

The Most Important Thing

The Backbone of Worship

My professor at the University of Birmingham – J. G. Davies – spent his long career studying liturgy, worship, and the buildings and places that were its setting, and he used to ask, of the eucharist: Is it something he, the Lord, does for us, or is it something we do for him? The liturgical books and prayer books of the different churches suggest both of these. Actually, I'm not sure his was just a rhetorical question, intended for students, or if, perhaps, he had never really decided upon an answer himself. The question raises all sorts of issues: Is there anything the Lord needs from us, or we can do for him? Does he lack anything which we can provide? More likely, we might think, it's him doing something for us, giving to us. But a little reflection suggests that the answer isn't so clear-cut. After all, on the basis of this initial thinking, we might ask why any of us are here in the first place. God didn't *have to* create us, after all, in order to be God; but God chose to, and why was that? The Bible suggests that God simply wanted companionship, and the whole business of salvation – saving us from the destruction we chose to bring on ourselves – was instituted in order to preserve that close relationship, that chance of perpetual, eternal, love. Yes, there is clearly something we can do for the Lord – yes, people like you and me – indeed, there is something we can give him, which he desires: our love, freely given, without self-interest or ulterior motivation. Read the words of any notable Christian – I am reading the letters of Teresa of Calcutta, at the moment – and one thing that stands out from the page is the passionate desire for selfless giving of love, love rising from knowledge of what the Lord has done for one. Thus, entering into the act of the eucharist (“thanksgiving”) *is* worship, because in it we offer our “selves, souls, and bodies” (as the *Book of Common Prayer* has it), our very essence, our all.

Yet it is also, certainly, something he does for us. What he gives us is an especial gift of his very self – in a very special, indeed singular, form. The word “bodies”, in the quotation above, is the clue. Our bodies remind us that we are physical, fleshly, sensual beings, inhabiting a material world. Personally, I could only give credence to a faith which tells us that God is real both as eternal, hidden, creator spirit, and also as a *person* – the person we know as Jesus, the Christ. Only by physical presence as one of us, in our form and nature, could God truly reach us, touch us. The eucharist is the place in which a material, physical, sensual event is made part of our experience; only by coming to us in physical form can we know any *communion* with the divine. And so the eucharist is the perfect fusion, the one true way in which our worship of Him, and our receiving His gift of love, can be united in one act. Thus, it is the centre and apogee of all our service, the very backbone of worship - but it is not always an experience which fills us with powerful *feelings*. Rather, it accomplishes a hidden, secret work in our lives; it is the means by which the Holy Spirit gradually, imperceptibly, transforms us into the being he desires. So, if we are able look back over some years in which this special worship has played a central part, we will surely come to realise that this has been the most creative, positive, influence of all, the one thing that we would not for anything have wished to be without – the most valuable thing we have – have always had - the one gift, and joy, which we can never lose.

John Thomas