Holy Communion – Week Four
Mystery: The Presence of Christ

Discussion
Where is Jesus now?

Calvin and the Ascension
It is a great sadness to me that the celebration of Ascension Day has all but disappeared from the Church calendar in the English-speaking protestant world. The day is still marked in Europe, and the Church of England recognizes it although it is not a public holiday in England. It should be ***THE*** pre-eminent festival for churches descended from Calvin and Knox. As one Reformed theologian put it, "Without the Ascension we wouldn't even know about the other festivals of the faith."

The sovereignty of God was central to Calvin's thought, and Christ's sharing in that sovereignty is a direct result of his Ascension. At the Ascension, Jesus, the man, takes the seat at the right hand of the Father. It is from this seat that Christ is given the power to reign as well as the power to judge (i.e. the authority to forgive sins). And it is from this seat that Jesus is able to send forth his Spirit of Love into the world at Pentecost. It is this sending of his own Spirit that makes it possible for Christ to have an ongoing presence in the world.

So, if Calvin was asked the question, "Where is Jesus now?" His answer would be something like this: "Jesus is at the right hand of the Father in heaven. He is able to be present in the world (in various ways and places) ***only because*** he is seated at the right hand of the Father, from whence he is able to send his Spirit into the world."

Christ's Presence in the World
But let's take a step back. When it comes to God's presence in the world, the church has always balanced the dialectic between a doctrinal belief in God's omnipresence (the idea that God is present everywhere) and the spiritual experience of God's presence in very specific and even tangible ways at particular times and places. The Celtic tradition, for example, speaks about such times and places as "thin places". Doctrinally, then, it is quite correct to say that we can encounter God anywhere, but historically Christian have identified specific places, practices, situations and rites as being able to mediate Christ's presence in more concrete and real ways.

- **Christ with the poor**: A good example of the distinction between the general presence of Christ everywhere and his particular presence is the point often made by Liberation Theology that, while it is quite possible to find Jesus among the rich, we can be certain to find him among the poor.

- **Christ *in* and *as* the Word**: The Bible has always been closely associated with the Word of God. Especially within protestant traditions, with their adherence to the authority of the Bible as the supreme rule of faith and life, there is a powerful reciprocal relationship between Christ, the Living Word of God, and Scripture, the written word of God. For Luther, for example, the Bible's authority as the Word of God lies in the fact that it points us to Christ in a unique way. Not only the reading of Scripture but its preaching too is understood as the place where we find Christ in unique ways. Dietrich Bonhoeffer for example could say of preaching: "The proclaimed word is the incarnate Christ himself…. it is the Christ himself walking through his congregation as the Word."

Christ in the Sacraments:
The word "sacrament" comes from the Latin translation of the Greek term "*musterion*" (from which we get the word "mystery"). It came to mean the visible manifestation of an invisible divine reality. Technically the reality to which it referred was always an action rather than a presence. A sacrament is a rite in which we experience God's saving action and grace. Of course there are many ways and places where we experience such grace but over the years the Church has identified certain specific rites as sacraments of that grace. Within the Catholic and Orthodox traditions seven are recognized (Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, the Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders and Marriage). Protestants typically recognize only two, namely Baptism and Holy Communion. Protestants point out that these are not only rites in which we experience God's grace, but they are also the only two that Jesus actually commanded us to do.

A sacrament does not only symbolize God's grace but actually confers it. So for example, if you consider the Catholic sacrament of Penance in which sins are confessed and absolved, then the rite doesn't merely symbolize the fact that Jesus *can forgive* sins, but through the rite the sinner is *actually forgiven* by Jesus.

The focus is on Jesus' action. It is not the Minister who baptizes, or the Confessor who forgives, or the celebrant who marries or the Church that ordains. In each case it is Christ himself who carries out the action and confers the grace. Christ's action in the sacrament implies Christ's presence. In other words, Jesus must be there to do the action.

Christ in the Eucharist
There is no sacrament in which Christ's presence is more fully experienced than Holy Communion and no sacrament embodies his saving action and grace more completely. At the institution of the sacrament during the Last Supper Jesus didn't merely command the

disciples to remember him but in the giving of the bread and wine he identified these elements with his body and blood, suggesting that he would have a tangible, physical presence with them whenever they ate and drank the meal in his memory.

As to the saving action which Jesus takes in and through this rite, that is the content of the rest of this study. We have already seen that through this sacrament Jesus' saving work on Good Friday and Easter is made real for us again and our communion with God and one another is established and celebrated. Next week we will reflect on how the meal also brings us into the place where we can anticipate our destiny as guests at the marriage banquet of the Lamb in the new heaven and the new earth.

Again, the point is that in the sacrament Jesus is actually present performing the actions.

Discussion

Q & A about the nature and meaning of sacraments.

But how? And where?

At the time of the Reformation a debate arose about the exact nature and location of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. The reason for the heat generated by the debate lay in the fact that Rome's materialist interpretation of Christ's presence in the elements of bread and wine had become one source of the Church's power over the people, a domination which the Reformers rejected. Firstly, since the Roman rite purported to "change" the bread and wine into Jesus' physical body and blood, the Reformers felt that seemed to allow the Church to control and manipulate Christ's presence in ways that were magical and potentially idolatrous. Secondly, the fact that Catholics actually did venerate the consecrated host by, for example, genuflecting before it was seen as outright idolatry. So what are the various ways that Christ's presence in the sacrament can be understood?

The Catholic Position – Transubstantiation

The idea that the bread and wine at Communion signify Christ's physical presence goes back to Jesus himself. At the Last Supper he said, "This is my body…this is my blood". The question of how and when exactly bread and wine are transformed into flesh and blood was hotly debated as far back as the 3rd and 4th Centuries. The debate remained a fairly academic (or Scholastic) one. By the 13th Century, based on Aristotelian philosophy and under the powerful influence of Thomas Aquinas, the answer developed by the Catholic Church was that at the moment of consecration the "substance", or metaphysical nature, of the elements changed from bread to flesh and wine to blood while their "accidents", or physical nature, stayed the same. In

this way, the Church could claim that the underlying reality of the bread and wine had changed even though their physical properties remained unchanged. At the Council of Trent in the 16th Century this doctrine, labelled "transubstantiation", became the official doctrine of the Catholic Church.

Martin Luther – "Consubstantiation"
Luther believed in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, based on a straightforward reading of Jesus' words of institution. The authority of scripture was the fundamental issue at stake for him here. As a result he rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation as an unnecessary appeal to reason to prove what scripture already attested. At the same time, Luther saw Zwingli's denial of the real presence of Christ in the sacrament not as a matter of disagreement over metaphysical theories, but as an outright denial of the authority of scripture. The closest Luther came to theorising about the metaphysics involved in the Eucharistic presence was to say that both bread and body could be present at once in the elements just as fire and iron could simultaneously exist in a red-hot iron. Somewhat ironically, his analogy came to be known as a metaphysical theory called "consubstantiation" – a term Luther never used himself.

Ulrich Zwingli – Memorialism
Against Luther's and Rome's insistence of the presence of Christ in the elements, Zwingli argued that Jesus' statement, "this is my body", was merely a figure of speech thus denying any idea of a "real presence of Christ" at the eucharist. According to Zwingli's analogy, just as a man, on setting off on a long journey from home, might give his wife his ring to remember him by until his return, so Christ leaves his church a token to remember him by until the day on which he should return in glory.

John Calvin – The Real or Mysterious Presence, a Middle Way
In the debate about the presence of Christ in the Eucharist Calvin sought a middle road between the substantial realism of Luther and Rome and the empty symbolism of Zwingli. On the one hand, Calvin affirmed the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist against Zwingli's empty memorialism. Although he agrees with Zwingli that Jesus' words of institution are figurative expressions, he nevertheless insists that the signs of bread and wine do not only represent what they signify, they also truly give what they signify. On the other hand, although he agrees with Luther and the Romans that there is a real presence, he differs from them in respect to the mode of that presence. Since the Ascension translated Christ's body to heaven, it cannot also be present in the elements. Moreover, the claim of Christ's substantial presence in the elements threatens the sovereignty of God by placing Christ's body at our disposal. So how and where is Jesus present in the Eucharist for Calvin?

The true mode of Christ's presence in the Eucharist for Calvin is not substantial but relational, or personal. Christ is present in the Supper not as an object on the altar, but as the Lord of the Church and host of the meal. This personal presence of Christ is effected and communicated to us by faith through the power of the Holy Spirit, who not only makes Christ present but in communicating that presence to us, unites us with Christ. As the 20th Century Reformed theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, has put it, "We must learn to think in a new way here: not – Christ is present in the feast here or there, but – the feast is held in his presence…"

As to *how* Jesus becomes present, Calvin insists that this remains a mystery caught up in the work of the Holy Spirit. "Now if anyone should ask me how this takes place, I shall not be ashamed to confess that it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare. And, to speak more plainly, I rather experience than understand it….In his sacred supper Christ bids me take, eat, and drink his body and blood under the symbols of bread and wine. I do not doubt that he himself truly presents them, and that I receive them."

Reflections on the Real Presence in the Eucharist

Despite its mysterious nature there are certain specific ways that Christ's presence appears to us in the sacrament.

- Firstly, in the Eucharist Christ is present among us as the true celebrant, as our High Priest, the mediator who brings our prayers of thanksgiving and intercession before the Father. Though we ordain individuals to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, and ask them to preach and celebrate – it is always in a vicarious way that they do so. From the pulpit we do not wish to hear the opinions of Neil or Euan or Sheila, rather we come to hear the Words of Jesus. Similarly, while Neil or Euan or Sheila may be gracious hosts in their own homes, at the Lord's Table we come to sit with Jesus, and the role of the minister is simply to remind us that we are welcome at His Table.
- Secondly, there is a special sense in which the elements convey to us the reality of Christ's presence. This is primarily so because of Jesus' own words, "This is my body" and "This is the new covenant in my blood". All the sacrificial symbolism of the Eucharist that we spoke of in Week 2 is caught up in our eating and drinking of the elements.
- Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly in the Reformed tradition, the presence of Christ is to be found in His mystical body, the Church, whereby those who are united to Christ are united also to one another and share in the communion of the saints. This union not only makes us one with Christ and with each other, but by implication therefore also makes Christ present *in* the community and even *as* the community.