

## A sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Making Eucharist 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2018 .

(James 1.17-27, Mark 7.1-8,14-15, 21-23)

Why do we call this service a ‘Eucharist’ – such a strange and foreign sound word – not at all obvious to the general public what it might mean. ‘Communion’ at least gives us some sense that this service might be about union with god, and community, too. It’s a word taken from Latin roots, and relates to other words which we use, so it gives someone a chance of guessing or feeling a bit of what the service might be.

But Eucharist comes from Greek – a language which has lent words and roots to English, but which generally feels less familiar to us.

But Greek, of course, was the language of the New Testament- the common parlance of the Mediterranean countries in the first century, even more than Latin. Jesus probably spoke Greek, as well as his native language of Aramaic, and Hebrew, the sacred language of the Old Testament which was the Scripture he was brought up with.

Greek was the language that Early Christians, who were beginning to form a community from many ethnic backgrounds, would have used among themselves and they all would have understood that the verb ‘*Eucharizein*’ meant ‘to give thanks’, ‘to bless’. And so, this service we celebrate is essentially focussed around giving thanks to

God – blessing him for being who he is and for what he does – and in the very same moment, being open to receive his blessings on us, flowing down.

This is the interesting thing about this verb *Eucharizein*: it expresses the idea of blessings going both ways. God blesses us – and we bless God, (In the old English sense of giving him thanks). And it works the other way round, too – *as* we bless him, somehow the doors of heaven become more open – he blesses us even more. The Greek word holds it all together – and, interestingly, so too does the equivalent Hebrew verb, which I suppose, is why so much Jewish prayer is framed in the form of blessing.

Just occasionally in ordinary speech we do seem to use the English word ‘bless’ with this two-way reference, too. When people say ‘grace’ at a meal, they might express their Thank. Think of how some people respond to seeing a new baby or a child who is very sweet: ‘Bless!’ they say, or ‘bless him, bless her!’. I think it’s very hard to disentangle in this exclamation the sense of thanksgiving and appreciation for a young child, from a prayer that God might bless – defend – and do good things for that child.

In our Epistle today James makes a very fundamental point about God – who he is and what he does: *‘Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.’* (James 1.17). God is the source of generosity, and is himself, supremely the giver of gifts. If we grasp this, then our first and fundamental response to him is one of thankfulness – thankfulness not just for particular things, but for life itself – the life in which we can receive and utter blessings. I love the way the old

‘General Thanksgiving’ for use at Morning and Evening Prayer services puts it: ‘*We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and for all the blessings of this life...*’ I had to learn that prayer off by heart when I was at school (I don’t suppose anyone’s made to learn it off by heart nowadays, least of all school children!) – but I’ve always been glad that I did, because when I feel low and miserable, the prayer lists those fundamental things for me – my creation, my preservation to this day – and all the blessings of this life, so many of which I scarcely notice. When I use this prayer for myself, I’m reminded in a salutary way of how I can and should be standing before God as a thankful child – always, and everywhere, whether it’s raining or sunshiney, whether I’m disappointed, grieving or angry, or, on the other hand, elated, cheerful and at peace. It’s *always* true that God, my creator has created me, preserved me to this day, and is constantly bestowing blessings which it’s up to me to notice. And when I do start noticing, why – then the sense of God’s blessings and love begins to grow in me.

But the old General Thanksgiving prayer doesn’t stop with its prompt to us that we should count ‘all the blessings of this life’. It goes on to bless God, ‘*above all, for the redemption of the world through our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.*’ The whole of our Christian faith and life is there, in those few words; I don’t propose to expound them now. But they bring us round to something right at the heart of our service today – the hinge on which it all turns: ‘Lift up your hearts’, the president says – and you, the people, respond, ‘WE lift them to the Lord’: what follows is praise, thanksgiving – the blessing of God for the redemption of the world

through our Lord Jesus Christ. We remember together before God that it is not only our duty, but also our joy, ‘at all times and in all places to give him thanks and praise’ – and that’s because we are not only created and preserved by God, but also redeemed through Jesus, given many gifts of grace, and established in a wonderful hope.

‘At all times and in all places’ – giving thanks for all this isn’t just for Communion services: it’s not just for when we worship together; it can be the keynote of our lives, alone and in company. But when we come together as Jesus commanded us, around his table, we are giving thanks in a very special way: we’re entering into his blessing of God, which he did when he took bread and wine, and blessed them (as he always would have done, at every meal); but we’re also doing it to commemorate – to make real among us – the last supper and the events it pointed forward to: Jesus’ death on the cross, on which all our hope depends, and the extraordinary and breathtaking fact of his resurrection, which opens the door on that hope for us.

Blessing and thanking God together – (and it is, very much *together*: the little dialogue inviting everyone to lift up their hearts makes it clear that this isn’t something the priest is doing alone) – this blessing and thanking creates the context in which God’s stupendous blessings of his presence in Jesus, his forgiveness, his strengthening, his re-making of us and his sending us out full of his Spirit – all these blessings can flow down upon us as we bless God together.

Let yourself be excited by that fact. Lift up your hands, if you want, as well as your hearts. 'Make Eucharist' with the church at all times and in all places, on earth and in heaven; say your parts as though you mean them, and *enjoy* offering the Father of lights, from who every perfect gift comes, the church's sacrifice of thanks and praise.