



## **The Cup of Salvation**

**L**AST MONTH I wrote about 'The Bread of Life', reflecting on the Eucharistic teaching of Jesus in John 6, the significance of daily bread, and the mystery of Christ present in our midst, not least in the tabernacle at Church. It seemed apt to go on to reflect a little on the Chalice, the common cup at Holy Communion. The medievals were denied the Chalice, for fear that the consecrated wine might provide an opportunity for sacrilege. I think I can understand that: I am always amazed how often non-churchgoers make jokes about communion wine, as if those who receive Holy Communion have a couple of goblets' full every time they go. I was shocked to read that the parish church where I grew up got through several gallons – a gallon being roughly five litres – one Christmas Communion in the eighteenth century. Wine is dangerous stuff, as a walk down town late at night, or a visit to the local A&E department in the small hours reminds us.

There is a point in the Eucharistic prayer when the bread has been consecrated – the Host – but the wine has not. Both scholars and mystics have seen that as the point of sacrifice: there is flesh but no blood, much as in the temple offerings of bulls and goats the blood was poured out, leaving only the flesh. And, to this day, Jews and Muslims eat meat that was killed by bleeding. The Eucharist, of course, is an unbloody sacrifice not a slaughter, and the consecrated wine – the Precious Blood – is very soon present alongside the Host. Thereafter Christ cannot be divided and what we receive, whether we receive one element or two, is the whole Christ, body, blood, soul and divinity. It is simply him. We say with Thomas, 'My Lord and my God'.

One reason for reflecting on this was the withdrawal of the routine administration of the Chalice earlier in the summer, when the swine flu pandemic got seriously underway. The actual risk from a common cup, made of precious metal (as it should be canonically) and containing alcohol (which is a disinfectant) is very small indeed but national medical advice was that this particular virus, unlike, for example the HIV–AIDS virus, is a particularly infectious one. With the chalice withdrawn, rather more important has been the personal hygiene of those who handle the wafers – beforehand in the sacristy, during the Offertory, distributing the Host at Communion.

And yet there has been great spiritual benefit in withholding of the cup if we learn to value it all the more and long for its return. Equally there is benefit in any reminder that we are on holy ground. 'Let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire' (Hebrews 12:28b, 29).

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