

EXPLORING OUR FAITH

A Walk Through the Sunday Service

Session 25 – The Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist

So what does the Episcopal Church believe about the Eucharist? We've walked through the Eucharist step by step these past weeks, and now we're in the home stretch, winding up before Palm Sunday. But one core issue we've not dealt with. Does the Episcopal Church, like the Roman Catholic Church, believe in transubstantiation: that the elements of bread and wine are actually changed in some objective way into Christ's Body and Blood? Or do we, like many Protestant Churches, believe that the elements are merely signs or symbols of a subjective transformation that depends upon how they are received by us as communicants?

Words at administration of Communion. Those two alternatives, call them the Catholic and the Protestant theories, have been in tension in Anglican theology since the Reformation. In the first Book of Common Prayer (1549), Communion was administered with the words, "The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life." In the second Book (1552), this formula was changed to, "Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy hearts by faith with thanksgiving." The 1549 Book was a "Catholic book"; the 1552, because of political changes in England, was a "Protestant book." The first formula reflects belief in an objective change; the second in a subjective, "remembrance" theology. When Queen Elizabeth I came along a few years later she wanted to heal divisions so made was a further change, reflected in all subsequent Books, simply combining the two approaches, as witness the various 1979 Book formulas.

The Doctrine of the Real Presence. Beyond this compromise in wording lie centuries of theological development. Today the clearest annunciation of Anglican thinking comes from a document called the Agreed Statement on the Eucharist, issued by the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission: "The elements are not mere signs; Christ's body and blood become really present and are really given. But they are really present and given in order that, receiving them, believers may be united in communion with Christ the Lord." This approach directs us away from simplistic either/or, objective/subjective, attempts to explain what is ultimately a mystery pointing to God. "Not mere signs" on the one hand. "Really present" on the other. But the outward presence, however real, is not an end in itself; it is given to make Christ present in the hearts and lives of the worshipers. Objective and subjective are transcended. We are left to ponder: What is real to us? What does present mean?

In this series of bulletin cover notes we are moving through the steps of the Sunday Eucharist. You can find past notes archived on the parish website. Each week in the 9:00 class we dig deeper into the week's subject, exploring further what we are learning.