

‘Bidden by God himself’

Why you should receive Holy Communion

On the night of his betrayal by Judas Iscariot, Jesus Christ, at supper with his disciples, took bread and wine, blessed it and shared it with his disciples. ‘Do this,’ he said, ‘in memory of me.’ The Christian Church has taken that commandment very seriously. Whether it is called the Lord’s Supper, the Mass, the Eucharist or Holy Communion, it is a solemn and festive remembrance, by the Christian community, of its Lord which involves the blessing of bread and wine which are then shared by the community of believers. The Apostle Paul tells the Christians in Rome that ‘as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes’.

The Eucharist, as we usually call it, is therefore central to the life of the Church and it always includes Communion, eating the bread and drinking from the cup. Jesus’ own words when blessing the bread were ‘This is my body’ and of the wine ‘This is my blood’. We teach that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist and that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the bread becomes his Body and the wine his Blood. This is his gift to us, that by receiving communion he should be in us and we in him. All baptised Christians should, therefore, receive Holy Communion, both frequently and regularly. It is a vital part of belonging to the Christian community.

On many occasions, the number of those receiving Communion at the service is substantially less than the number present in the church. This was always the case at the Midnight Mass of Christmas but it is increasingly obvious on ordinary Sundays. It seems to have been a problem when the Book of Common Prayer was produced in 1662 for there is an exhortation to be used by the priest ‘in case he shall see the people negligent to come to the holy Communion’. The priest gives notice of his intention to celebrate the Lord’s Supper and says ‘unto which, in God’s behalf, I bid you, all that are here present; and beseech you, for the Lord Jesus Christ’s sake, that ye will not refuse to come thereto, being so lovingly called and bidden by God himself’. The priest then reviews the reasons or rather the excuses given for not coming to Communion and continues:

I, for my part, shall be ready; and according to mine Office, I bid you in the Name of God, I call you in Christ's behalf, I exhort you, as ye love your own salvation, that ye will be partakers of this holy Communion.

The exhortation explains that as Christ died for your salvation, so 'it is your duty to receive the Communion, in remembrance of the sacrifice of his death, as he himself hath commanded'.

We should receive Communion, therefore, because:

- (1) We are commanded to do so by Christ;
- (2) We are lovingly called to do so by God;
- (3) It enables us to participate in Christ's Body;
- (4) It is beneficial to us in terms of salvation;
- (5) It is an important sign of belonging to the Christian community.

Why then, doesn't everyone do so?

First, you may not realise how important it is for you. I once tried to persuade a man in his forties to be confirmed by the Bishop in order to be able to receive Communion with his wife, who was the PCC Secretary at the time. Year after year he put it off, eventually promising to be confirmed with his stepdaughter. He was confirmed and after two or three weeks of receiving Communion he said 'Why didn't someone tell me how special it is and how different I would feel?' His wife and I laughed because we had been telling him for years. If you are able to receive Communion as a member of the Church of England, having been confirmed, or because you have been admitted to Communion in another Church, then you should accept the invitation to draw near with faith and to receive the Body and Blood of Christ.

Secondly, you may not be receiving Communion because you are not baptised — and baptism into Christ is a fundamental part of belonging to the Church — or, if baptised, then you may not have been confirmed. Any adult who has faith in Jesus Christ as Lord can be baptised. Children are also baptised by virtue of the faith of their parents and godparents. A significant number of those baptised as infants do not get around to being confirmed and confirmation is generally necessary before Communion can be received in the Church of England. The old rule was that if the Bishop came within half a day's journey

the recently baptised should be presented to him that their baptism might be confirmed. A priest can baptise but only a bishop can confirm. If you are baptised but not confirmed, then you should ask one of the clergy about confirmation. We talk about ‘being prepared for confirmation’ or going to ‘confirmation classes’. There is usually some preparation as the priest who presents you to the bishop has to affirm that you have been prepared. But baptism and confirmation are based on *faith* not on *knowledge*. Preparation is an opportunity to explore some aspects of Christian believing and to deal with any tricky questions. Similarly, you should speak to one of the clergy if you are not baptised. There is a leaflet in the church porch at Saint Bartholomew the Great about the requirements for adult baptism and confirmation.

Third, you may think that occasional reception of Communion is sufficient. The Church recommends frequent Communion. As participating in the Eucharist and receiving Christ’s Body and Blood confers spiritual benefits, strengthening us in body and soul, so we should come regularly to the altar rail to receive it. We could employ an analogy drawn from diet. We all know that a balanced diet is needed for physical and mental health. We need vitamins, for example, and we know that the benefits we receive from vitamins need to be renewed — by taking in more of them at regular intervals. The Christian diet also needs a variety of things. We benefit from reading the Bible, especially the New Testament and the Psalms. We benefit from prayer, both private and corporate. We benefit from reading spiritual books appropriate to our needs. We benefit from joining in the services of the Church, from being forgiven for our sins and receiving God’s blessing. Holy Communion is an essential part of the mix and we should be receiving more frequently than once or twice a year. Even monthly must be considered infrequent when we are ‘lovingly called and bidden by God himself’.

People sometimes raise health issues about the common cup, the sharing of the consecrated wine in the chalice. Some churches withdrew the chalice during to so-called Swine Flu epidemic in 2009. We didn’t. Hospital microbiologists told us that if we wanted to reduce the risk of transmission we should stop singing hymns and shaking hands! We maintain high levels of hygiene and cleanliness in handling all the vessels used, and the wine in the gilded silver chalice is indeed proper wine with a decent alcohol content — 15% vol.

Poets and hymn-writers have had much to say about the Eucharist. Here are some of their words with the *Common Praise* (CP) hymn numbers:

Draw nigh and take the body of the Lord, and drink the holy blood for you outpoured. (CP 296)

Thy body, broken for my sake, my bread from heaven shall be; thy cup of blessing I will take, and thus remember thee. (CP 276)

...and by this food, so awful and so sweet, deliver us from every touch of ill (CP 279)

Bread of heaven, on thee we feed, for thy flesh is meat indeed; ever may our souls be fed with this true and living bread; day by day with strength supplied through the life of him who died. (CP 284)

...here as bread and wine are taken, Christ sustains us as of old. (CP 301)

Jesu, we thus obey thy last and kindest word; here in thine own appointed way we come to meet thee, Lord. (CP 307)

O may we all one bread, one body be, through this blest sacrament of unity. (CP 318)

O risen Christ, today alive, amid your Church abiding, who now your blood and body give, new life and strength providing, we join in heavenly company to sing your praise triumphantly, for we have seen your glory. (CP 333)

It is clearly not in our own best spiritual interests to refrain from receiving the Holy Communion by which we are nourished. In doing so we are also refusing the loving invitation of God. We also reduce the life and unity of the Church, for it is the community of believers invited to a feast, and, as the Prayer Book teaches, when ‘we spiritually eat the flesh of Christ and drink his blood; then we dwell in Christ, and Christ in us; we are one with Christ and Christ with us’ and this is the heart of the Christian life.