Editorial

The issue of so-called 'lay presidency' at the eucharist is one which has been lying around in Sydney (Australia) for some years but which has only recently come to the notice of the Anglican Communion as a whole. At a recent synod there, the clergy and laity of the diocese voted to permit lay celebration of the sacrament and in doing so presented their archbishop with a dilemma. Either he accepts this decision and incurs the wrath of the rest of the Anglican Communion, or he rejects it and runs the risk of being *persona non grata* in his own diocese. Whatever one thinks of the issue itself, one can only sympathize with an archbishop caught between this particular Scylla and Charybdis, and be grateful to him for having the courage to state publicly that he must bear the rest of the Communion in mind. Outsiders who may be inclined to criticize Sydney should reflect that had this decision been taken by a diocesan synod in the United States, or even in New Zealand, it would probably have been implemented regardless of what anyone else thought about it. The Archbishop of Sydney is in an uncomfortable position, but at least he has shown a desire to take other Anglicans into consideration, and whatever he finally decides to do, he ought to be commended for this responsible attitude.

When we try to unravel the issues behind the move towards permitting lay celebration, we discover that all the threads lead us back to the nineteenth-century Tractarians. It was they who 'restored' the high view of the eucharist which had prevailed before the Reformation, and which has always been the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. An important corollary of that view is a high doctrine of those who are appointed to celebrate the sacrament, and when the Tractarians began to concentrate on restoring that to its former glory, it was inevitable that Roman notions of 'priesthood' would begin to penetrate the Anglican world once more. Ordination came to be regarded as a sacrament in its own right which made the recipients somehow different from (and therefore implicitly superior to) the rest of God's people. Anglo-Catholics could never push this as far as Rome has done, if only because they were unable to impose the celibacy rule which is an important part of the mystique, but they did their best to convey the impression that a priest enjoys some kind of special status in the church, and this impression has stuck in many quarters to this day.

It is that false view of ordination which Evangelicals have always opposed, and which is the real motivation behind the move towards lay celebration in Sydney. Ordained people are not superior to others, and the clericalism which such an idea is bound to encourage must be resisted –

some would argue, at all costs. There are those who think that by introducing lay celebration it will be possible to accommodate women who wish to preside at the Lord's table. However, this way around the issue of women's ordination is unlikely to gain much support from the women most directly affected, for the simple reason that most of them want the status which they believe ordination conveys. Take that away and they will either lose interest or (more probably) concentrate on becoming bishops, whose status will presumably remain unimpaired by the change. Moreover, few seem to have reflected upon the fact that whatever happens, there will have to be some kind of regulation as to who can celebrate the sacrament, and that the end result is likely to be a kind of *de facto* ordination by some other name. The confusion which this can cause is perhaps best illustrated by the practice of dedicating children at the font rather than baptizing them. Few ordinary people notice the difference, and it is liable to cause confusion later on when the would-be confirmation candidate discovers that he or she has never been properly 'done'. It may seem far-fetched at the moment, but we could find ourselves in a situation where a minister is put forward for consecration to the episcopate, only to discover that in fact he has never been validly ordained. The point here is that changes of this kind have knock-on effects which are not always easy to see in advance, but which could end up making the existing situation more difficult and confusing than it already is.

Many Evangelicals are convinced that lay celebration is something they should favour because it is a blow to the sacramental idea of priesthood, but they forget that it is also a concession to the Tractarian notion of the centrality of the eucharist in Christian worship. Modern debates about ordination have occurred mainly because the eucharist has once more become the main act of worship in most churches, which makes it necessary to have a priest on hand at all times. It is often forgotten nowadays, but the Church of England spread the gospel around the world for many years without this particular luxury, and faithful Anglicans did without the eucharist altogether. That was certainly not an ideal situation, but it would be hard to argue that churches in Africa or Asia are spiritually impoverished as a result, particularly if they are compared to such bodies as the American Episcopal Church, which has more priests than it knows what to do with. The belief that frequent communion will strengthen the spiritual health of the church is taken for granted in liturgical circles, but the evidence on the ground suggests that, if anything, the opposite is true. In many congregations, communion has now become so banal that most worshippers have little appreciation of what it really means, and think that it is just something which happens during the course of the service, rather like the collection. It is hard to see how lay celebration can do anything other than add to this ignorance, since it will help to make the eucharist even less special than it already is.

What the Anglican Communion really needs is not a debate about lay celebration, which focuses attention on an epiphenomenon rather than on the underlying theological issues, but a thorough re-examination of the purpose and meaning of both ordination and the sacraments. A glance at the Prayer Book will soon reveal that the Anglican reformers did not treat the eucharist as casually as most modern Anglicans do. For them it was hedged about with safeguards which reflect the fact that they were mainly concerned with spiritual discipline – a notion which has almost completely vanished from modern liturgies and which is never raised in debates on this issue. Those who presented themselves for communion were expected to 'try and examine themselves' first, to see whether they were in the right spiritual state to receive it. This was not meant to produce an obsessive concern with 'worthiness'; indeed, the same Prayer Book makes it plain that even after the most searching self-examination, 'we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs' under the Lord's table. The spiritually healthy communicant is not someone who thinks he (or she) has a right to be there, but rather someone who knows that he is unworthy in every respect. When we kneel to receive the bread and wine, we are submitting ourselves to the cleansing and life-giving Spirit of God, so that he can take us, sinners that we are, and transform us by the power of Christ's atonement, so plainly exhibited to us in the symbols of his broken body and poured-out blood. Every eucharist is a challenge to God's people to renew their commitment to Christ, and to submit to the Holy Spirit's power in a constantly deeper and more all-embracing way.

But the eucharist does not stand on its own. The ministry of the sacrament (if we want to speak like that) is only ever an adjunct to the ministry of the Word, of which it forms an integral part. The eucharist should never be celebrated without the preaching of that Word, which in turn should be directed towards challenging God's people in the manner just stated. There should be no need to fence the Lord's table, because if the Word is preached in this way, only those under real conviction would ever dare to present themselves at the rail. If anyone doubts whether this was ever done in the Church of England, he should read the story of Charles Simeon's conversion. Simeon was convicted by the need to prepare himself for communion, when he realized that unless he gave his life to Christ first, he would be unable to receive the sacrament in good conscience. Simeon's experience would be scarcely imaginable today, which may explain why there is nobody like him in the modern church. What we desperately need is to recover a powerful preaching and teaching ministry, exercising genuine leadership ('headship'), which alone can put the celebration of the eucharist in its proper context. Furthermore, those who are unable to function in such a role should not be ordained to the presbyterate, which is primarily an order of preachers and teachers. There ought to be plenty of room for women, part-timers and others in a

reformed diaconate, which is essential if the church is ever going to fulfil its pastoral ministry adequately. Those called to preach and teach need to be set apart, not because they are superior people, but because they have a vocation which demands particular concentration and dedication if it is to be fulfilled in the way which the New Testament intends. It is the devil's cleverest trick to get the preachers of the Word so wrapped up in worthy (but secondary) things that they are too busy to devote their time to the main business of their calling, which is to minister that Word and the sacraments which belong to it. Allowing lay celebration only detracts further from this aim, and it is for that reason that we cannot approve of it, however much we sympathize with the motives which have prompted those in favour of it to press for its adoption. Having said that, the vote in the Sydney diocesan synod must not be opposed in the interests of a do-nothing conservatism. Rather it should be seen as a wake-up call to the Anglican Communion to get its house in order, beginning with a root and branch reformation of its ministry – and of those called to exercise it.

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