

***Engagement with the Holy***

(Exodus 3.1-5)

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***Praying the Eucharist***

There's a particular struggle that priests have with the Eucharist... That is, are they really *there* or not... are they actually *present*? It's so easy to spend your whole time thinking (maybe even worrying) about *what's coming next... have you remembered everything... will the rosters work this morning... Or wondering about whether it's going over OK... are the people responding... what are the numbers like today... do they think I'm a good priest...* I'm told that a congregation can tell... whether a priest is actually *praying* the Eucharist or if he's '*somewhere else*'... and that it makes a difference.

It took me many years to learn how to be present as a priest... and it's still a Sunday-by-Sunday choice. These days I try to catch my thoughts early, before they gallop away, and just quietly remind myself... "*I've done all I can to prepare well. Now it's over to you God. Your Spirit will carry us... and whatever you are transacting in the hearts of these people, is between you and them. All I need to attend to is You... and what you're wanting to say and do with me.*" Most Sundays now this works effectively.

Of course lay people experience a similar struggle. It's very easy to be inattentive in the Eucharist – to turn up in body but then to let the mind wander off in all manner of distractions. '*Have I got enough food for our lunch guests... did I remember to lock the door... why on earth is he preaching so long...*' Simply letting our minds wander off...

***Worship***

When we describe the Eucharist we say that it's *worship*. In more Evangelical traditions they prioritise *teaching* and *fellowship* on a Sunday morning... and hence they often gather without

Holy Communion and they might describe what they're doing as a *meeting*. But while we value *breaking-open the Word of God* (preaching) and *communion* with each other (fellowship)... our main focus and priority is to *worship*. We come to worship God.

What does it mean to worship?

It means to show honour, respect and love for our God. And to do this in a way that challenges our usual self-absorption and self-reliant pride... The NT Greek word that we translate *worship*<sup>1</sup> literally means to *'fall down before'*. So in worship we express reverence... adoration... *extravagant* love. We publicly name *who* and *what* is truly sacred in our lives.

Good worship therefore is heavily dependent on the disposition that we bring to this time, this place, this action. There's much we could talk about, but today I'm focusing on *attention* and *engagement*. Instead of inattention, we seek a prayerful engagement. Instead of self-focus, we reach for a God-focus.

### ***Engagement with the Holy***

I love the *Exodus* story we read today. Moses is in the wilderness, minding sheep, when he sees a bush that's alight with flame... burning with fierce light... and yet the bush is not consumed. When he goes over to investigate, the voice of God speaks from the flame saying, "*Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you're standing is holy ground.*"

To come to worship is to enter holy space. To come to worship is to be ready and focused – shoes off, head and heart clear – for *here* in this place and this time, we are opening ourselves to the presence of God... to engagement with the holy.

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<sup>1</sup> *proskuneo*

R. S. Thomas, Anglican priest and Welsh poet, wrote so beautifully of this engagement... in many of his poems... including this one called "*The Bright Field*"...

*I have seen the sun break through  
to illuminate a small field  
for a while, and gone my way  
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl  
of great price, the one field that had  
the treasure in it. I realize now  
that I must give all that I have  
to possess it. Life is not hurrying  
on to a receding future, nor hankering after  
an imagined past. It is the turning  
aside like Moses to the miracle  
of the lit bush, to a brightness  
that seemed as transitory as your youth  
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.*

Worship is attentiveness and engagement... looking for those moments of revelation; those sights and awakenings that open us to that which is holy... that which is truly beautiful and lasting. The poet speaks of a moment – when the sun breaks through the Welsh ‘gloom’ – and he sees a small field illuminated... *We* come to the Eucharist, looking for, hoping for... expecting... such a moment... an encounter with the holy... with ‘that’ which is truly worth our worship. Every Eucharist has the potential to be a *burning bush* moment... for God in Christ is intimately present... every time... if only we would turn aside from our usual preoccupations, and be open and ready to see.

### ***Disposition***

How *do* we come to worship? Rushing in at the last moment, because we're busy with other things? Fussing around with all those little jobs, those little conversations we can squeeze in before the end of the first hymn? Distracted by all of those things that whirl around our ever-busy minds? What is our disposition? What is the state of our heart and mind?

It's so easy to be anywhere else but present... And here I want to suggest something disturbing... something that's troubled me in the last decade of my life as a priest... That there may be a more powerful and disguised form of inattention... And that's to sit through the Eucharist absorbed with our selves... our needs, our worries... about family, health, money... perhaps even our sense of failure and guilt. The whole service can be spent in asking God to save, or help or comfort... us.

Now it's right and good that we bring our needs and concerns before God... but I want to suggest that this should only be a small part of what we do in worship. Because in worship the focus is on God... not us... In fact it would probably be better if we came a few minutes earlier, knelt and unburdened ourselves... laying down all that stuff we carry. We *might* be better to light a candle before the Eucharist begins... and then compose ourselves saying, *'The next hour is yours God... your agenda... your thoughts... your issues, not mine. Speak to me God and carry me somewhere new... even somewhere I might not wish to go. For I am truly here God... and I know this is holy ground.'* I'm suggesting that in the Eucharist, God's agenda (whatever that is) should be centre stage.

### **Conclusion**

In every Eucharist we see a glimpse, we experience a foretaste, of the Kingdom. In every Eucharist the holy space is aflame with the glory of God, whether we choose to notice or not... Holiness is God's creation, not ours. Our only choice is whether we will be present or *'somewhere else'*. The *quality* of worship relies heavily upon our disposition.