



**GRAY'S
INN**

Sung Eucharist for All Saints 2021

“How holy is communion?”

Revelation 7: 9-17 & John 15: 12-17

On All Saints Day in the year 1666, a man called Abraham Morten died in the Derbyshire village of Eyam. Four months previously the whole village had gone into voluntary lockdown, aware that they were suffering from the Black Death, and not wanting to spread it outside the village. It had been brought on a piece of cloth from London. Morten was to be the last of 260 Eyam villagers to succumb to the plague.

You might say that they were all saints, in that their self-sacrifice spared countless others. It was because they recognized that they were part of something larger, that they had obligations and responsibilities beyond their own families and community, that they entered their self-imposed lockdown. So they also knew what being in “communion” meant. In our world today we have never been so connected and inter-dependent, and yet ironically we have become more and more individualistic and privatised. So it may be all the more important that we attend to what the Christian faith says about being in communion.

Holy Communion is very much at the heart of this Eucharist – our communion with God, our relationship with him. And just as a mother feeds her child from her own body, God feeds us in this sacrament. We celebrate this relationship, this communion, at the start of life through that other great sacrament, which is Baptism. Today in this Chapel we will baptise two children. People sometimes ask: why don't you leave it till they're older and can decide for themselves? But that's to misunderstand what baptism is all about. It's not about what we decide, what we do, it's about what God has already done. We hope and pray of course that these children may grow up and have some sense of communion with God. But it starts with God's love, God's saving love, for them. That's what we celebrate in baptism.

But communion also means something much wider than that. We say in the Creed, “I believe in the communion of saints”. We affirm a belonging, a solidarity, which goes

beyond a personal one-to-one relationship. We don't just believe in the communion of saints, we believe that we are part of it. It is a communion which leaps over boundaries: we are part of a worldwide Church, a global Christian community. It is a communion which transcends the barriers of time: we are joined with all those who have fought the good fight in the past, because it is a communion where death has no victory. So we read of that great vision of St John the Divine, of the people from every nation, tribe and tongue, gathered around the throne of God, sharing in the "springs of the water of life" – and "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes".

It is that vision which sends us back into the world to be people of communion. During the pandemic there has been talk of us all being in it together, of COVID as the Great Leveller, as if the villagers of Eyam have been our inspiration. The truth of course is the opposite. In our own country it has revealed and exacerbated our social and economic inequalities. More widely, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres has likened the pandemic to an X-ray, revealing what he calls "the fractures and fallacies in the fragile skeletons of the societies we have built". Rich nations have engaged in Vaccine nationalism, hoarding 90% of supplies, while the poorest still have a vaccination rate of only 2%. Yesterday's G20 meeting in Rome was being urged to act on that. The main contribution of the UK was to make a £4bn cut in International Aid. It is of course in our own interest to get the world vaccinated, but that's not the point I'm making. I'm asking, what does it mean to live in communion with the rest of humanity?

And, with COP 26 starting today in Glasgow, there is of course even more. For we belong together not just with the rest of humanity, but with the whole of creation. Creation is a gift, requiring a proper sense of dependence and responsibility. But we just took it and threw away the Manual. And so we have lost a sense of communion with nature and done such great damage to the created order that the very future of the children we baptise today is under threat.

And so it comes full circle, and a circle is a good image for being in communion. In communion with God, who welcomes us as we are, old and young, babies and barristers. In communion with all the saints of God, past and present. In communion with all the people of today's world, especially those who get left out and forgotten. In communion with the whole of creation, which is God's gift to us.

So let the saints of God urge us on, as we respond to what we heard Jesus say in the Gospel, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you".