

**Being there is everything**  
**23 August 2015**

**John 6:56-69**

Some of you will know I am a football supporter. And I'm talking about proper football, the type you actually play with your feet. (Although I do also like some of the oval ball offshoots, in which you are allowed to carry the ball.) The club I support is West Ham United Football Club (or West Ham for short) from East London.

One of the problems with supporting an overseas based sports team is that you rarely – if ever – get to see them play live. So I could not believe it when I found out last year that West Ham was coming to New Zealand, and that they would be playing Sydney Football Club in Wellington. This was something I could not miss. So I got tickets for Maria and me, in the West Ham fan zone of course, and off we went to the Westpac Stadium.

We lost the game 3-1, but that did not really matter. We still had a great time. What mattered was being at the game with other fans, getting to belt out the club's anthem and a few chants, seeing players like Winston Reid, whom I had only previously seen on TV, and having an experience that I otherwise could only have had in England. What mattered was being there.

For the last four consecutive weeks, our gospel readings have come from Chapter 6 of the Gospel according to St John. We have heard about the feeding of the five thousand, the bread that came down from heaven, and today, the words of eternal life. And we have been told the bread that came down from heaven was Jesus himself. Not only did he teach that he was the living bread and that whoever ate this bread in the form of his flesh would live forever, but that they should drink his blood as well.

The concept of eating human flesh would have been as horrific to Jesus' Jewish audience as it is to us today. 'Eater of flesh' is how we would translate the Aramaic title for the devil. And drinking blood was an absolutely abominable act, so Jesus' teaching was not merely difficult, it was outrageous. "Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."<sup>1</sup>

Of course, we now know what he really meant. Very soon, his body would be broken for us and his blood would be spilled for us in what would be the most revolutionary act in history. This extraordinary sermon that Jesus preached at Capernaum described what would

happen to him and also anticipated the inauguration of the sacrament of the Eucharist, or Holy Communion.

The Eucharist re-enacts what happened at the Last Supper on the night before Jesus died. On the day of his resurrection, Jesus met Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus. They invited him home, where he took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them<sup>2</sup>. These four actions re-enacted what he had done at the Last Supper and are repeated at every Eucharist service to this day.

So, what actually happens at the Eucharist? Different churches hold different views.

The Roman Catholic belief is that the bread and wine change completely into the actual body and blood of the Christ. You may have heard the word Transubstantiation, which is the proper term for this.

The Orthodox Church accepts the real presence of the Christ at the Eucharist, but, does not make any attempt to explain how the change occurs, and prefers to regard it as a Divine Mystery.

The Lutheran understanding is that the bread and wine remain bread and wine, but there is also a real presence of the Christ in what Martin Luther called a “sacramental union”. Luther explained this by using an analogy from the third century theologian Origen. If a piece of iron is placed in a fire and heated until it glows red, it remains iron, but heat is now present as well. The Christ is physically present, but the bread and wine retain their distinct identities.

The Reformed and Presbyterian tradition is that the presence of the Christ is only spiritual and not physical.

And the ultra-Protestant position is that that the Eucharist is nothing more than a memorial service.

So what is the Anglican position? That is a difficult question, as the individual views of Anglicans vary considerably and can be any of the views I described above. To understand why this is so, we need to remind ourselves how the Anglican view of the Eucharist changed a number of times during the turbulent Tudor era, which saw the Church of England repeatedly changing direction during the respective reigns of Henry VIII (who actually remained a believer in the fundamental Roman Catholic teachings, despite having been excommunicated); Edward VI; under whose reign Protestantism was

established for the first time in England; Mary I, who restored Roman Catholicism; and Elizabeth I, who got to pick up the pieces.

The 1549 Prayer Book contained the words "The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life", implying the real presence of the Christ at the Eucharist, but the 1552 edition, replaced these words with "Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith, with thanksgiving," implying that the Eucharist was a memorial service.

And from 1559 onwards, both phrases (or modernised versions of them) were retained, allowing for the fact that members of the Church held diverse views on the subject. As they still do today. I know Anglicans who believe the bread and wine change completely into the actual body and blood of the Christ. There are also Anglicans who believe the Eucharist is nothing more than a memorial service. But most of us seem to occupy positions somewhere in between.

My personal view of the Eucharist is perhaps closest to the Orthodox understanding, in that I believe the Christ is present at the Eucharist, but I do not understand exactly how this happens. Not that this really matters. What matters is that the bread and wine become for me the body and blood of the Christ.

The Eucharist is one of two sacraments recognised by the Anglican Church as being commanded by Jesus, the other being baptism. Just as it is through baptism that we are cleansed and born into a new life with God, it is through the Eucharist that we are nourished on a spiritual level by sharing in the life, death and resurrection of the Christ.

A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Although I like the more simplistic view that a sacrament is where the worlds of the physical and the divine meet. You may have heard of the Celtic Christian concept of 'thin places'. There is a Celtic saying that heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in the 'thin places', that distance is even smaller. A 'thin place' has been described as a place where the boundary between heaven and earth, or as I prefer to say, the boundary between the physical and spiritual realms, is especially thin. It's a place where we can sense the divine more readily. I like to think we are in such a 'thin place' when we are received into the Church at our baptism. And also when we share the Eucharist.

I could not experience the atmosphere of West Ham playing in Wellington by watching the game on television. I had to physically be there. And it is the same as the Eucharist. It's only because of the presence of the Christ that it is spiritual food and drink for us.

So we should approach every Eucharist with the expectation that we will personally encounter Jesus when we are at his table. Because he is really present. And being there is everything.

Darryl Ward

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<sup>1</sup> John 6:66

<sup>2</sup> Luke 24:13-35