

A version of this sermon was preached two months in to my time at Holy Trinity, and was responding to an existing situation. A 'blank slate' commentary on the Reserved Sacrament might well have been different. The document below was offered to the congregation for those who wanted to think about it further.

KB 31-8-07

**Trinity 12**

**3 September, 2006**

**Teaching Sermon on Reserved Sacrament**

Please note: this is not the sermon as preached. I realised soon after starting that this would be far too long. But I figure those of you who are choosing to read it won't mind an extra page or two, and this is what I would have said had time, attention span, and hard pews allowed.

Those of you who've had a chance to read the pew sheet will have seen that what I want to do today is to think together about our lay led services from the Reserved Sacrament. That means I won't be addressing the lectionary readings today, nor on the other Sundays – about once a month – when I talk to you about the liturgy. That's not ideal – but I hope it will be worth it, as we look more carefully at why we do what we do, and reflect on the nature of our worship together.

I want to start with the question: How did we get here – one Sunday a month: lay led service from the Reserved Sacrament? And if I've heard correctly what some of you have been saying, the answer is 'almost by accident'! One day it just happened – the

rector couldn't be in two places at once, so you had to find a different solution. Bit by bit, people started doing things: the prayers, then the service from the reserved sacrament with someone reading a printed sermon, then personal testimonies, and then the blind leap of faith into preaching. That story isn't unusual – to some extent, the practice of having a lay led service with the reserved sacrament did arise by accident – in a lot of congregations, and in the wider church. There's been a lot of creative theology 'on the hoof' looking for ways to explain what we were already doing. And sometimes that's the way theology develops – but I think it's important that we slow down occasionally to ask the basic questions: why are we doing this? What does it mean? How does it effect our understanding of God, of Christian faith? Not that I'm going to try to deal with all of that today!

So – a bit of background. First on Reserved Sacrament itself. Since early days in the church, it has been the custom for some of the bread and wine that is consecrated at the eucharist to be set aside, and kept in reserve. First and foremost – so that people unable to share in the celebration of the eucharist could still receive – but also so that we could keep the reserved sacrament as a sign and focus of Christ's presence in the church.

But there was one more practice – rare, but possible. If a priest was not available for the main service – suddenly ill, say, or tapped on a ferry going nowhere -- then a deacon could administer communion from the reserved sacrament. To be honest, I'm not sure if this was ever officially 'on the books' in Piskie church law, though it was in the Roman Catholic church—but it was so unheard of that it hardly mattered. In an emergency, people often do what is needed without much concern for what is technically legal.

But then, what was exceedingly rare became more common. Many congregations became too small to support a priest on their own – so the priest had to move between places trying to juggle service times, but still not always able to be there. And that leaves the congregation with a choice: you can either do without communion, or you can find another way. Many congregations – Anglican and Roman Catholic – found that they would rather have communion from the reserved sacrament than not have it at all. So more and more, lay led services with Holy Communion from the Reserved Sacrament became the norm.

Now, that makes it sound rather grim: we do this because we have no choice. So I want to offer some of the good things that have emerged from these changes. First and foremost, having a lay led service at all is only possible because the church has got better at recognizing that we all have gifts to use in God's service. Gone are the days when Father knew best – or even when Father was Father – and the laity left him to get on with it. We have become much more aware that being Christians is an active thing. God needs all of us to use the gifts he gives us for the good of the world. And some people, at particular times, are called to use their gifts to enable the public worship of the church – by preparing the worship space, reading, serving, leading the prayers, preaching, and administering communion. Of course none of this is inevitably linked to the Reserved Sacrament – you all have gifts to offer, and some of you have gifts to offer in sharing in the leadership of public worship even when I'm here! But the absence of the priest tends to make things more obvious. There's that feeling of 'oh look – we got through it. Maybe we can do this after all...'

But I'll be honest with you – I never think that having the main service from the Reserved Sacrament is ideal. In a perfect world, every congregation would be able to gather with a priest to

celebrate the eucharist each Sunday (and I'll say more about why in a minute). I hope that one day that becomes possible again – but for now, we do the best we can.

So, let's move on to the real issue: how is Holy Communion from the Reserved Sacrament any different to the celebration of the Eucharist. Why would we choose one over the other?

I need to make one thing absolutely clear: when you take communion, it makes no difference at all whether it was consecrated that very minute or at some other time. Christ is present, just the same. We know that to be true, not just because of abstract Eucharistic theology, but because that has been the experience of the sick and housebound for centuries. They might rather be at church, but the eucharist is every bit as powerful when it is received in other contexts.

What **is** different is what is happening in the service. On most Sundays, we **celebrate** the eucharist. We join in the central act of the church, as we gather to worship, to confess and receive absolution, to hear and reflect on the word of God, to pray for ourselves and for the world, and to offer ourselves with the gifts of bread and wine to be changed by God's presence. And that's the key bit – as we celebrate the eucharist, we offer ourselves with bread and wine to be changed. That's why I've asked that members of the congregation carry the bread and wine to the altar – as a sign of our offering of the whole life of the congregation. The eucharist is an action we're all involved in – the priest acts in a particular way: focusing the prayers of the community, representing the local community and the wider church, holding and offering our shared life. But all of us take part in the consecration – take part in the prayers, give our assent in the Amen. (which is why a priest cannot celebrate if no one else is

there.)

But when we take communion from the Reserved Sacrament, the dynamic is a bit different. We are joining in something that has already happened. We are not 'celebrating the eucharist' or 'consecrating bread and wine', but coming together to worship, to pray, to reflect on God's word, and to receive God's gift of himself in the sacrament. Of course we still offer our lives to be transformed, and are still changed by Christ's presence – but the timing is a bit off. In some ways, it may not matter, since God seems to be fairly flexible with time – but there isn't the same sense of God changing things right before our very eyes – our offering bread and wine and the daily stuff of our lives, only to find that God gives it back to us wholly transformed. Changed in the twinkling of an eye.

That's why some of the liturgy is different. The consecrated bread and wine -- the reserved sacrament – starts on the altar, because it has already been offered and blessed and changed. There is a prayer of thanks in which you remember what has already been done – instead of the Eucharistic prayer in which our offerings are joined to Christ's.

The dynamic is different – though Christ's presence is ultimately the same.

So much for the theology of it. What about the logistics. How do we decide who does what? After all, a priest goes through a long process of selection and training. Who chooses lay people to preach and lead prayers and to administer the sacrament? Well, at one level, we have to hope and pray that God does. But God -- bravely-- works through the church. The pattern of discerning a call to lay ministry is really no different to the pattern of discerning

a call to ordained ministry – the individual has to believe that God is asking them to offer their gifts in this way, and the church needs to recognize and affirm that that is so. We're going to talk a lot more about this in the not too distant future. The vestry have already begun to think about how we select and train people to share in the work of the ministry team – and before long I want to open that conversation to the whole congregation. But for now, what I want to emphasise what I said before. All of us have gifts to use in God's service. Some of us are called to offer those gifts in public worship for the good of the community. So those who are asked to lead worship are there on our behalf. It's often a scary task – and the members of the team need to know that they have your support, that you are praying for them – and that you are also trying to offer your gifts to God for the good of the whole church

Now – I know this has been longer than a normal sermon – but one last thing I want you to consider. And that's whether you have any other options to the service from the Reserved Sacrament.

I suspect you think I'm going to say 'no'. But you do, actually. First of all, you can stay home! And I gather from the numbers in the book that that's what a number of you choose to do. But I want to say that I hope this won't be your option. I'll even go so far as to say I think it's a bad choice. Because whatever the pattern of the service, this is the worship of the church. It is what we do as Christians – we come together to worship God, and quite what form our worship takes is far less important than the fact that we all share in it. Which is not to say that I expect all of you here every week. I don't. Modern life is far too complex for that, and there are lots of valid reasons that you might need – or choose – to be elsewhere on a Sunday. But I hope you won't choose to be elsewhere just because it is a lay led service from the Reserved Sacrament.

So – option 2. We could have non-eucharistic worship. That would involve every bit as much lay participation – reading, preaching and leading prayers. But there would simply be a liturgy of the word. No communion. For centuries, it would have been the thing people chose to do if there was no priest. But as I said at the beginning, most congregations today seem to want weekly communion – better the Reserved Sacrament than nothing at all.

Which brings me to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and final option. The one I hope you'll all choose... We could grow.

If we all worked hard at living out our faith – at believing that we are called to share the good news of Christ, to pass on the faith to others –

if we could reach out to others in such a way that they believed they would meet God here, then our congregation would grow -- in strength and number. We could work towards the day when there was no need to share a priest with Rothesay and Tighnabruaich – a day when we didn't need to trust on the generosity of the Province to help pay a priest's stipend. And then every week, there would be a celebration of the eucharist: priest and laity gathered together, offering our gifts and our lives to be broken and transformed.

Now I know it seems unlikely, and you all probably think I'm mad. But it could happen. It is possible. And I suspect it is what we are being called to do...

Kimberly Bohan  
2 September, 2006