

Lent III 2020 Havant

On the 15th June in the year 1415, a church council was being held in the Bishop's Palace in Constance in Southern Germany. There was just one item on the agenda for this particular day: the question of communion in one kind only, in other words whether at the Eucharist everyone present should receive from the chalice, or whether it was sufficient for the priest only to do so, everyone else receiving the consecrated bread only.

The reason this was being discussed was because there was a backlash against the custom of giving communion under the form of bread only.

The way communion is given had varied a lot over the centuries and in different places. Sometimes it had been what we are familiar with, sometimes the bread and wine were mixed together and each communicant received from a spoon (rather like the Eastern Orthodox practice today), sometimes the faithful received through a straw. In exceptional circumstances communicants consumed only the bread or only the wine. During the couple of centuries before the Council of Constance, however, in western European churches the use of the chalice for lay people had almost totally disappeared. There were various reasons for this development and we probably don't need to bother too much about them at moment, except to say that they were mainly practical matters of reverence and hygiene.

Most people simply took the new practice for granted, but some people wondered how compatible it was with Jesus' teaching. *"Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."* Or, for that matter, St Paul: *"As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."* The more historically aware also knew that this had been the almost universal tradition of the church for over a thousand years. So, following the example of Jesus at the Last Supper and the way his first disciples worshipped, all the faithful, congregation as well as priest, consumed both the consecrated bread and the consecrated wine

So the discussion at the Council of Constance didn't come out of the blue but took place in the context of a current controversy.

Now it is usually the case that most elements in the church's teaching and practice have been largely taken for granted without the need to explain too precisely what was going on or what it meant. It's only when awkward questions get asked that theologians need to scratch their heads and find ways of explaining the whys and wherefores of what we do and say. Just think

for example of the Creed we say every Sunday. The way it describes our faith in Jesus Christ, fully God and fully human, only got defined in the way it was because in the fourth century one particular teacher argued that he wasn't really God in the fullest sense, but only the first, highest and best of God's creatures. Faithful Christians as a whole had an instinct that that was wrong, but it needed serious thought and eventually the decision of a council of the whole church to put that instinct into a concise form of words.

The fifteenth century debate wasn't so much prompted by the issue of communion in both kinds as an issue in itself but rather by whether as a matter of principle this was the essential and only way to receive communion; whether, to put the question directly, it was necessary to salvation to receive the wine as well as the bread. Everybody agreed that this had been the earlier practice of the church and indeed symbolically communion in both kinds was a clearer sign of "eating the flesh of the Lord and drinking his blood." Some of the critics went further however and wanted to outlaw the possibility of communion in one kind. They argued that the consecrated bread and wine added something to each other and that the sacrament was incomplete unless everyone received both.

This conflict raised a deeper question: on what or rather whom do we feed when we receive holy communion? Outwardly of course we eat bread and drink wine. That bread and wine however feed us with Jesus Christ himself; he is the inner reality of the gift. One single gift of Jesus Christ himself, completely one with God and completely one with us. Whatever may appear to our senses, whatever we see and feel and taste and eat and drink, he is not divided. One and the same gift of his body and blood whether received in one or two forms.

So while the normal and ideal thing is for communion to involve the sharing of both bread and wine, we can be confident that, as our Archbishops wrote in 2009 during the swine flu epidemic (the last time the chalice was withheld from the congregation), *"While communion in both kinds is the norm in the Church of England in faithfulness to Christ's institution, when it is received only in one kind the fullness of the Sacrament is received none the less."*

I hope that goes some way to reassure anyone who has any scruples about the Church's decision during the present emergency – and also to explain why we can with a clear conscience thank God after communion *"for feeding us with the body and blood of [our Lord] Jesus Christ."*