). We all share in the body of Christ because, as Paul says, ‘we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.’ Communion unites us with the crucified and risen Christ. We share his body and blood in remembrance of Christ’s death and in anticipation of Christ’s kingdom.

As members of the body of Christ eating our common meal, we are conscious that we are eating from a ‘common table’ with all our kin in creation. This sacramental meal is linked with every meal we enjoy, every eating and every drinking. In every meal we receive life from God.

*All our kin in creation eat from the common table of Earth, the source of our food. Our communion extends beyond holy communion in church to all communal eating. We share this Earth with all creatures.*

Communion also implies hospitality for the hungry, a place at the table for those without food. We who enjoy this meal with Christ know that Christ reminds us ‘when I was hungry, you gave me food; when thirsty you gave me drink’ (Matt. 25.35). We commune with a consciousness that what world powers and corporations have done to Earth has left millions hungry. As Sean McDonagh writes,

If the Eucharist symbolises food and drink and sharing a meal in the memory of Jesus, who lived, died and rose from the dead, the most important challenge facing any celebration of the Eucharist today is not the legitimacy of the priest’s orders, or the appropriateness of the liturgical text, but the fact that the Eucharist is today celebrated in a world where over one thousand million people are regularly hungry’ (1986, 171)

The Eucharist is inclusive, inviting all in need to share the common table called Earth, the table symbolised by the Lord’s table where the members of Christ’s body gather. Those who join in this communal meal do so to unite with Christ and find strength to be true hosts in this world. We gather to open our doors and hearts rather than to exclude. All

are invited to eat and drink together, conscious that we are receiving life from the giver of all life, the Incarnate One and celebrating with that One. As Rasmussen writes,

And we might understand, reflecting Luther's common table of all *adamah's* kin, that all things are indeed creationally connected and share a collective doxology that divinity itself experiences. (1992, 45)

## Cosmic Presence

*The Christ of the Eucharist is also the Cosmic One who gathers all things in creation to himself according to the plan of God (Eph. 1.10). We share our meal with the Christ whose power and presence extend beyond that table to the banquet halls of the cosmos.*

As we remember the extent of Christ's redemptive work in creation and as we anticipate Christ's coming to renew all creation, we are conscious of more than a few people around a local altar. We share this meal with all people everywhere who are members of the body of Christ and we are conscious of that communion extending to all in creation whom Christ gathers in celebration. Or in the words of Denis Edwards,

The Eucharist is an event of praise and thanksgiving on behalf of the whole of creation—"All creation rightly give you praise". It is a living, participatory memory for all that God has done for us in creation and redemption. It is an experience of the divine eschatological Communion. All creatures are embraced and loved in this divine Communion. It is to remember every sparrow that falls to the ground and to know that it has its place in God. Those who participate in Eucharistic communion are taken beyond the walls of the church to the communion with creation. They are called to be humble participants in the healing of creation and the Spirit's work of new creation. (Edwards, 2003, 14)

As we remember what our crucified and risen Christ has done also for creation and as we anticipate that ultimate meal when all creation will join in celebrating the new creation, our celebration of the Eucharist extends both outwards and forwards. Outwards to creation groaning and dining around us and forwards to the final festival where all creation gathered in Christ toasts the new creation!

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving in *The Lutheran Book of Worship* used in America begins with words: "Holy God, mighty Lord, gracious Father: Endless is your mercy and eternal your reign. You have filled all creation with light and life; heaven and earth are full of your glory" (1978, 122). This prayer repeats the theme we discussed in our analysis of Earth as God's sanctuary. The God of the holy communion meal is a God who fills all creation with presence, the God who is in, with and under every component of creation—from the most distant stardust to the bread and wine on the table. The God who is present in the Eucharist is the crucified and cosmic Christ who gathers all things to himself.

Given this cosmic perspective, the eucharistic table becomes a symbol of the centre of the cosmos, the point where the risen cosmic Lord is truly present in a concentrated way in the body and blood we eat and drink together. Or as Santmire suggests:

This should be the vision: the bread and the wine on the table are, for those eucharistic moments, positioned at the centre of the cosmos, and the revelation of the divine energies of the crucified and risen cosmic Christ, in whom all things consist, radiates from the centre to reach out to peoples of every nation, male and female, slave and free, and indeed to every dimension of the cosmos as a universal, multi-galactic whole. (Santmire, 2000, 90)

*The Eucharist then becomes a moment of eternal time, cosmic presence and supreme thanksgiving with the Eternal One, the Cosmic Christ and all creation. In that moment we partake of the Christ who has partaken of our flesh and blood, become one with creation and one with us. In that moment, we share the fulfilment and reconciliation of all things in advance.*

It would only seem appropriate, then, that where possible this meal be celebrated with the table at the centre and the symbolism of the space reflecting the wider community, our local creation, our sanctuary called Earth and the cosmos. As the Israelites gathered in Zion at the navel of Earth, we too are gathered together by Christ at the centre of our sanctuary at the core of the cosmos.

The celebration of the Eucharist in *The Season of Creation* offers us the opportunity to affirm the presence of Christ fully in the bread and the wine, a presence that is sacramental, communal and cosmic. We bond with each other, with Christ and with creation. We eat together at a common table and anticipate an even greater celebration with the crucified Christ in his cosmic kingdom.

## References

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