



St Anne's Church Wandsworth

Understanding the Eucharist

The Eucharist is a cornerstone of our Christian worship. At St Anne's every main Sunday morning service is a Eucharist. 'Eucharist' means thanksgiving.

The Eucharist can be discussed in countless ways, but this leaflet looks at three core themes in our understanding: *Remembering Christ*, *Meeting Christ*, and *Responding to Christ*. Because we have people from many different traditions attending our church the themes include a wide range of thought but try to represent and explain a bit of the different traditions.

Remembering Christ

Perhaps the most obvious thing about the Eucharist is that we do it to remember Jesus. We fulfil his command to remember him when we come together in his name and share bread and wine



together. The narrative of the Last Supper is recited as a centre part of the Eucharistic Prayer and most people imagine that it was always there from the very beginning. In fact it was most probably a later insertion into the prayer, and took several centuries to be generally used. The real core of the prayer is the thanksgiving over the bread and wine, continuing the practice which Jesus and his disciples had followed whenever they had eaten together. From then on they 'did this' to remember him.

The Last Supper was held in Passover time, in all probability a Passover meal at which Jews celebrated the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. The gospels portray Jesus as foreseeing his own coming death and presenting it as being 'for the forgiveness of sins'. It is more than just instituting a memorial practice: Jesus was offering his life to God in obedience to his love and praying for his disciples in spite of their lack of understanding and their coming abandonment of him. And remembrance is never just a neutral mental act: it carries emotions and response.

St Paul in I Corinthians 11 gives the earliest narrative of the Last Supper and concludes: 'As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes'. 'Proclaiming' is a much stronger and more positive word than mere remembrance: there is no separating the death of Jesus from his resurrection, or his earthly life from his life with us now. That is why Christians moved their worship from Jewish Sabbath to Sunday, the day on which Jesus was raised from the dead and on which we celebrate his victory over death and sin. It is important also that Paul looks forward to Christ's second coming: our worship does not simply look back but also forward to the time when the world is reconciled and brought to wholeness in God's loving plan. So 'remembering' is a massive idea!



*They knew him in the breaking
of the bread*

Meeting Christ

There is a wide range of opinion across the Christian traditions about *how* Christ is present with us in the Eucharist, but every Christian tradition affirms that he is present with us in this worship. The resurrection appearances often included Jesus eating with his disciples; and most famous is the story of him walking with two men on the road to Emmaus. At the end of the day they share food together, and

when Jesus says the meal grace and breaks the bread they recognise him. Luke's gospel summarises the story by saying how 'they recognised him in the breaking of the bread'. (Luke 24.13-34) So we are not just thinking

about how Christ died all those years ago but meeting him alive with us now.

Jesus said 'This is my body ... this is my blood'. How do we understand those words? Some traditions put an emphasis more on his presence in the bread and wine; others on him being present in our hearts as we eat and drink together. Our personal approach may depend on our own church upbringing. But whichever our emphasis we should keep both these ideas within the frame of our understanding of this service.

Anglicans are sometimes worried by what they see as an over-physical

Roman Catholic theology proposes that the 'substance' of bread and wine are replaced by that of the body and blood of Christ, while the 'accidents' or appearance of bread and wine remain. This is often known by the medieval theory of transubstantiation which is actually very technical and designed to exclude gross ideas of eating dead meat and drinking blood. The Lutheran tradition holds that the substance of bread and wine remain along with that of the body and blood of Christ (sometimes called 'consubstantiation'). While many Anglicans adopt a Roman Catholic or Lutheran view, official C of E teaching is deliberately vague and excludes only the most extreme ideas.

understanding of the bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ and often prefer to talk about them as 'representing' Christ's body and blood. But 'representation' is not an empty concept: when the policeman 'represents' the law he brings with him its full force and weight. And it might be useful to think of the bread and the wine of the Eucharist in a similar way: in 'representation' they 'make present' the living Christ among us. Christ feeds us with himself, and just as he gave himself for the world on the cross so now he gives himself to each one of us personally in bread and wine.

In communion we are joined to Christ *and* to one another. The broken bread and common cup are important symbols of our belonging to one another. St Paul said, 'We

who are many are one body, because we all share in one loaf of bread.' (1 Cor. 10.17) This is so fundamental that it is often forgotten, but the symbolism can come alive again if, for example, teachers and pupils in a school, or warders and prisoners in a jail, stand or kneel side by side as equals to receive communion. We are all God's children whatever our earthly rank or whatever we have done or suffered in life. The members of the congregation are meant to be transformed as the body of Christ

just as the bread and wine are transformed as the body and blood of Christ. Many people also remember the departed at the time of communion – we are united with the whole Church of God in all times and place.

Responding to Christ

As said above, any act of remembrance carries with it an emotional and often an active response. In the first instance the Christian response to Christ's self-giving is of celebration and thanksgiving. The thanksgiving prayer that Jesus had said over the bread and cup is now the 'Eucharistic Prayer' for all that God has done for us, but focussed on Jesus Christ, his life, his ministry and death, and his risen life among us now. And we align ourselves, as it were, with him in response to his giving of himself to us.

Traditionally the Eucharist is talked about as a place of 'offering'

- We offer bread and wine, foodstuffs which people have made but are very close to the natural products of the earth, grain and grapes which have been minimally processed, in thanksgiving for God's care for us in the world. We offer them to God in our poverty for him to give them back to us transformed by his Holy Spirit into vehicles of his love.
- We unite our offering of this worship with Jesus Christ's self-offering on the cross, in thanksgiving for his sacrifice of himself and praying that we may be filled with the love and life he won for us.
- We offer ourselves to be made new by him. The traditional 1662 Prayer Book had us offer 'ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable [i.e. spiritual], holy and lively [living] sacrifice' to God.
- We hold before God the whole Church of God worldwide, with whom we are united in prayer and worship, and pray for it to be brought into the fullness of God's kingdom.
- We hold before God the world that it too may be transformed by his Holy Spirit and reconciled to him in his kingdom.

So the Eucharist contains many rich ideas. Frequent attendance at the same service might seem unimaginative, but part of the aim is to deepen our understanding and appreciation and to make it a cornerstone of our lives. Hopefully we should grow, as individuals and as a community, into living as the Body of Christ on earth and look forward joyfully to the time when we shall join in the heavenly banquet.