

Humble Access

11 3 12

We do not presume
to come to this your table, merciful Lord,
trusting in our own righteousness,
but in your manifold and great mercies.
We are not worthy
so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table.
But you are the same Lord
whose nature is always to have mercy.
Grant us therefore, gracious Lord,
so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ
and to drink his blood,
that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body
and our souls washed through his most precious blood,
and that we may evermore dwell in him and he in us.
Amen.

The focus for today's sermon is not a text from Scripture but a prayer that is an optional part of our service of Holy Communion. Believe it or not, though we usually omit it, it is, to my mind, a very special prayer.

In our service, the Prayer of Humble Access comes just after the consecrated bread is broken, immediately after the Agnus Dei (the Lamb of God). It comes

immediately before the invitation from the priest to the people to come up to the altar to receive the consecrated elements. It is a final prayer to prepare us to eat the bread and drink the wine.

So what are we praying? What is this prayer saying to us as we pray these words?

We do not presume
to come to this your table, merciful Lord,
trusting in our own righteousness,
but in your manifold and great mercies.

We begin by acknowledging that we come up to communion trusting in God, not in ourselves. We are not trusting in our own righteousness or in our own sense of good-standing in the sight of God – our salvation and state of grace is just that: a matter of grace, a question of God's limitless mercy towards us who try to get it right but frequently get it wrong.

Then, there is a statement that irritates Mary Pierpoint.

We are not worthy
so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table.

Mary, God-bless-her, does not like the idea that there could be any crumbs under God's table and I can see her point. In the perfection of heaven, there are no crumbs. But the words are, in fact, an allusion to a great passage in Scripture where the Syro-Phoenician woman answers Christ's objection about giving bread meant to feed the children to the dogs by observing that puppies do eat any crumbs that children may let fall to the floor from the table above. It is an effective image providing a parallel acknowledgement of our unworthiness to

receive what we are being given but what we will still be given it because God wants to feed us.

Next follows an interesting comment on the nature of the bread and the wine that we are about to receive.

Grant us therefore, gracious Lord,
so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ
and to drink his blood,
that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body
and our souls washed through his most precious blood,

It states clearly that what we are eating is Jesus' flesh and what we are drinking is Jesus' blood. For some, at this symbolic meal, the presence of Christ is real; for others, the presence of Christ is symbolic. However you personally interpret what you are doing, fact is that we are all taking part in a holy mystery in which we are being sustained by direct contact, communion with God through the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. And the benefits are real. We are being purified, washed, made clean by our participation in this holy communion.

And the final line:

and that we may evermore dwell in him and he in us.

The final petition is that the promise of Jesus found at the end of Matthew's gospel may be true for us – 'And remember, I am with you always till the end of the age.' (28 v20)

May that be true for us and may this prayer the Prayer of Humble Access help us to get what we do at Holy Communion in the right perspective.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

11th March, 2012

H: Sermon 25: Humble Access

