

Can we have Holy Communion online?

By Revd. Matt Williams

Like many of us, I'm missing Holy Communion and I long for the day when we will be able to gather together in remembrance of, and thanksgiving for, our Saviour's death. I'm writing this brief article because you may have seen that some churches are broadcasting Holy Communion online, and wonder why I have not done the same.

I have not celebrated Communion online because the physical act of gathering is an essential part of Holy Communion. 1 Corinthians 11 is one of the key texts for understanding Communion. In it Paul refers five times to the fact that they celebrated the Lord's Supper when they all came together as a church, as one assembly meeting in one place at one time (1 Cor. 11:18; cf. vv. 17, 20, 33, 34). This physical gathering isn't just what they happened to do at the time, it is essential! Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:17, "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf." Paul is saying something very surprising – that the physical act of eating the bread together at Holy Communion enacts, celebrates and strengthens the church's unity. By eating the same bread, and drinking the same wine, together in the same place, Holy Communion makes the many one. That is why we say, "As we eat and drink these holy gifts make us one in Christ, our risen Lord" (Prayer H). This means turning Holy Communion into something other than a communal activity of the church, gathered together in the same room, is to turn it into something other than Holy Communion. The essential communal nature of communion is reinforced in the Anglican rubric relating to Communion of the Sick. You can find it here if you're interested:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/book-common-prayer/communion-sick>.

Every loss is a form of suffering, and to have lost Holy Communion (for a time) is a bitter pill to swallow. We instinctively want to mitigate that loss however we can - but we cannot erase it. As tempting as it is to carry over Holy Communion services into our online worship, and as much as compassion urges us to do that, we cannot and should not. Would it really be the right thing to do, to rewrite our understanding of Holy Communion 2000 years after Christ gave it to us? What right do we have to do that? Communion is God's creation, not ours. God has the right to tell us how to worship him.

We need to understand that we live at a highly individualistic moment in history. We focus on our own personal relationship with God and can easily forget that God calls us to be part of his heavenly community. We think 'why can't I celebrate communion at home if I want to?' But Christ never intended communion to be a private act of personal worship. He gave it to us as a communal act of worship. For when we have the bread and wine together Christ binds us to himself and to each other through the sacrament he has given us. If we were to reinterpret communion to suit our current (and God willing temporary) situation we would run the risk of damaging the precious gift Christ has left us. We would be robbing it of its essential communal nature. It is, after all, no coincidence that it is called 'communion' for it is all about our *union* with Christ and other members of the *community*. One day we will celebrate it again together, in the meantime we can still take great comfort from the truths we remember every communion service, "that by his merits and death and through faith in his blood, we and all [God's] Church may receive forgiveness of our sins." (Eucharistic Prayer C).

I hope it won't be too long before we can have communion again. I know we all miss it very much, as do I. Since Anglican theology and liturgy do permit an ordained minister to preside at Holy Communion, so long as it is part of a community of believers, I do hope and expect that communion

at St. Paul's will be one of the first things to resume once we are allowed to reopen the building. I also hope that when this happens we will have the resources to record/stream our services so they can be watched at home by those unable to be there themselves. For those watching at home it won't be Holy Communion, but I do hope it will be a great encouragement to them nevertheless.

God bless you all,

Matt