

# Online Holy Communion?

## 3 options briefly considered

### Introduction

Easter 2020 will surely be remembered as one of the strangest ever. Normally Easter Sunday would see a celebration of Holy Communion in every parish church, often with larger than usual congregations present. In the preceding weeks, Home Communion would have been held for the housebound in their homes. This year, none of this can happen – our church buildings are closed and all gatherings and home visits have ceased.

Understandably the question now arises of what should be done about Communion on Easter day (and Maundy Thursday). Leaving aside absurd suggestions like sending out consecrated bread and wine in the post, is there any way in which technology can, or should, help? Should those churches which have been holding online acts of worship via Facebook Live, Zoom etc. attempt to hold an online Lord's Supper? I want to take a brief look at the pluses and minuses of three options:

### Option 1. Purely Online Communion

#### What it involves:

The minister celebrates the Eucharist in his/her own home, perhaps with other members of his/her household receiving communion, and joined by an online congregation who watch and listen as this takes place.

#### Arguments for:

- The Eucharist takes place and people are able to watch and listen to the familiar actions and words, reminding them of Communion services they attended in the past.
- Videoconferencing technology allows a degree of 'presence' of congregation members.
- The rubric on p440 of the Book of Common Prayer (2004) gives some comfort that a person not able physically to receive the bread and wine nonetheless partakes of the body and blood of Christ.

#### Arguments against:

- Holy Communion is, in its very essence, a physical thing. Christ's command was to eat and drink, not merely to watch and listen (Matthew 26:26, Mark 14:22).
- It feels absurd to invite people, in the words of the liturgy, to eat and drink when they are clearly unable actually to do so.
- There are shades of the pre-Reformation practice of the Mass being conducted in private or with the people present only as spectators and auditors. The separation between priest and people is heightened by this option.
- The rubric on "Spiritual Communion" in the BCP was not intended to address public worship but situations of extreme sickness. It points out that receiving Holy Communion is not strictly necessary for receiving Christ, but rather repentance and faith are the requirements.

### Option 2. Hybrid home/online Communion

#### What it involves:

The same as in option 1, but in addition the online congregation in their own homes take their own bread and wine and eat and drink these at the relevant moment in the service.

#### Arguments for:

- Eating and drinking some actual bread and wine could be more satisfying and more edifying than merely looking at some bread and wine on a screen. There would be less sense of absurdity at the moment of reception.
- Something of the physicality of communion would be retained in this option.
- The sense of 'elitism,' with the priest's household being the only ones able to partake, is lessened, and there could be a greater sense of 'togetherness' as everyone receives something.

#### Arguments against:

- The online congregation are probably not truly receiving Holy Communion as they are not partaking of one loaf together (1 Corinthians 10:17) and their bread and wine have not been duly consecrated, at least in the way traditionally understood and practiced in the Church of Ireland.
- This option may be seen as 'lay presidency by stealth,' dissolving the distinction between the ordained minister of word & sacrament and the lay people of God.
- This approach increases the danger of the Eucharist being treated casually or irreverently, and the possibility of participation by those who ought not to receive yet e.g. the unbaptised.

### **Option 3. Delayed Communion**

#### What it involves:

We simply wait until we are able to celebrate the Lord's Supper and receive Holy Communion in the normal way – physically gathered as the church, with Home Communion for those unable to be present.

#### Arguments for:

- This avoids the disadvantages of the other two approaches and acknowledges that, while well-intentioned, neither of them constitutes a regular celebration of the Lord's Supper.
- It avoids unintentionally giving support to irregular theological ideas, for example (a) the idea that it makes no difference whether one is physically present and physically partakes of communion or not, (b) the idea that the Lord's Supper need not be presided over in person by an ordained minister with spiritual oversight in the congregation, or (c) the idea that the Eucharist has value as an act in itself regardless of participation by the people.
- This option could sharpen our sense of hunger/longing for the restoration of Holy Communion, and this could be in keeping with one of the purposes of the Lord's Supper – an anticipation of the heavenly banquet (cf. Luke 22:16,18; 1 Corinthians 11:26) when Christ comes in his kingdom.

#### Arguments against:

- Easter without a celebration of Holy Communion is very irregular, going against the long-standing practice of almost all Christian churches across the world and throughout time.
- To miss communion at Easter is particularly painful, since the risen Jesus himself held a form of Eucharist at Emmaus on the day of this resurrection, and every Lord's Supper is a reminder of the first Good Friday and Easter Sunday.
- There could be a strong feeling that an imperfect Lord's Supper would be better than no Lord's Supper at all. In other words, it is better to attempt something than to do nothing.

### **Conclusions**

None of the three options is ideal and we are faced with trying to pick the best of a bad bunch, or the 'least worst' option. Which do we go for? A lot will depend on one's existing theological convictions. Those of a more evangelical/low church disposition will have misgivings about option 1 with its echoes of medieval private Masses. Those of a more catholic/high church disposition will have concerns about the resemblance to lay presidency of option 2. Most of us will feel the pain and loss involved in choosing option 3.

Personally I am least in favour of option 1 – the prospect of the faithful watching the Lord's Supper without being able to participate concerns me. Option 2 comes in second place for me – it is an improvement on a purely online experience, but raises its own questions about whether it is a proper and Anglican approach.

My own decision is to choose option 3 and to wait for the restoration of Holy Communion as we have known it. This third option, while far from ideal, seems to me to have the fewest pitfalls and is probably the best way to safeguard our understanding and practice of the Lord's Supper. It is painfully ironic that at this time we can probably best honour the Eucharist by not celebrating it. But while we fast from the Sacrament we will feast on the Word, taking comfort from Jesus' promise: *"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."* (John 6:35)