

WHITHER WORSHIP? The Parish Communion



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As I write we are coming out of Covid 19 lockdown, and although public worship has been permitted in England in recent months, most churches and cathedrals wisely decided to pause worship within their buildings. We continue to have a wide variety of Zoom or streamed services to choose from, and are immensely grateful for their existence, and for the work and creativity that go into their production. Most will be heartily thankful for the return of worship 'in person'. No doubt digital services have been a means of outreach to many unchurched people and a source of comfort to regular worshippers and some of these services should continue. There is nevertheless an element of 'viewing' rather than 'worshipping' in these services, and a lack of the physicality that marks attendance together in a building.

The pause in physical worship, which the pandemic dictated, should make us ponder on the nature of worship when we return. In recent years there has been a tendency for parish churches to offer a wide choice of types of service, enabling us individually to attend the service of our choice. On the face of it this seems laudable, but this 'supermarket' style simply elevates individual choice over community. In the early stages of the Fresh Expressions Movement there was much talk of worshipping communities based on shared interests rather than geographical communities. In practice surveys have shown that fewer than 10% of Fresh Expressions congregations are based on this bond.¹ Should the Church rather be catering for geographical congregations of varied ages, backgrounds and interests worshipping together, physically in a building? Few parish churches today really encompass all types of people, but that remains their role and the Church is still essentially a broad based association.

Perhaps we should return to the Parish Communion Movement, which took root in the 1920s and 30s, and flourished in the early post-war decades? This movement proclaimed that the Church's central Sunday service should be a simple Eucharist with hymns and brief sermon, suitable for all ages to gather together as the Body of Christ. There had indeed been isolated attempts at this as early as the 1850s, for example at Frome and Wantage, and in several northern parishes in the early years of the twentieth century. A Sung Eucharist at around 9 a.m. was held at St Jude's, South Shields in 1904, St. Edward's, Holbeck, Leeds in 1904, and at Christ Church, Shieldfield, Newcastle upon Tyne in 1907. By 1912 at All Saints, North Street, York a Sung Eucharist with general communion, followed by a 'parish breakfast' was introduced.² This pattern became much more common in the 1920s and 1930s, and in the post-war years became the norm for urban parishes in many regions. At first this Movement was strongly counter cultural, with most churchgoers more accustomed to Mattins, or at the more exotic locations, High Mass. At that time there was

little widespread appreciation of the Church as the Body of Christ, and an individualistic approach to worship was common. One peer reputedly declared in the House of Lords that 'these parsons are Communion mad!'

Slowly the Movement progressed, citing that Jesus calls us to 'do this in remembrance of me', and the biblical ideal for the whole Body to meet together.³ In 1937 Hebert wrote that we ought to think of the Parish Communion "not as a means for making a successful parish ... but solely in terms of the will of God for the salvation of mankind through his Church, as the outward and visible embodiment in the Sacrament which our Lord has instituted, of the redemption of men to God and their unity with one another in him."⁴ In other words it was not to be chosen because it was a 'nice service' but because it was the true expression of what the Church is, and of its purpose. We might say it is the best way of 'doing Church'! It is theological because it starts with God, rather than human preference.

Regular attendance at the Parish Communion was promoted as 'the Lord's Own Service on the Lord's Own Day'. George Foster, Vicar of Holy Cross, Newcastle upon Tyne (1936- 1948) used to say that you "should be there every week, wet or fine, alive or dead!"⁵ Many suburban churches had very large congregations at the Parish Communion up until the 1970s when numbers began to decrease, and parishes were tempted to 'try something else'.

Nevertheless, the Parish Communion Movement was not a panacea. Like any Church movement there was a tendency for parishes and individuals to embrace the more attractive aspects (a lively well attended service with only a short sermon) and to forget about the more difficult aspects (proper preparation for Communion, including fasting). It is easy to forget how important the custom of fasting before receiving Communion was, as late as the 1930s and 1940s. Hebert wrote that 'the Fast before Communion is, of course, a rule, and it has been the rule of the universal Church ever since the second century'. He argued that 'the compilers of the Prayer Book did not mention it, because they took it for granted'.⁶ Whether such sweeping statements are justified may be a matter for debate, and certainly fasting before Communion is rarely mentioned in our own times. But in the early years of the Movement it caused many Parish Communion parishes to hold their service as early as 9.00am. or even 8.30am. Today this would rarely be considered an appropriate time for a main Sunday service.

However, part of the problem with the Movement was not its rigour, but its incomplete enactment. The Parish Communion was supposed to be, if not the only Sunday service, at least the only **main** service. In practice most parishes retained various alternatives, not least of which was an 8 00 a.m. said service, which allowed many parishioners to carry on worshipping in a highly individualistic way. Nevertheless, in recent years declining congregations and clergy shortages have in practice resulted in many 'one service a Sunday' churches. Another associated feature meant to follow the service was the Parish Breakfast, sometimes accompanied by a Parish Meeting, leaving weekdays clear for

church members to get on with being Christians in the world. In later decades these gatherings declined into a quick chat over coffee and a biscuit. There is much more post service fellowship today than in former decades, but there should be more.

Today we live in very different circumstances. No one would advocate mimicking the 1950s. Certainly there must be some other services as well as the Eucharist, and we must also be creative and flexible in our Eucharistic services. Perhaps because of the variety of other services on offer, there has not been the creativity in Eucharists that might be hoped for? There is no need for every service to last an hour or more, and in an age of shorter attention spans 40 or 45 minutes is quite long enough for a meaningful service with two or three hymns and a short sermon. Common Worship, and its predecessor the Alternative Service Book 1980, provide a wide selection of possible items; indeed the ASB indicated which items were essential and which were not - many such are optional and do not need to be included on every occasion.

In recent decades there has been a rapid decline in Confirmations. Previously, lapsed communicants would receive on the greater festivals, but now far fewer people have been confirmed, fewer people receive. This problem is seen in statistics for 2018, which show that whilst 2.55 million people attended Anglican services at Christmas, only 34% received Communion. Christmas communicant figures had dropped by 17% since 2008, whereas attendance had increased by 2%. In that same decade the annual number of those confirmed had dropped from 27,000 to 14,500.⁷ In many churches children now receive before Confirmation, but this does not solve the problem of unconfirmed adults. Another difficulty is that of the multi-parish benefice, where a shortage of clergy prevents a weekly Parish Communion. In these circumstances it can be possible to emphasise a monthly service of that nature, into which other services lead: this could be a monthly benefice service, or a monthly single church event.

Adaption and evolution are needed to meet current circumstances, without abandoning the Parish Communion principle. The Eucharist remains at the centre of our worship, doing as Christ commanded, and respecting those hard-fought struggles for its central place in the last century.

Chris Mitchell
Ascensiontide 2021

¹ 'The Day of Small Things' George Lings/Church Army 2016.

² 'History of the Parish and People Movement' Peter Jagger 1978.

³ Luke 22.19 1 Corinthians 12.27

⁴ 'The Parish Communion' ed. A. G. Hebert 1937 p.23

⁵ 'Short History of the Church of the Holy Cross, Fenham' George Pallister, 1976

⁶ Hebert, p.26

⁷ 'Statistics for Mission' Church of England, 2019