



**Trinity College**  
THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

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# SACRAMENTAL LIVING

*by*

THE MOST REVD DR ROWAN WILLIAMS

The St Peter's Public Lectures, sponsored by the Hughes-Cheong Lectureship Trust and delivered at Trinity College, the University of Melbourne, as part of the celebrations for the 125th Anniversary of the Trinity College Theological School.

*14 and 16 May 2002*

TRINITY PAPERS NUMBER 32

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## **PREFATORY NOTE**

The Hughes-Cheong Lectureship Trust was established in 1943 in honour of two of the finest priests to have served St Peter's Eastern Hill: Father Ernest Selwyn Hughes, and Father James Cheong. Under the auspices of the Trust, many of the world's leading theologians have been brought to Australia to deliver lectures, seminars and sermons. It was the wish of the Trustees that the 2002 Lectureship be offered to the Archbishop of Wales, the Most Revd Dr Rowan Williams. As both of the priests honoured by the Trust were graduates of Trinity College, and as the visit by Archbishop Williams coincided with the Trinity College Theological School's 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary, it was agreed that the two lectures would be delivered at Trinity College.

Thanks are due to the Trustees, and to the Revd Greg Seach who transcribed and edited the lectures.

## *Living Baptismally*

### **The first St Peter's Public Lecture given by the Most Revd Dr Rowan Williams at Trinity College, 14 May 2002**

I have chosen as a title for these lectures the broad theme of 'Sacramental Living'—hence 'Living Baptismally' and 'Living Eucharistically'—because my intention in these two talks is to draw out a little what it is that the sacraments are about in terms of the very shape and contour of Christian Life.

I think that it is very important that, as Christians, we remember that the sacraments are not simply *events*. They are such; but they are events because they are also manifestations of those underlying contours of the life of discipleship. Treat them primarily as events themselves, and you end up with some of those (frankly not very edifying) controversies about sacramental theology that have not only taken up the energies of many people who could have used their energies better, but have divided and embittered the life of the church. But go through to the contours of discipleship which they manifest, and perhaps it looks a little different.

I want to begin thinking about 'Living Baptismally' with an image: the classical icon of the Baptism of Jesus as you see it in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. This depicts Jesus naked, up to his neck in water. You see on one side of the river John the Baptist, on the other (frequently) three angels holding Jesus' clothes. We see the hand of God descending from above, and underneath, in the depths of the river, you frequently see a little figure who represents the 'river god'. It is a very strange, Classical survival in Orthodox art. But that presence of the river god is often seen, by Orthodox commentators on this iconographic tradition, as a representation of the way in which the Baptism of Jesus is understood as a descent into chaos: into a world of chaotic, unregulated reality, prior to the coming of the Holy Spirit. In other words, it is like the waste and void which covers the face of creation at the beginning of Genesis. In Eastern Christian tradition, as elsewhere, there is a very strong element in theologising about the Baptism of Jesus which sees it as a recapitulation of Genesis. (Before you point it out—yes, there are any number of 'recapitulations of Genesis' in the Gospel story. The fact that Matthew begins his Gospel with the word 'Genesis', is one. The fact that John begins his Gospel with the words 'In the beginning', is another. But that is another story, or rather, lots of other stories!) But the Baptism was frequently seen in terms and imagery first seen in Genesis: once again, watery chaos is addressed by God. The Word descends into the chaos and, under the overseeing and overshadowing of the Spirit, something is brought to birth. And the something that is brought to birth, in this case, is the vocation of Jesus to live out his innermost identity as God's beloved child. When he comes up out of the water there is no longer chaos, there is the voice of calling from above.

So, living baptismally—if it has something to do with that particular image of baptism, which in turn has its roots in scriptural language itself—is living through that process of chaos, a descent of the Spirit, an emergence into new identity. Baptismal identity is most deeply thought about, quite clearly, as identity in and with Jesus. But that, in turn, is an identity which *restores the identity* of the first creation. In baptism, God remakes out of chaos. And in our birth in baptism into the kinship of Jesus, we return to something that was lost at the very beginning of the human story and is restored in Jesus Christ. And it is a reminder that chaos is not resolved or organised by fear, by a word from a divine distance, but organised, shaped, given (even) beauty, by the involvement of God. Whereas we might read the first Genesis story in terms of a word addressed from a distance—although you would be wrong to do so—it is impossible to read *this* ‘Genesis story’ as about a word (or Word) that comes from a distance. *This* recapitulation of Genesis is about the naked Jesus, up to his neck in watery chaos and only there and from there, hearing fully and finally the voice which addresses him as God’s beloved child and which empowers him to go forward in ministry and death and resurrection.

To take on the baptismal identity, then, is to take on an identity which is very, very suspicious both of distance and of control, and I will have a little more to say about that later on. And it also says to us that where you might expect to find a baptised person is somewhere near chaos. The baptised, I’m suggesting, are those who live in the name of God in the neighbourhood of chaos: and that may be an inner as well as an outer chaos. I don’t mean by that that baptised people are called to chaotic lives: however true that is of most of us, that is not quite the point. The point is, rather, that the baptised person is aware of her or his proximity to chaos, of the impossibility of making order and shape out of our human lives by goodwill and hard thinking. To take on the baptismal identity is to take on something of that being poised over the nothingness out of which God calls us.

Now, to be aware of our nothingness in religious terms is a complicated bundle of ideas and a dangerous one, but we need to be aware of what it does and doesn’t mean. To be aware of my nothingness does *not* mean to think that I am contemptible, to think that I am negligible. It means to acknowledge, head-on, that I am *of myself* nothing. It is the difference—as Iris Murdoch used to say—between suffering and death: ‘Suffering can be romantic and dramatic. Death just isn’t.’ So to accept my nothingness is not to indulge in an extravagant putting down of myself. It is to believe, as a matter of bare-faced fact, that I would not *be* were I not spoken to by God. And to know that I would not be were I not spoken to by God is part of what it means, I believe, to live on the edge of chaos. I do not have the resources to batter the world into submission and into patterns that satisfy me. But I am spoken to by the One who brings reality out of chaos. And I am spoken to moment by moment. Not once, definitively—in a way that takes me right away from the chaos and brings me into a world of order inner and outer—but spoken to in a way that keeps me aware of that nothingness over which the word (and Word) of God speaks.

That is the first general point I want to make about ‘living baptismally’. It is living in the proximity of chaos, in the proximity of nothingness. To be aware that I only am as I am spoken to in love by God, and summoned to the identity of a child of God through and in the Spirit. It means that in my inner life I must not be afraid of confronting nothingness and chaos, I must not pretend that my inner life is tidier than

it is. It means, too, that I may expect my baptismal calling to take me into the neighbourhood of other kinds of chaos. The chaos of other people's lives, the chaos of suffering, the chaos of doubt, the chaos of a real world in which people are ground-down and oppressed and denied by others who don't understand what it is to face *their* nothingness.

Now that in turn leads to a second point (and you will be interested to know that I have four not three points—I am being extremely un-Anglican!) This suggests, I believe, that to be baptised is misunderstood rather fundamentally if it is thought of as the possession of a status that marks me off from others. And here is a paradox; because obviously, from the very beginning, baptism has functioned as a marker of Christian identity, and markers of identity mark people off don't they? But here it seems we have a marker of identity which is meant to give us precisely that identity which is not afraid of identification with any and every human circumstance. Baptism, if it is an entry into the identity of Jesus Christ, who is the identity of God entering into chaos, is an entry into the most profound solidarity with human experience that we could imagine.

Some of the historical arguments about baptism—its conditions, its consequences and so forth—have unfortunately pivoted around the assumption that baptism really is something that marks off. In the very early church, there were great debates about whether any post-baptismal sins were allowed, and if so, which ones, and how many—'three strikes and you're out' I believe is the phrase—because a lot of people assumed that to be baptised was to be part of a body of Christ distinguished by its purity, its absolute integrity. And it took a while, I think, for the church to 'discover' (as it were) that one of the features of the body of Christ which we need to ponder, is that it is a *wounded* body, and therefore one whose boundaries are breached. To live, therefore, in that wounded body is not to live in a state of sinless isolation. It took the church all of a hundred and twenty or so years to realise this. We might perhaps, with the wisdom of hindsight, have said that they could have noticed it more quickly. But this is the very paradox, of course, at the heart of any Christian notion of holiness: Christians believe that they are called to be holy. And (like others here, no doubt) when I preach confirmation sermons, I tell people that they are being confirmed in order to be saints. This deeply alarms them of course, and I suspect that it alarms their friends and families even more! But the nature of Christian holiness is precisely that it is not something *possessed*—a set of achievements, a set of qualifications. It is a *relationship*, and can only be understood in those terms. To be holy is to be in the neighbourhood of Jesus Christ, and therefore also to be in the neighbourhood of whomever Jesus is in the neighbourhood of. And we see from the Gospels the sort of people he is habitually in the neighbourhood of, and once again we are back to a proximity to, a neighbourhood of, chaos.

And that is the sense in which baptism, again paradoxically (I am sorry about all these paradoxes but I think they are there!), baptism is not simply about cleansing *from*: it is, in a strange sense, about being contaminated *by*. God in Christ—by living in the wounded body, which is the body of the incarnate Word—adopts and accepts contamination by the world. 'He was made sin,' says St Paul very strongly and boldly, 'for our sake,' and only from that lowering of defences, that opening of the breaches, only from there comes openness to the Spirit. Again, that is something that already emerges in the reflection of the very earliest people to think about the identity

of Jesus. We see it in the third chapter of St Matthew's Gospel, in that strange little encounter between Jesus and John the Baptist, where the Baptist says, as people have said ever since, 'Why do you come to me?' And Jesus' enigmatic answer effectively says, 'That's what I am here for. To be contaminated by baptism. To be affected by the need, the chaos, the darkness of the world.' (Matt. 3:13-15.) And that is the paradox that runs through our baptismal living, our whole sense of holiness. Proximity to Jesus, yes; proximity to those that Jesus is in the neighbourhood of, yes. And therefore an understanding of our identity as itself with Jesus, and in Jesus, an unceasing, unyielding mission to those we might be tempted to regard as contaminating, those whose neighbourhood makes us feel awkward.

Jesus spends most of his ministry, according to the Gospels, in the neighbourhood of those in whose company people tend to feel awkward. And it is always a very good question I think, for self-examination, to ask: 'Who are those in whose company I feel most awkward?' And that may have a very wide range of responses. It may be the classic publicans and sinners of the Gospel, it may be all kinds of other people too; it may even be the respectable. And to imagine oneself before the throne of God in the company of those alongside whom one feels most uncomfortable is also always a salutary exercise. The Scottish theologian Elizabeth Templeton wrote some years ago, both movingly and entertainingly, of her attempts to come to terms with the idea that one day she might have to stand before the throne of God and make her peace with Ian Paisley, before she was allowed to grow any further. So, for 'Ian Paisley' read your own particular private *bete noir*. But that is something to do with baptismal living, something to do with the proximity of those with whom we are not comfortable. And in that, we believe as baptised people, in that there is constantly re-enacted the Father's embrace of the Son in the Spirit across the abyss. In that is re-enacted the eternal action of a divine love which is all about the embrace of the totally *other*. And as the great twentieth century Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar liked to remind us again and again, God's love of creation only makes sense against the background of a God who already, eternally, loves the Other. The Father and the Word and the Spirit in love with one another because they are *not* each other, and do not in any sense assimilate or reduce to each other. It is because God is that kind of God that God, to put it boldly, is capable of creating. To put it very mythologically, by the time God gets around to creating the universe, God is already profoundly and eternally used to loving the *other*: God has had an eternity of practice at this and so is very good at it! Thus, our baptism involves an identification with, a proximity to, chaos—not a status that marks us off, but a journey into a particular kind of solidarity.

And thirdly, that has implications for how we understand the prayer of baptised people. The prayer of the baptised is bound to be a growth into conformity with Jesus' prayer, and that means at least three things. It means what is variously called advocacy or surrogacy—'standing for'. Jesus' prayer is a 'standing for' in those situations in which he is—those situations of chaos or dissolution, breakdown and darkness. It is out of that, in that and for that, that Jesus prays. But again, one might deduce simply from the most superficial reading of the Gospels, that that advocacy or surrogacy—that 'standing for'—is also caught up in a prayer of thanksgiving and adoration. The intercession—the painful, wrenched intercession that is offered, for example, at the grave of Lazarus—is, at the same time, a prayer of thanksgiving. If you go and read John Chapter 11 you will see that the pain of standing with the dead

man and his bereaved family is caught up in Jesus' prayer into a thanksgiving: 'I thank you Father, You always hear Me'. And that with the tears still on His cheeks! (see John 11: 28 ff, esp. vv. 41-2).

That particular fusion of intercession (or surrogacy) and thanksgiving, is surely why we have to say that the prayer of the baptised is quintessentially a eucharistic prayer: because it is there, in the Eucharist, that surrogacy or advocacy and thanksgiving stand together. The Eucharist is an entry into the prayer Christ offers for creation, and that prayer itself is, in turn, energised and sustained by the eternal act of loving thanksgiving which is (again) the life of the Trinity, and which is made real in the ministry, the death and the resurrection of Jesus. So the prayer of the baptised needs to be seen as standing for and standing with, and at the same time *as* a thanksgiving: both together because the prayer of the Baptised is a being caught up into that everlasting movement of the Word towards the Source, the Son towards the Father.

And the third element of the prayer of the baptised—which arises out of that and which is, in some ways, hardest to pin down, to be precise about—is that that is also, in human terms, a prayer of great risk and potential darkness. It is also Gethsemane! It is a prayer in which the presence of God is not simply that of a comforting partner, not even that of address to a loving parent, as we commonly understand it. Jesus cries out 'Abba' in Gethsemane, but it is not quite the domestic picture that is evoked by that. So the prayer of the baptised is also a journey into mystery, a mystery which will challenge us, challenge us to the depths, a mystery which will require of us daily conversion, daily turning into the darkness which we have not yet understood, away from the comforting emotional and intellectual patterns that we can devise for ourselves and use to keep ourselves safe. That, then, is where baptism leads us in prayer: to advocacy, to thanksgiving and to the darkness of faith. I would go so far as to say that those three are in some important and central way the very heart of what it is for the church to be the church, and that a church that in some way fails to understand its prayer in those terms (and therefore its life in those terms), is a church that is jeopardising its very being as a church.

But there is another side to that which needs to be noted here; and again I speak with some tentativeness on this. All this should make us a bit cautious (shouldn't it?) about treating baptism as in any sense something conditional, something that is a reward for doing well. And some of the historic defences of infant baptism have rested precisely upon that. No, we don't wait for people to have adequate expressions of their faith before we baptise them. Yes, we do rush indiscriminately and recklessly into baptising people because the gift poured out is not a gift given by measure, as it says in the fourth Gospel. I believe there is much truth in that and it is at the end of the day why I go on believing in infant baptism. But it might also be the case that we ought to associate infant baptism rather more than we do with a kind of 'ecclesiastical health warning', when someone comes to ask for baptism and we say, 'There is a great gift to be poured out and I am glad you asked.' And we can say, (and we do say, I hope) that baptism is an entry into a particular type of solidarity. The gift given is the gift of identification with lots of people that you never know and never meet and who are there for you. And perhaps we should say baptism also, like it or not, commits you to a life in which your boundaries are less safe than you ever thought. And whether you know it or not—and whether you make it real or not and are sent to it or not—that is actually going to be a characteristic of your life from now on.

Perhaps we ought to warn people about that. Who knows how that works? Who knows whether those who are baptised as infants and never do anything about it are in fact, in some way, exposed by the act of God to the world and to God in ways they never understand and have words for? Who knows? It is one of those things that makes me very wary about simply saying that people are baptised as infants and never have anything to do with God again. I suspect that God may have something to do with them, in a very particular way.

So I do not know, and this is an area of ecclesiastical delicacy as well as theological complexity and I am wary of dogmatising. But I would like us to live in a church whose attitude to baptism was both generous and realistic. Generous in saying ‘The first thing is gift’; realistic in saying ‘But you do realise what that gift brings don’t you?’ And I think here, as somehow summing that up, of a not terribly well known poem by my fellow townsman Dylan Thomas called *The Conversation of Prayer*, which imagines a child saying bedtime prayers half thoughtlessly, and somewhere else, a man dying in great mental and physical anguish. And as the poem unfolds, the dying man is somehow eased by something and the child drops into a kind of nightmare. And Thomas’s point is that in the conversation of prayer, the exchange, the interflow of experience, can be a great deal more mysterious than anything we commonly imagine. And that remains for me one of the haunting, one of the most mysterious, images of the whole process of intercessory prayer that I know. It relates a bit, of course, to the well-known speculations of Charles Williams about co-inherence in the body of Christ. The ways in which again, half consciously, we end up carrying things for one another in this fellowship.

But I want, in the last section of this lecture, to think further about how the baptismal identity is, in very specific ways, a messianic identity. Now ‘messianic’ is a dangerous word, because so much of us and so many of us would like to believe that *that* was what we were involved in. ‘Messianism’ is the curse of so much religion. But frequently, when we talk about people having a messianic complex (as we do), if we recognise in ourselves a messianic complex common to many of the clergy—it has even been known among bishops, I believe—what is happening, of course, is that the word ‘messianic’ has lost its connection with the Messiah, and we will see what I mean in a moment.

Being ‘messianic’ is about being anointed: the Messiah is the one who is anointed. And in Scripture (and subsequently of course) that anointing has commonly been seen as a three-fold matter: the anointing as prophet, priest, and monarch. And the theology which has looked at Jesus’ messiahship in the light of that, will, I think, have some rather different things to say about what ‘messianic identity’ might mean. And so I would like, in this last section, briefly to look at those three categories: of the prophetic, the priestly and the royal. To think of some of the dangers that attend those ways of understanding our Christian identity and some of the vitality that goes with the words.

Jesus’ anointing is to a prophetic calling, and the prophetic calling in the life of Israel is a calling to renew the community’s integrity. ‘Have you forgotten what the Lord did for you? Have you forgotten who it is that calls you?’ The prophet is not simply a moralist, castigating the failures day after day, the moral failures of God’s people. The prophet is calling people, God’s people, to recognise afresh where they began,

why they are there, who it is that made them who they are. And at every level of the prophetic tradition in Hebrew scripture, I believe, you can see that process going on. You can see it perhaps most eloquently in Hosea—the impassioned plea to return. You can see it also in the amazing interweaving in the second Isaiah of the themes of creation and exodus and restoration from exile—all inseparably bound together. Prophecy is about restoration, about finding your origins again. Hearing again that call that comes to you from God, to be a community. Once again perhaps, it is a recovery of that primal chaos out of which God makes something. The prophet, and I certainly think here of Isaiah, reminds God’s people that they were drawn out of nothingness into community. And when the form of their communal life has ceased to express the amazed generosity which arises from thanksgiving to God, then people will have forgotten who they are and where they come from.

The priestly anointing, the priestly task, is in some ways very straightforward to understand. The priest is the unitive, sacrificial and intercessory presence, the one who makes connections. The prophet points to distance, the priest makes connections. The land and the people have abandoned or betrayed who they are and what they are, turned away from holiness. The priest is the technician of reconciliation, the one who can tell you what to do in order to reconnect. And it is a very remarkable and surprising insight in Hebrew scripture, picked up of course, in Christian scripture as well, that there is a strand of tradition which sees the vocation of the whole people of God as priestly. In this community, everybody is a technician of reconciliation, it is not simply the task of an élite—everyone is in the business of making connections.

And then what about the *royal* anointing—the anointing as monarch? Ancient Israel was rather in two minds about monarchy. It was aware of the dangers of having a monarch like the kings of the nations, and that savage bit of republican polemic that you find in the first book of Samuel still makes very interesting reading. (see I Sam. 8:4ff, esp. vv 10 – 18.) Ancient Israel was confused and uncertain about monarchy: they knew how badly it could go wrong, and at the same time the monarch was for them clearly a focal person, a representative person in the community. If it is true—which I believe it is—that a great many of the psalms are meant to be put in the mouth of the king at various ceremonies, then the complicated identity of the people is caught up in the identity of the king. And that means, of course, that the anointing as a royal person is not an anointing simply to power and control, but an anointing precisely to that identification with which we began in thinking about the baptismal identity.

So the prophetic, the priestly and the royal anointings, as the consequence of baptism, as the filling out of the baptismal identity, become something a good deal more than simply a license to exercise various kinds of power. We know that each of them can be corrupted in its own distinctive way. The prophetic calling can be corrupted into an abstract moralism, and when people self-identify as ‘prophetic’ in the church I think one may reasonably scratch the head a little about what is going on there, and wonder if that is indeed what the Lord has in mind! It can be another way of avoiding the vulnerability of the baptised identity, whether in the form of training the prophetic for radical critique in the church or claiming the prophetic for certain kinds of charismatic utterance. (I should add that I am entirely in favour of radical critique and entirely in favour of charismatic utterance. I just want us to be extremely careful

about how we use the word ‘prophetic’ here, lest either of those turns into another way of levering ourselves into a safer position within the church.) Prophecy is a real gift, but it is a gift that is extraordinarily difficult to employ with integrity—that does not mean it is not a gift. But yes, we can take the prophetic anointing in all sorts of strange directions, we can take it into that moralism, that isolation and purism which undermines the very basis, I believe, of baptismal living.

And we all know what can be done with the priestly anointing. It can be turned into an apology for elitism, or perhaps, even worse, for a kind of decorative sacerdotalism. The great William Stringfellow—the American lay theologian, one of the most underrated thinkers of the twentieth century, one of the greatest giants of the Anglican tradition—talked about how we could turn priesthood, real priesthood, into what he called a superfluous and decorative form of laity. Unless you understand what real priesthood is about, he said, you won’t have a real laity, and that is a very sobering thought. And for him, a real priesthood is a priesthood that understands what it is to make sense and make connections, and to do so in ways which are very much more than superficial and decorative. A priestliness which is simply putting the stamp of religious approval on what anybody else happens to be doing is not a making of connections. The priest is there to make the unexpected connections, which is more than putting a stamp on what happens to be going on and that is why authentic priesthood is such a very difficult task both for those we call ordained priests and for the whole priestly people of God. In fact, the priest may be seen as the one who must perpetually be asked by (and attempt to answer for) the people, the question Prospero asks Miranda in *The Tempest*: ‘What seest thou else?’<sup>1</sup> Making sense is hard work. Making Christian sense, making Christian connections, is still harder. This is a world in which fragmentation is frequently the dominant theme and to make sense, to connect across the abyss—to go back to an earlier image—is no small matter.

And the royal charism, the royal anointing. Certainly, as I have already hinted, as Scripture hints, we turn that very easily into another search for control or security. We look for the wrong kinds of freedom from our environment, we assume that the royal position given to humanity within creation, according to a great deal of traditional theology, is a license to print money and a license to exploit the environment. And we fail to see that other haunting side of the royal tradition in Scripture, expressed so eloquently in the story of David, I would say, and in the psalms of David.

So all those aspects of the messianic identity; the prophetic, and the priestly and the royal are capable of distortion within the baptismal enterprise. And the distortions are judged and, we pray and hope, checked, only by the constant referral back to precisely where we began: which is the image of the naked Christ up to his neck in the world. It will not surprise you, there is nothing at all original in saying this, that baptismal identity, baptismal living, has to be interpreted and referred constantly and quite simply to the identity in the living of Jesus. We know, we have heard it said so often, that the whole notion of messiahship is redefined by what Jesus is and who Jesus is, and what he says and does and suffers. We can say, too, that the reality of being a child of God is only given its definitive sense in and through the story of Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Tempest* I. ii.125

In trying to draw these reflections to a close, it is there that I would want to put the emphasis. Baptismal living is living, as I said at the beginning, in the proximity of Jesus and therefore in the neighbourhood of those to whom Jesus is near. Those to whom Jesus is near will be very surprising to us and there is no way round that. And living in that proximity is living in a wounded body—that is, a body whose defences are very unsafe. Living in the proximity of Jesus is living in some sort of derived reality, some sort of reflection of his messiahship. And therefore, living prophetically, living in a priestly way and living in a royal way—but only as those are given content by the story of Jesus and the identity of Jesus.

Finally, and as a bridge to the second of these talks, I would return to baptismal prayer for a moment. Living baptismally is nothing if it is not a constant discovery of who and where we are. We pray not just to get things, but we pray so that we may be truthful. We pray for the Spirit of truth and in the Spirit of truth. That is, we pray to know who God is and who we are. And baptismal prayer, I have suggested, is a discovery of how the prayer of Jesus prays in us and lives in us—in advocacy, in darkness and doubt, and in thanksgiving. So that it ought not, in any sense, to surprise us that baptismal living works itself out and realises itself above all in that act of corporate thanksgiving: corporate entry into the cross of Jesus, corporate baring of the needs of the world before God the Father, which we call the Eucharist. And it is to that which I will turn in the second of these talks.

## *Living Eucharistically*

**The second St Peter's Public Lecture  
given by the Most Revd Dr Rowan Williams  
at Trinity College, 16 May 2002**

I spoke before about Baptismal Living in connection with the theme of 'being in the proximity of Jesus', and quite obviously that leads us into thinking about the Eucharist. Because if you read the Gospels carefully and openly, one theme comes over with enormous clarity and consistency I believe: what is salvation in the practice and in the language of Jesus? The answer is really remarkably simple: it is to accept the welcome that Jesus offers. Hence the fundamental and central quality in the Gospel narratives of table fellowship. It has been said so many times, it hardly needs saying again—but let's say it! Table fellowship is the concrete and specific form of 'being with Jesus' which brings about healing and wholeness. From one point of view, this table fellowship is the concrete and specific expression of that 'undefendedness' of Jesus which I spoke about *before*—that baptismal nakedness. Here is someone in whom the promise of God has no defences, has no fortified boundaries. Here is somebody whose identification with, and (as I suggested before) contamination by, the unrespectable and unclean, takes concrete form in sitting around one table.

In the ministry and teaching of Jesus, therefore, to be at peace with God and to belong with God's people is something which is determined not by religious ritual performance, not even by orthodoxy. It is determined by whether or not you believe Jesus when he tells you that God welcomes you. That is the 'test' of being at peace with God and belonging with God's people: do you believe Jesus when he tells you that God welcomes you? If you do, anything is possible; if you don't, nothing is possible.

Now that acceptance of the welcome, of course, that belief in welcome, can show itself in the practice of Jesus in two different interwoven ways—so deeply interwoven that the theme is like shot silk in the Gospel: you look at different angles and you see different colours. That two-foldness of the Good News is perhaps expressible in these terms: the gift Jesus offers is not simply his invitation to sit down with him, it is also your freedom to invite him to sit down with you. When Jesus says, in Luke 19, to Zachaeus 'Salvation has come to your house' he says it because he has just invited Zachaeus to invite him. And to confer the dignity of being a host is part of what it is for Jesus to greet his guests. That is what I mean by 'shot silk', the interweaving of the invitation of Jesus and the freedom or dignity to be ourselves 'inviters'. Just as in the most general terms possible, where the work of God is concerned, the essence of God's gift is to give the dignity of being a giver. That is perhaps another story—but you see how it applies here.

So that is the first point I want to make about eucharistic living. Its roots are in practice: the words, the actions of Jesus in respect of the welcome that he offers on God's behalf and the welcome he therefore enables and draws out from human beings. The freedom to respond to an invitation and the freedom to give an invitation. And to belong with God's people, to be (so to speak) a paid-up member of God's Israel depends, in the eyes of Jesus, only on that.

With that in mind we can, of course, understand far more fully why it is that so many of the Resurrection stories in the Gospels pivot around the experience of invitation. Jesus, we might very well say, invites himself into the locked upper room (he does not wait to be asked!) and then invites his disciples who have abandoned him to make him their guest. 'Have you anything to eat?' he asks. (The ultimate social embarrassment when your guest finally has to ask you to give him something to eat!). And once again the alternation and interweaving of themes in John 21: a miraculous draft of fish, the invitation to sit down to breakfast and, again, the invitation to invite which comes out of that, when Jesus says to Peter 'Feed on my behalf'. In other words, go and invite.

That the Resurrection stories give such stress to this theme suggests (I think) very strongly, both that the experience of the Resurrection of Jesus had a great deal to do with this theme, and that the table fellowship of the early church was seen as the context in which the Resurrection story could best and most fully be told. And we, I think, deeply misunderstand the resurrection if we fail to connect it continually with this experience of welcome given and repeated. The Resurrection is the continuation of Jesus' encounter with those he invited.

Jesus' freedom to invite on behalf of God is not extinguished by any degree of human refusal—even that ultimate slamming of the door which is the death on the cross. Nothing can stop God in Jesus issuing an invitation, and therefore nothing can finally quench the liberty in human beings to be themselves hosts, inviters. And in the context of that, it is very hard indeed, isn't it, not to see the Eucharist of the Christian Church as centrally, focally, *the* Resurrection Encounter. These are the people who have eaten and drunk with him after his resurrection from the dead. We read in the Acts of the Apostles that that is how Jesus' followers are recognized: eating and drinking with him after his resurrection from the dead, because it is after his resurrection from the dead we see that this invitation is more powerful than anything that human beings can do. This invitation is of God, but it takes the cross to show us that. Only on the other side of the cross does the utter freedom of God to invite become real and definitive. Only *there* do we see what this invitation is capable of overcoming. Only when we see what the depth of the negation is—that says no to God's invitation—do we see the depth of the negation of that negation: the 'no' to our 'no' that God utters on and by the cross.

And that, I think, is why also we have often been at sea in thinking of the Eucharist as first and foremost the representation of Christ's passion. You can see why: 'Do this in remembrance of me' says the Lord as He breaks the bread, which is His body and pours out the blood. That clearly brings the Passion to mind. But the more we focus on the Eucharist as the representation of the Passion in and of itself, the more I believe we lose that sense of the Eucharist as the act of encounter with the Risen Christ. There is a sermon by the great sixteenth century Anglican divine, Bishop John

Jewel of Salisbury, where he asks what it is that is represented in the Lord's Supper. And, like a good Protestant, he replies that, of course, it is the Lord's death that is set forth there to our minds and affections. 'But,' he says, 'not the Lord's death as an event on its own. But,' he goes on, 'it is the effects of the Lord's Passion. Here we see the darkness over the earth, here we see the cost of sin; here we see the graves to open and the dead to rise and the earth to shake.' It is quite strong really for what is going on in the Eucharist, but he is talking about the effect of the death of Christ. The no to our no. The graves open and the rocks are split.

So the Eucharist re-presents, commemorates, makes active, allows to *be* active, the passion of Jesus as it is oriented to the renewal of Resurrection. Not as an event transacted at a distance but as, specifically, that event which shows us how God's invitation overcomes our refusal, which pushes forward irresistibly towards resurrection. From all this, then, we can see that Eucharistic Living is, centrally, living in the presence of the living Christ; and a little more specifically, it is hearing the invitation of God in Jesus Christ and exploring our own freedom to invite.

So in the rest of what I want to say this evening, I want to explore those two things further and also tentatively to suggest some of the ways in which the implications of that go on beyond and outside the human world alone. So let us think for a moment about the Eucharist as a place where we are invited.

The Eucharist is, if all I have been saying is right, a place where the call of God in Jesus Christ is heard and renewed, the call to be a guest. Eucharistic living, then, is living as a guest, which means living in and with the sense, in the awareness, that my company is desired. One gets into trouble (I speak from experience), using the language of desire too freely where God is concerned. I was able to read recently a very severe judgement on my use of this language by an American theologian who didn't like it at all and thought that I meant somehow God was after us for God's own sake: that God wished to improve the quality of His life by searching out relationships with us. That is not quite what I mean. That is not at all what I mean. (As T.S. Eliot puts it, 'That is not what I meant at all!'). I think we need, for talking about the love of God in the light of Jesus, language strong enough to cope with the passion and intensity and relentlessness of the divine outreach towards our aloneness and lostness. And I am not quite sure that we have got any language other than 'desire' for that. We can make all the analogical qualifications we want, and I am quite prepared to say that I do not, for a moment, believe that God needs us to be happy. But God behaves as if He did! And that sense that our company is desired, longed for, is surely one of the things that we ought to be saying as part of Eucharistic living. If we are God's guest then God actually desires with all his heart that we be present there. And our presence to God is the effect, the creation, of God's longing.

So it is not only, as I said last time, that we are, by God's grace, called into being out of chaos. It is also that we are called, very specifically, into company—into accompaniment with God in Jesus Christ, called into the intimacy that Jesus has with the one He calls Father. Called therefore into a movement of love so strong that we can only speak of it in something like the language of desire. After all if God is, in some sense, hungry and thirsty for God's own being, if God is hungry and thirsty for God's own fullness, then God's love for Jesus, the Word, the Offspring of the Eternal Source—that love reaching out to us can only be seen as God's hunger and thirst for

God's own reality. We are treated as if we were God. And I always quote here that marvellous Eucharistic hymn 'Look Father! look on His anointed face and only look on us as found in Him.' And so He does!

Out of all that emerges the very obvious point that living eucharistically is living gratefully, and I touched on this last time, when speaking of how, if we understood the baptismal calling, we would understand why the Eucharist is at the centre of our Christian practice. Because what response could there be to being desired in such a way but our thankfulness? And I said then and would say it again—that the centrality of gratitude in Christian language and practice is something that cannot be underlined too strongly or repeated too often. Because it does not seem to feature all that largely in some accounts of what it is like to live as a Christian. And you would not always deduce from the way we carry on that gratefulness is something that gave us our distinctive flavour as human beings who are Christians.

But living thankfully—*there* is actually quite a challenge. I can be thankful, from time to time, when I think that I have got something to be thankful for, and depending on my temperament and my circumstances I may or may not do that regularly. But *living* thankfully—that is a bigger challenge, because that suggests that somehow I have to learn a way of connecting every corner of my experience with God as giver. And because so much of our experience is not felt or sensed as a gift, that is an immensely challenging thing. And with some trepidation, I refer here to the experience of a friend who died some six or seven years ago after a very painful and humiliating illness; and who wrote to me about how she found it possible to pray in hospital. How she felt herself obliged to move from 'if I live until morning I will give God thanks' to 'I will give God thanks and perhaps I will live until morning'. That is, I suppose, putting it as starkly as could be, and it is not everyone for whom that comes naturally—to put it mildly. But you see what I mean about living thankfully. 'I will give God thanks and perhaps I will live until morning' is different and frightening, and I do not want to make that bland or pious because thankful living is not the kind of cheerful acknowledgment that God is the giver of good things. It is the willingness, as I said, to make the connection between our experience, wherever and whatever it is, and God as giver. And the referral of every moment of our experience to God, the sense that every moment is a door that God has opened for us into the divine life, that is thankful living. And it is in that sense of course, that gratitude is so closely bound up with what I spoke about last time in terms of the priestly calling, of the baptised, of the making of connections—the making of sense. You might say the distinctive Christian way of making sense is to refer moment by moment to God as giver in this way.

I suppose it is something of this which lies behind the language, the quite bold and extravagant language, used by the great Gregory Dix in his book on the Eucharist, about what he called 'Homo Eucharisticus'—that species of humanity that Christians are supposed to be, eucharistic humanity. Because certainly what is being defined and outlined here is a distinctive style of being human, and it is certainly the very opposite of a depersonalised, functionalised humanity. It presupposes that human beings are capable of thanksgiving at that level. 'I will give God thanks and perhaps I will live until morning.' Gregory Dix, you will remember, in many of the pages of his work on the shape of the liturgy, writes about how Homo Eucharisticus, eucharistic humanity, stands over against corporatist humanity, collectivist humanity;

humanity understood in terms of what it can achieve as a lump. Against that, the eucharistic person is the one who is able to identify the movement of her or his life moment by moment, with the movement of Jesus towards the Father in time and eternity. The eucharistic person is the one who is able to be taken up into that movement, so that sense is made of the movement of her or his life.

So eucharistic living seeks a connection between our finite experience—moment by moment—and God, by way of gratitude. By way, that is, of acknowledging that what comes to us comes to us as gift, and that that means that every moment contains an openness of possibility of growth towards God. How do we discern, how do we uncover, that gift and invitation in every moment? Well nobody, least of all myself, is going to give you a generalised answer to that. But I think that that challenge takes us on to a further aspect of eucharistic living which I have begun to hint at already. If my task as a eucharistic person is to recognise the open door in each moment and experience into the life of God, then how I view other persons, and how I view my whole environment, and how I view the very passage of time itself is altered. If these things are the carriers of gift, if they have in them an open door, then my task, in response to time and matter and people, is the task of incorporating my awareness of those realities into Christ's act of thanksgiving to God, Christ's act of motion towards and into the heart of God. And that, of course, has very radical effects on how I look at time and things and people.

What if time were a gift? What if time is not just a large empty space waiting to be filled up with useful and productive activity? What if time is an open door to God? 'I will give God thanks and perhaps I will live until morning' changes the way you spend the night. What if the material stuff of this world is God's gift? Then there are things that I must not do with it. I must not subordinate it wholly and uncritically to my agenda and my personal drives. What, above all, if other people are God's gift to me? How very hard to believe, when thinking about that in the last lecture, in respect of the people we would least like to spend eternity with. But what if people are God's gift? If all of these things—with time, with things, with people—what thanksgiving imposes on me is the need for, what that great French philosopher Simone Weil called 'hesitation'. Pause, draw breath before you work out how to fill your time. Pause and draw breath before you plan what to do with your material environment. And, above all, pause and draw breath on the threshold of that infinity which is the person next to you, and the person before you and even the person you are.

That hesitation, that reverent caution before the reality before me is, again, a hard aspect of Christian discipleship, but without that we will end up in that frame of mind which is not, I guess, unfamiliar to you (as it is certainly not unfamiliar to me) which regards the environment as the raw material for my ego. And that is the one thing, of course, which stifles thanksgiving once and for all. Because the material which is before me is not a gift whose hinterland is the mysterious giver, the material before me is just raw material. And with raw material, of course, I can do what I damn well please! And it is in *that* sense that I suspect eucharistic living has something very deeply to do with something I can only call the contemplative attitude to time and things and persons. Contemplation which, as St Augustine said, is 'The enjoyment of something in itself and for its own sake,' is very deeply bound up with thanksgiving. It refers what is before me not to *me*, but to something beyond, and to break through the compulsion that so distorts our lives in referring things to our ego, that requires

very, very deep practices of stillness and (in the right sense) detachment in our inner lives. First see what is there. ‘What seest thou else?’ Well, that seeing which is required of the ordained minister, required of all the baptised, *that* is part of what is required of living eucharistically. That seeing of our environment as related first to God before it is related to me. First related to the Giver, even before I experience it as a gift.

Eucharistic living then, living in the presence of the living Christ—yes, living with a sense of invitation and the dignity of being able to invite, living in gratitude, living contemplatively. But here of course we need to put in the necessary qualifications—lest anybody should suppose that living contemplatively is the same as living passively! As if the point of Eucharistic living were just to sit back and cultivate our experiences and think how wonderful they were! We do not respond and interact creatively with our environment if we are passive. And one thing that eucharistic practice and language says to us is that this is a mystery to do with *transformation*. That is, with how in our seeing and our interacting things change, how our perception of what is possible changes. At the heart of the eucharistic action is a prayer and a ritual which says that what you see is no longer what is the full reality. Something has been broken and opened up and in that withdrawal, that hesitation and caution, that context that is seeing, that thankful patience is all connected with, rooted in, the action of Christ—the Passion and resurrection—in all that, what is possible for the world changes. So no, not a passive attitude: eucharistic living is the opposite of that. And it changes (I have already hinted at this) our sense of what the material world is about, and therefore the ways in which we concretely use it. Eucharistic living ought to make us see the environment differently certainly, but also then use the environment differently. And to live gratefully in a material environment is very clearly, I would say, part of living eucharistically and is something which we clearly have not learnt to do after two thousand years of celebrating the Eucharist.

But I think it takes us back also to a theme which I touched on last time: the sense of what the other person is. To be invited and to have the freedom to invite establishes both self and community as being free to exercise hospitality. So, on top of all the other words I have used, I would say eucharistic living is hospitable living: undefended, risky, but creative, because hospitality changes possible relations. But not a hospitality which simply depends on my initiative and my vision. I may or may not feel like inviting somebody, I may or may not feel like having somebody sharing space with me. But the Eucharist is about how God’s hospitality has already anticipated and overtaken ours. God’s action of invitation has gone beyond my will and my decision. Because of the Eucharist, God says to me this or that person, this or that situation, is already invited—and your job is to catch up! And when we see one another as already called, as already guests summoned by God, I realise, we realise, that the value of the other, just like the presence of the other, does not depend on what I decide or what I think is suitable. Eucharistic living is aligning ourselves with and reiterating the call or the welcome of God, and that means that eucharistic living is bound up with the recognition of others as already summoned.

God has been there ahead of us. If we approach the other person—at any level, in any context—as someone we may or may not want to invite, we miss the point. We encounter others first as people that God has already invited, and, as I said earlier, that is a deeply unpleasant and embarrassing reality most of the time. It is unpleasant and

embarrassing when we look around the church, it is unpleasant and embarrassing when we think of the people we would like to see in the church and the people we would not like to see in the church. Unpleasant and embarrassing in any number of ways. It was said to me—and I do not exaggerate—that one of the complaints about a new parish priest in our diocese was that he spent all his time bringing new people into the church, which is no doubt regarded as a very terrible failure. I think it arose from the conviction on the priest's part that those who worshiped regularly at the Eucharist in this church had some notion that they were invited by God but that possibly people around didn't have that notion and might need to be woken up for the recognition of that already existing invitation. So living in and with invitation, and having the freedom to issue invitation—but not to issue an invitation simply on the grounds of *my* decision, but on the much more authoritative and world-transforming grounds that *God* has decided to invite them already. Hospitable living in addition to thankful living and contemplative living.

Now I suppose that it is in the light of all this that Christians have so regularly seen the Eucharist itself as a sort of anticipation of the end of all things. And if you will pardon the jargon, the final thing I want to address is the Eucharist as eschatological living. ('Eschatological' is one of those words, as you know, that theologians use when the going gets tough!) In eucharistic living, something is anticipated, something is realised in advance, and as you think through some of these themes, you can see, perhaps, how very many aspects of our world are caught up in this understanding—in such a way that you can see where they are going in the longest of long runs in God's purpose.

God invites us into being by creation, and therefore God's purpose for every human person is that they be drawn into a definitive, unsurpassable, unique intimacy with God's own life. At the Eucharist, and in eucharistic living, that final intimacy is already anticipated. It is anticipated and shouted forth in some very, very crude and simplistic images of assimilation and unity: eating and drinking. But that intimacy, that mutual in-dwelling and absorption represented by eating and drinking, that is there to tell us we are made for intimacy and here we taste it. So that distinctive and unique creative word which God speaks to call each person into being, that is the word that we are to listen for in the Eucharist because in the Eucharist we begin to hear our true name, our distinctive name as uttered by God before the foundation of the world, and we know what we are for. And at the same time, in knowing that, we know that all those unique, distinctive words are the reflections or the sparks from the fire of the one Word. So that in that Word, in God's eternal self-communicating, we all meet, and something else is anticipated: the fact that the good of every human person is convergent with the good of every other human person. (Something which we again find habitually very hard to believe, because we are innately deeply competitive and we find it almost impossible to credit that what is good for us has something to do with what is good for the person next to us, let alone the person next to them, the person in the other room or the person on the other side of the globe.) But if the words of the invitation come from the one Word of God's self-communicating, then what is spoken to me is spoken to you and spoken to a great many people that I have never met and shall never meet, and what is anticipated in the Eucharist—where that Word is uttered, that call is heard—what is anticipated is that convergent gathering-in of human beings drawn to their joy, drawn to their eternal good. And because the creative Word of God is not something which applies only to

human beings, because there are other things in creation apart from human flesh and bone, then the purpose and the good, the fulfilment of every aspect of our environment, is also anticipated and foreshown in the Eucharist.

As has often been said, especially in the Eastern Christian tradition, there is a sense in which the Eucharist is about the material world itself finding its place. Its place is to speak of the self-giving of God. So that the natural processes and the material stuff of bread and wine stand for a creation which has been soaked through with the loving self-communication of God. What we do with things at the Eucharist is the anticipation again of that final, that 'horizon state' of things, in which everything speaks of God because everything lives in mutual gift, dependant on God's initiating act. 'Alpha and Omega, to whom shall bow all nations at the doom, is present now,' says another great eucharistic hymn. So Eucharistic living is living hopefully—let us say that, rather than 'eschatologically'; it is a lot easier and actually a lot more positive. Living hopefully. The universe in all its complexity, human and non-human, is rooted in the self-giving of God. And that means that the universe in all its complexity, human and non-human, is destined to reflect God—to absorb God's radiance, God's action and realise it in its own inner relationships. The Eucharist anticipates that, and therefore living eucharistically is living in the confidence that as we go into our daily business from a celebration of the Eucharist, it is possible to make a difference in the name of God and possible to identify and to create anticipations of the last day, and begin gathering things and persons in God's love.

So then, time to draw this together a little bit. Perhaps, again in good Anglican style, three things to round up where we are.

1. Eucharistic living is first of all living at the centre of the world because at the centre of the world is Christ's gift of self to the Father. That Trinitarian relationship out of which flows everything else.
2. Secondly, it is living in a transforming contemplation of the world, because it is a processes of finding and re-finding meaning in all things and all people in relation to God: reading the world and reading persons in terms of gift as I suggested. A transforming contemplation, which, like all contemplation, makes on us demands that we frequently want to shrink from. We would be easier with a scheme which allowed us to absorb reality into ourselves, our projects, our agenda. We would be easier with a scheme that allowed us more room and more right to defend ourselves. But we are asked first to stand back, to be still, to look and, in that looking, to discover something of what God's purpose is for a situation, a person or a material object.
3. Living at the centre of the world, living in transforming contemplation of the world and living, finally at the end of the world. Living with our vision informed from that sense that in God's purpose and by God's providence reality converges, it doesn't fall apart into eternally, endlessly incompatible goods and destinies. Eucharistic living is about a proleptic—another technical word, sorry—a realising in advance, a proleptic realising of the calling of the holy creation.

In all of this, with all of those three things in mind, we have to go back to the simplicities with which we began. This exists because of who Jesus was, and what he said, and what he did, and what he suffered. It exists because at that pivotal moment in the history of the human universe the act and work of God was made specific in acts of invitation. And health and salvation was understood once and for all as the belief that the world is welcome.

If we are in the business as Christians of eucharistic living—living out our baptismal calling in the neighbourhood of Christ—then, in short, our task is to learn what it is to believe that the world is welcome. Welcome to God and therefore welcome to us. Once again Christian history does not always suggest that this has been the first thing associated with eucharistic practice in many people's minds. But if it has anything at all to do with Jesus' own redefinition of salvation in terms of welcome, then that is our task. If the world is welcome to God, if my neighbour is welcome to God, if this moment is a door into God through which I may be welcomed, if this experience is open to God in that way, if this material reality and environment is welcome to God, then my calling should be clear.

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This paper represents the 32<sup>nd</sup> in a series published from time to time by Trinity College which focus upon broad issues facing the community in such areas as education, ethics, history, politics, and science.

It is the text of two lectures delivered by the Most Revd Dr Rowan Williams at Trinity College on 14 and 16 May 2002, as part of the celebrations for the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Trinity College Theological School.

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