

SUPERINTENDENT MINISTER'S LETTER

Dear Friends,

We thank you, Lord,
that you have fed us in this sacrament,
united us with Christ,
and given us a foretaste of the heavenly banquet
prepared for all people.

I am not entirely sure of the origins of this little prayer but it has been familiar to Methodists since 1975 and the publication of the Methodist Service Book, which succeeded the Book of Offices (1936). My guess is that the prayer was probably written by Revd A. Raymond George, one of my college tutors, who later became a very good friend. At the time, Mr George was undoubtedly British Methodism's expert in writing such prayers. This post-communion prayer has been included in the Methodist Worship Book (1999) and I have certainly used it in most of the communion services where I have been the 'presiding minister'. Incidentally, I am rather proud of the phrase 'presiding minister' because it was one of the suggestions I made for the Methodist Worship Book, which I was pleased to see was accepted. However, despite my using the prayer regularly, I'll be honest and say that 'a foretaste of the heavenly banquet' has rarely been true in my experience – but we aspire for it to be true in our experience.

What does a 'foretaste of the heavenly banquet' mean? Perhaps some of our best insights into this are given in the last book of the Bible, Revelation. I like to compare reading Revelation to going to the theatre. The auditorium is in darkness. The curtain opens giving us a glimpse into another world – often brightly lit with all kinds of fantastic things happening – before the curtain falls again, leaving us to think about all that we have seen. There are some great passages in Revelation (there are some bewildering ones too), you might like to look them up – take Revelation 5:9-14 (heavenly worship of the Lamb of God), Revelation 7:9-17, Revelation 19:1-10 (Hallelujah! For the Lord God Almighty reigns), Revelation 21:1-5 (The New Jerusalem – I am making everything new!).

Two important things strike me from these passages. Firstly, heavenly worship is focused on Jesus – the Lamb, crucified and risen, for us and for our salvation. At the end of each service, we should ask ourselves not, 'did I enjoy the service?', but, 'did I worship Jesus?' Secondly, heavenly worship is for people from every nation, tribe, people and language. My 24 years living outside of Devon soon taught me what it was to be the outsider. On my return to the county, I was welcomed at the door of my new church in Plympton (a suburb on the east side of Plymouth) by someone who enthusiastically affirmed me as being 'one of us'. In church we have to be careful that we don't simply offer a 'welcome' to people that we know and to people who are like us. In our congregations, we have to model a community of faith, hope and love in Jesus Christ that is radically different from the outside world – a place of grace, mercy, compassion, forgiveness and understanding. At the end of each service, we should ask ourselves not, 'were other people friendly to me?' but, 'did I welcome the visitor, the stranger, the person who did not seem much like me today?' Maybe when these are the major characteristics of our worship we might be a little closer 'to a foretaste of the heavenly banquet prepared for all people'.

God bless

John Haley