

Anamnesis

Theories of what happens at eucharist generally depend upon some phrase or word of Scripture taken literally. The mediaeval doctrine of transubstantiation states that God, acting in the eucharist, effects a change in the inner reality of the bread and wine. It depends upon the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, 'This is my body', 'This is my blood', and was often buttressed by the phrase of Ignatius of Antioch, 'the eucharist is the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ'.¹ But the modern theory of anamnesis, based on St Paul's addition to the institution narrative, 'Do this in remembrance (anamnesis) of me', refuses to admit the plain and literal meaning of *anamnesis*! The theory states in general that *anamnesis* means, 'to "re-call" or to "re-present" before God an event in the past, so that it becomes *here and now operative* by its effects.'² But in all the dictionaries and lexicons, *anamnesis*, both in the Septuagint and in the New Testament, means 'remember', 'recollect'. The Hebrew parallel, *zkr*, in the hiphil, causative, sense of the verb, can often mean not just 'cause to remember' but 'cause to do something about'. C. F. Evans, in his commentary on Luke, translates '*eis tēn emēn anamnēsin*' as 'have me in mind.'³

Linked with this conception of anamnesis as a 're-calling' of an event from the past is the notion that in the five occurrences of the word in the Septuagint⁴ it reflects a Jewish sacrificial ritual. So Darwell Stone, after reviewing the evidence, concluded that, 'The word "memorial" naturally suggests, without actually necessitating, the sense of a sacrificial memorial before God; and that in the case of the institution of the Eucharist the probability of a sacrificial meaning is greatly strengthened by the use of the word "covenant" just before and by the sacrificial surroundings when our Lord spoke.'⁵ Stone was followed by others in the same vein and notably by Stephen Bedale in 1953 who concluded that 'the word anamnesis on each occasion of its use in the LXX has exclusively a "God-ward reference"'.⁶ However, D. R. Jones in an article on *Anamnēsis in the LXX and the Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11: 25*, at the conclusion of his study of these and other passages says, '... the use of the word *anamnēsis* in the LXX involves too many ambiguities to provide authority for any particular interpretation of New Testament passages.'⁷ Jones also adds the comment of Buchanan Grey that 'all attempts to interpret the Lord's *eis tēn emēn anamnēsin* in the light of Jewish sacrificial ritual in any case fail to explain the *emēn*.'⁸

At this point we now turn to Dix because, since the publication of his book, *The Shape of the Liturgy* in 1945, he has had the greatest influence in the promotion of the theory of anamnesis. Dom Gregory, stating the theory explicitly in his book, gives his opinion that in our usage 'remembrance' or 'memorial' have the meaning only of mental recollection of something that is absent. So he wished to

¹ Ep. Smyrnaeans, chapter 7, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Eerdmans, page 89.

² G. Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, Dacre Press, 1945, page 161.

³ C. F. Evans, 'Luke', SCM, 1990, pages 790-791.

⁴ Leviticus 24:7; Numbers 10:10; Psalm 38(LXX 37),1; Psalm 70(LXX 69),1; Wisdom 16:6.

⁵ Darwell Stone, *A History of the Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist*, Longmans, Green & Co., 1909, Vol. 1, page 11.

⁶ Stephen Bedale, *The Eucharistic Sacrifice*, Theology, lvi, No 398 (1953).

⁷ Journal of Theological Studies,(JTS), N.S. Vol. VI, Pt 2, October 1955, page 183.

⁸ Buchanan Grey, *Sacrifice in the Old Testament*, pp.395-6. (Quoted in D.R. Jones, op.cit. page 188).

maintain that in antiquity there was a more dynamic understanding, ‘... we have to take account of the clear understanding then general in a largely Greek-speaking church of the word anamnesis as meaning a “re-calling” or “re-presenting” of a thing in such a way that it is not so much regarded as being “absent”, as itself presently operative by its effects. This is a sense which the Latin *memoria* and its cognates do not adequately translate.’⁹ Dix goes on to apply this meaning to eucharist, ‘It is in this active sense, therefore, of “re-calling” or “re-presenting” before God the sacrifice of Christ, and thus making it here and now operative by its effects in the communicants that the eucharist is regarded both by the New Testament and by second century writers as the *anamnesis* of the passion, or of the passion and resurrection combined.’¹⁰

Dix gives three texts in support of the anamnesis theory - Numbers 5:15; 1 Kings 17:18 & Hebrews 10:3-4. In these texts Dix wished to translate anamnesis as ‘re-call’ but in fact the Hebrew lying behind the Septuagint text clearly means ‘remembrance’ in one form or another. For example, 1 Kings 17:18 is translated by Dix as - “the widow of Sarepta complains that Elijah has come ‘to “re-call” to (God’s) remembrance my iniquity’, and therefore her son has died.”¹¹ In the NEB it is translated, ‘What made you interfere, you man of God? You came here to bring my sins to light and kill my son.’ Here the hiphil of *zkr* is used in a sense apparently meaning ‘to accuse’ before God.¹² We may note that Westcott pointed out in his commentary on Hebrews 10:3-4 that *anamnēsis hamartiōn* meant in that passage ‘a calling to mind of sins.’¹³

In the case of the second century writers to whom Dix appeals, it is well known that their expression of eucharist is quite realist. Ignatius, Justin and Irenaeus give clear instances of this usage.¹⁴ So Justin says that the eucharist ‘... is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.’ But none of the pre-Nicene writers put forward any theory of what they supposed was happening in eucharist. They were writing in response to challenges from gnostics and pagans and were simply concerned to state that the Christian eucharist was really about worship with the crucified and living Lord.

Neither the Old Testament texts we have reviewed nor the writers of the second century appear to support Dix’s theory. Of course he was writing at the beginning of the so-called biblical theology movement and at the time there seemed nothing strange about constructing a whole theory on a word which was said to have a special meaning for the biblical writers. It was believed that there is something called the ‘Hebrew mentality’, for which our ideas of past, present, and future are really inappropriate. Since the work of James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (1961), such an idea has been largely discredited. Unfortunately, the liturgical polemics inherited from the time of the reformation, could not be bypassed in 1945. As we shall see, Dix’s advocacy of the anamnesis theory was not unconnected with his view that the protestant eucharist was only a personal, mental remembrance of the redeeming work of Christ.

Before we look at the form the anamnesis theory takes today we need to note two other ways in

⁹ Dix, page 245.

¹⁰ Dix, page 161.

¹¹ Dix, page 161.

¹² cf Brown, Driver & Briggs, *Hebrew-English Lexicon*, Oxford, 1906, page 271.

¹³ B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Macmillan & Co., 1892, pages 306-307.

¹⁴ Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans, chapter 7, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Eerdmans, page 89; Justin, Apology, I, 66 in *A New Eusebius*, ed. J. Stephenson, SPCK, 1957; 6th impression 1974, pages 66-67; Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. V.2.3, *ibid.* page 124.

which it claims support.

First of all appeal has been made to the work of anthropologists such as Mercea Eliade. One of the ideas put out by Eliade and others is that worship has as its chief aim the recovery of the primordial events enshrined in the 'myth' of the people. To recover in reality the primordial time of their beginnings there was the need to re-live, to re-enact the myth in a regular, cyclic rhythm. Most particularly, by the sacred meal the corporate life of the community was expressed and the primordial myth recovered through ritual re-enactment. 'In religion as in magic, the periodic recurrence of anything signifies primarily that a mythical time is made present and then used indefinitely. Every ritual has the character of happening now, at this very moment. The time of the event that the ritual commemorates or re-enacts is made present, "re-presented" so to speak, however far back it may have been in ordinary reckoning.'¹⁵ We shall see that this approach has little or nothing to do with the presuppositions of the New Testament.

Secondly, it has become common to refer to what is claimed to be a Semitic usage of *anamnesis* in the first century. It has been maintained that in the celebration of Passover, the Jews of the first century and the Jews of today, make the events of the original Passover present by their remembrance of it. In fact the opposite is the truth about Passover.¹⁶ It is *as if they were there*. As D. R. Davies says, 'Memory of a deliverance was central in the Jewish Passover.'¹⁷ At a supper with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they re-tell the events of Passover and re-enact the flight to freedom from slavery in Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea. It is a time of great rejoicing and excitement.

The anamnesis theory appears in two forms today. There are those who say that *anamnesis* means 'to make effective in the present an event in the past.' The Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) refers to it in that form, 'The notion of *memorial* as understood in the Passover celebration at the time of Christ - i.e. the making effective in the present of an event in the past ...'¹⁸ There are others who contend that it means not simply to make a past event *effective* but actually *to make the past event present*. Here is a brief account of these latter enthusiasts.

By making anamnesis, it is claimed, Christ, or the effects of his passion, will be actualised in eucharist. So J. D. Crichton maintained, 'Through making memorial of (the past events of God's saving mercy) we are asking that their saving power may be made present to us here and now. and because we do so according to the command of Christ Christ makes himself present in all his redeeming activity.'¹⁹ George Guiver CR, connects with the idea of primordial myth, 'The full meaning of the Greek word anamnesis is remembrance, done in such a way as to call forth the actual presence here and now of the person and deeds commemorated, in the kind of way that liturgical re-enactment of myths has always done.'²⁰ Crichton also comments on the work of Dom Odo Casel on the Continent in

¹⁵ *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Sheed & Ward, (1953), 1993, pages 392-393.

¹⁶ Cf the rabbinic teaching on the Passover, 'In every generation a man must so regard himself as if he came forth himself out of Egypt.' *Pes. 10.5* Danby, *Mishnah*, page 151. (Quoted in C. P. M. Jones, *The Eucharist in the New Testament*, in *The Study of Liturgy*, SPCK, 1978, page 154).

¹⁷ Cf *Haggadah*, (London, 1897) by A. A. Green, page 27, 'Now even though all of us were wise, all of us of great understanding, all of us learned as elders, all of us familiar with Scripture, it would still be our duty to tell again the story of the Exodus from Egypt ...' (Quoted in D. R. Davies, *Paul & Rabbinic Judaism*, SPCK, 1955, page 252).

¹⁸ ARCIC, *The Final Report*, Eucharistic Doctrine, pages 14-15.

¹⁹ *The Study of Liturgy*, SPCK, 1978, page 26.

²⁰ *Company of Voices*, SPCK, 1988, page 9.

promoting the view of the eucharist as ‘mystery’. ‘What then is the particular significance of the use of the word mystery in the liturgy? It is a link between the past and the present, or rather it looks to the past to recover the power of the primordial event and makes its power present in the here and now so that the worshipper can encounter the redeeming Christ.’ And more specifically, Crichton writes, ‘...by the liturgical mystery we are *actualising* the past event, making it present’²¹

It does not appear that the anamnesis theory can find any basis in either the semantics of the word or in the Semitic usage of the first century.²² Nor do the primordial rites of primitive societies have anything to say to Christian faith, which is a relationship with Jesus Christ. The reformers rejected the transubstantiation theory that the inner reality of bread and wine was changed into the body and blood of the Lord because they said it overthrew the nature of a sacrament. The theory of anamnesis has a like subversive effect in that it undermines resurrection faith in the living Lord who is always there before us and calls us to worship. It is noticeable that in these liturgical theories of what happens at eucharist, all the writers without exception begin, not from the person of Jesus as the New Testament authors express our relationship to him in discipleship, but from liturgical texts and biblical words forced into a ritual understanding. The result is that eucharist appears to be something that *we* must activate, according to a rite, rather than a response to the prevenient action of Christ in the Spirit as we come to respond to the Father in worship. We have to ask, ‘What sort of God is it who requires the worship envisaged by the anamnesis theory? Is it the Father of Jesus or a god of abstractions?’ As Käsemann says, commenting on Paul’s problems with the celebration of the eucharist at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 11:23-34, ‘The Apostle is maintaining against every possible magical, metaphysical or mystical misinterpretation that it is the *Kyrios* himself in his self-manifestation who is dealing with us; and dealing with us in such a way as to lay hold on our will, lay claim to our obedience and set himself over us as indeed our Lord.’²³

By 1971 the anamnesis theory had become a common-place of liturgical understanding. So much so that it could be quoted in the ARCIC Document on the Eucharist.²⁴ Despite complaints from some sources about the use of this theory, ARCIC gave no supporting evidence for its continued acceptance of it. But one phrase in the Elucidation of 1979 was revealing, which will take us back to Dix and the *Shape of the Liturgy*. ARCIC said, ‘(this use of the word) enables us to affirm a strong conviction of sacramental realism and to reject mere symbolism.’²⁵ It was Dix’s conviction that the ‘protestant’ eucharist was simply a mental remembering of Jesus and his sacrifice, quite lacking any corporate action. ‘The new (protestant conception)’, he wrote, ‘is of a strictly *personal* mental reflection upon (Christ’s) action in the past. We cannot enter into it, since as a matter of history the passion is unique and finished...and the bread and wine need only be a “token”.’²⁶ The anamnesis theory, together with

²¹ *The Study of Liturgy*, SPCK, 1978, pages 13-14.

²² So also R. T. Beckwith, ‘The claim that *anamnesis* and its Semitic equivalents in the Passover denote the making present or effective of a past event is without linguistic or Jewish support.’ *The Jewish background to Jewish Worship*, in *The Study of Liturgy*, SPCK, 1976, page 49.

²³ Ernst Käsemann, *The Pauline Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper*, page 134, in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, SCM Press, Studies in Biblical Theology No 41, 1964.

²⁴ ARCIC, *The Final Report*, Eucharistic Doctrine, page 14.

²⁵ ARCIC, *Elucidation*, Eucharistic Doctrine, page 19.

²⁶ *The Shape of the Liturgy*, page 624.

so-called ‘sacramental realism’, is clearly a reaction against what is styled ‘mere remembrance’ or ‘mere symbolism’. Its impracticability is even more evident than the mediaeval transubstantiation theory. When the reformers jettisoned what they termed the superstitious and un-Scriptural mediaeval mass, it was found very difficult to find a mediating position between Catholic and anti-sacramental ideas. But there is much that is positive and forward looking in many of the reformed theologians. For instance, John Jewel’s stance is typical of the attitude Anglican doctrine has tried to support over the centuries, ‘We affirm that bread and wine are holy and heavenly mysteries of the body and blood of Christ, and that by them Christ himself, being the true bread of eternal life, is so presently given unto us that by faith we verily receive his body and blood.’²⁷ Then there is Hooker who defined eucharistic theology and experience as ‘the real participation of Christ and of life in his body and blood by means of this sacrament.’²⁸ The reformation controversies made great complexity for eucharistic thought and one can find negative and positive statements in all the leading figures, but it is too sweeping to subsume all reformed thought under the heading ‘mere memorialism’ as Dix appeared to do.²⁹

Today the polarisation of ‘catholic’ and ‘protestant’ ideas of eucharist must be left behind. We need to recover the New Testament writers’ presuppositions of worship in their understanding of a relationship with the risen and victorious Lord. As Colin Buchanan writes, ‘(the “remembrance”) is a remembrance of one *who is alive*.’³⁰ Moreover, the ‘remembrance’ as understood by Paul was a remembrance of *Jesus* and not of his death! None of the re-statements of eucharistic theology, either Catholic or reformed, has been able to cut loose from the mediaeval pre-occupation with the passion and death of Christ. In one form or another, the eucharist was said to be pleading the death of Christ before the Father. The New Testament has a different view of God. God is seen to be a participant with Christ in the redemption of us all. In Romans, Paul writes that, ‘God set forth Jesus as an expiation by his blood, to be received through faith’³¹, and in 2 Corinthians, ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.’³² The deed was finished, once and for all. But for all who believe and who have died with Christ in baptism, a renewal of life is now possible - ‘When anyone is united to Christ he is a new creature: his old life is over; a new life has already begun.’³³ The anamnesis theory looks to find ways of connecting with the death. But God, far from demanding the death to be continually pleaded before him, actually gives the free gift of his forgiveness and love to all who put their trust in Christ as the living Lord.

It follows that our faith in the living Christ, who calls us individually, is a relationship between persons. There are now no laws of entry to the presence of God other than our relationship with him, which is sealed by baptism. In the Spirit we can now cry, ‘Abba, Father’. It is in the Spirit that we are

²⁷ Jewel, *Apology*. (Quoted in C. J. Coxworth, *Evangelical Eucharistic Thought in the Church of England*, CUP, 1993, page 35).

²⁸ Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity*, vol II, page 320. (Quoted in C. J. Cocksworth).

²⁹ C. W. Dugmore criticised Dix’s misrepresentation of reformed eucharistic theology in his review of the *Shape of the Liturgy* in the *Journal of Theological Studies*, 1946, pages 107-113.

⁰ *Eucharistic Consecration*, Grove Books, Worship Series 148, 1998, page 18.

³¹ Romans 3:21-26.

³² 2 Corinthians 5:19.

³³ 2 Corinthians 5:17.

called to worship, responding to God 'in Christ'. It is the mystery of a relationship with Christ that lies behind the whole tenor of the witness of the New Testament documents. In a wonderful and mysterious way Christ is present to all with a transcendent presence - 'he is Lord of all'. From the very beginning that is where eucharistic worship began - when Christ was made known in the breaking of the bread.

The worship of eucharist is not a matter of calling this or that aspect back from the time of the death of Christ, for in eucharist we participate³⁴ in his life now. By faith and in the supper we are renewed in the life of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ. There, at the eucharistic banquet we experience, in the presence of Christ with us, on the one hand an alignment with his passion and death made 'once for all'; and on the other hand it is a proleptic experience of the Messianic Banquet when God shall be all in all. From the eucharist we are sent out in that faith and experience to witness to the Lord who is alive and who, in our own life and suffering and dying, will be made known to others.

Contrasted with anamnesis, seen as a sort of magical-manipulative rite, faith is substantial - a response to gift and grace. It arises out of that total re-orientation of religion made by Jesus, for it is a relationship with him and through him with the God who is mercy and love. In eucharist we proclaim the fruits of all that God has done and continues to do in Christ and we renew our relationship and discipleship through participation in his life which he offers to us. In his addition to the words of institution Paul expresses that in the compass of one phrase - 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, *you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*' He means that as we celebrate with Christ we give thanks for his death as the eschatological event - the bridge to the age of the new covenant in which we now share - and look forward to the consummation.³⁵

³⁴ cf 1 Corinthians 10:16ff 'When we bless the "cup of blessing", is it not a means of sharing in the blood of Christ? When we break the bread, is it not a means of sharing in the body of Christ?'

³⁵ Cf J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, SCM, 1966, page 253, 'This means that the death of Christ is not proclaimed at every celebration of the meal as a past event but as an eschatological event, as the beginning of the New Covenant.'