

A Sermon by the Rev. Roger Wm. Smith on the Sunday after Ascension Day, June 6, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

All you peoples – a cry for joy

Part III in a series of reflections on the words in the Eucharistic Liturgy (The Communion Service)

Text: “Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with a cry of joy.” (Psalm 47:1)

Notice those words: “All you peoples...”

When we meet in a place like this to celebrate Holy Communion, what we do is a corporate act. It is an opportunity for all of us together to shout to God with a cry of joy. It is not so much an individual (me and God) kind of thing as it is a family gathering of God and us—all of us together.

When we have an occasion to celebrate we want to do it with others. I remember August 15, 1945. It was the end of World War II. President Truman announced that the Japanese surrendered. It was over! And did we celebrate! People danced in the street. Church bells rang. It was a day to shout for joy.

I was in Ann Arbor at the time. I was just beginning my freshman year at the University of Michigan. My home was Jackson, Michigan—about 35 miles west of Ann Arbor. I couldn't wait to get home that day. I wanted to be with my family and friends for the celebration. I don't know how I managed it, but I was home in the twinkling of an eye, and what a great time we all had!

Celebrations are like that. We like to gather the family for days like Thanksgiving and Christmas. We want everyone to be there when we blow out the candles on the birthday cake.

This theme of corporate celebration is introduced at the very beginning of our Eucharistic Liturgy. After we have sung the hymn *Glory be to God*, there follows the salutation, “The Lord be with you” and the congregation responds “And also with you”. Originally the words were “*Dominus vobiscum...Et cum spiritu tuo.*” “The Lord be with you...And with thy spirit.” This is a call to join hands and gather together.

Some of us here have lived long enough to remember when the old words gave way to the new. At first that response, “and also with you” was disquieting. After all of those years of the poetic, “and with thy spirit”, the new response “and also with you” sounded like slang—not at all suitable words to start the service. That was in the late 60's. Like most of the things that happened then, we've grown used to it. And in the growth process we've come to realize it was for the best.

I. This salutation occurs three times in the service. First, just before the collect of the day. The collect is that short prayer that comes before the reading of the Scriptures.

It comes from the Latin word *collectam*, meaning a prayer at the *gathering*. It is a prayer that calls us to gather, so, like VJ Day or Christmas or Thanksgiving Day or your Birthday it enables *all* of us to shout for joy and celebrate the Word of God.

Take a look at today's collect....It is the one appointed to commemorate the Lord's Ascension into heaven.

Almighty God, whose blessed Son our Savior Jesus Christ ascended far above all heavens that he might fill all things: Mercifully give us faith to perceive that, according to his promise, he abides with his Church on earth, even to the end of the ages....

He abides with his Church—that's us! We are the Church—we are God's family gathered, and we are not alone. The Lord is with us!

When we say that he ascended far above all heavens, we don't mean he's up there somewhere in outer space. We mean he is with us and within us everywhere. He is no longer traipsing around Palestine, he has become universal. That is what we are celebrating today. Hail thee, Festival Day!

The Eucharistic Liturgy is always a festival.

When Queen Victoria was asked why she disliked the Communion Service in the English Prayer Book, she said she didn't like it because it was so sad...She was right. The Church of England Communion Service is sad. It refers endlessly to our sins and our need of forgiveness. It warns us of the dangers of receiving the Sacrament without repentance. It declares us not worthy to even gather up the crumbs under God's table. The Eucharistic prayer thanks God for giving us his son "to suffer death on the cross for our redemption," and the theme of Christ's suffering and death is a constant reprise throughout the service.

That theological emphasis is the gift to us from our Calvinist forebears. They were relentless in their determination to take the joy out of our worship.

II. The salutation appears for the second time at the conclusion of the Liturgy of the Word. The Bible has been read. Someone has preached to us (for better or for worse). We've prayed for those in the world around us, confessed our sins and have been assured of God's mercy and forgiveness. Then we stand up and the priest says "the *peace* of the Lord be always with you. We respond, as usual, "and also with you." Then our gathering, like a molecule on hot surface, begins to jiggle. We jiggle and wiggle. People start up and down the aisle, greeting one another, some hugging, some kissing, all of them wishing each other the peace of God.

The passing of the peace is the revival of an ancient custom. Back in the New Testament times, Christians greeted each other with the "kiss of peace". This was an act of mutual love and support in the days when it was dangerous to be a Christian.

When this greeting was restored to the Service, some people were shocked and upset. We Anglicans, you may have noticed, are a somewhat inhibited breed of Christians. We are not demonstrative, and we like to be left alone.

When we introduced the peace in my parish in Connecticut (add Connecticut Yankee to the non-demonstrative equation), there were those who refused to participate. One parishioner proposed that, like the no-smoking zone on an aircraft, there be a no peace passing zone in the pews.

That never happened. God wants us to share his peace as a family—a gathering of celebrants—a community of love.

III. The third time the salutation appears in the Liturgy is at the beginning of what we now call “The Great Thanksgiving.” It introduces the Eucharistic Prayer, The Canon of the Mass, that part of the Service where the bread and wine are consecrated to become the Body and Blood of Christ. It is when we gather at God’s table to be nourished by that holy Sacrament. It is when we are strengthened to go out into the world and show forth God’s love and compassion among all those with whom we will share the days ahead. So the Celebrant says: “The Lord be with you.” And we respond “And also with you.”

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give him thanks and praise.

It is right and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere

To give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven

And earth...

And so every time we hear someone say, “The Lord be with you,” we know we are being called into a gathering, hearing God’s word, sharing the Lord’s peace, and thanking God for all the blessings of this life. It’s a celebration...a festival...a time to shout for joy.

The ultimate blasphemy would be for the priest to say, instead of “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God,” “Let us complain to the Lord our God.” No doubt we have lots to complain about—how about these endless wars; the political shenanigans in Congress; the devastating earthquakes and storms? No doubt we would like the Creator to explain all of that—maybe even apologize for some of it, but that’s not what we come to the Eucharist for. We come together to shout for joy, praising God from whom all blessings flow.

Amen.