

The real birthday of the Church

As we come towards the end of the Easter season and we approach the festival of Pentecost, I often hear people say that we are marking the birthday of the Church at that time. However, for me, the real birthday of the Church is found not in celebrating the gift of the Spirit to the Church, but in the events that we mark tonight – events that for me seem to establish that group of people who became enlivened by the Spirit at that later event.

This is a birthday that we remember not once each year but every time that we gather as Christians, and particularly when we gather as Christians to share in the symbolic meal that is variously called Communion, the Eucharist, Mass or, as we do when we combine two of these titles this evening, the Last Supper. At face value we are here tonight to remember the last meal that Jesus shared with his disciples – and in remembering it we are marking our own position as disciples of Christ. In a very real way as we gather to share this ritualised meal we are eating alongside millions (if not billions) of others who have gathered in Christ's presence. This meal that we share tonight, as we share it with others throughout the year, is a real sign that we participate in the single feast that binds heaven and earth – a feast that binds Jesus' disciples on earth with the saints who have gone before us and the angels who praise God in heaven.

But we are here not just to be a part of a social group (however grand and however extensive), but to remember his instruction that whenever we gather we call to mind all that Christ is for us: his example, his death and the sign of hope that is the Resurrection. Far more than 'just' being a meal that binds us together as a social group, the eucharist is therefore a meal that brings to the present events from the past. In calling us to remember the sacrifice of his body when we break bread, and more so the sacrifice of his blood as his words gave new meaning to the sharing of the cup of fellowship at the end of the meal, Jesus was calling us to remember far more than just a meal – he was calling us to remember the events of the whole Easter event whenever we share in the Eucharistic meal. And so it is that in the great prayer of thanksgiving that the priest prays on our behalf and in the sharing of bread and wine we bring to mind and bring to the present the love of the creator God that is revealed in the incarnation, the love of Jesus that is demonstrated by the sacrifice of his life in loving service to humanity and the sign of hope that is the resurrection. And so each time we gather for that hour of a Sunday, or whenever else we share this meal with others, we bring to the fore events that have the utmost significance for us as Christians as we remember the love of God that is revealed in the events of that first holy week and that have an enduring message that has the capacity to bring new hope as we ourselves are called to participate in the love that is revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

And so, over the coming three days, the sacred Triduum of Easter, let us enjoy the time and space to we might find to deepen our experience of that most Holy Week; so that in those few precious minutes of our regular eucharist we may draw on the experience of these few days and more fully participate in and be transformed by the message that brings hope out of despair; the Easter message of self-giving and transforming love that is at the heart of the Christian Gospel.