

## **Sunday 28 February at 6.30pm: Second Sunday of Lent**

### **Reflections on the Eucharist**

#### **Readings: Luke 14.16-24; “Love bade me welcome” (Herbert)**

I was brought up in a Methodist church, where the Communion (as Methodists call the Eucharist) is only celebrated once a month. Therefore as a child it had a special significance, a sign of God’s love that he invited us who ‘are unworthy even to pick up the crumbs under his table’, to his supper – a moment of mystery, solemnity, graciousness and thankfulness.

When Michael and I moved to London and began to attend St Martin’s – a church my father had always greatly admired – it felt rather strange to have communion every week, made it somehow more ordinary, and the shock of tasting alcohol so early in the morning, and on a Sunday at that, also removed it from the teetotal Communion of my childhood!

Doing something regularly risks, of course, that it simply becomes ritual, and for a while that is certainly what it became for me, and still can be. It’s easy to become like the friends of the host in the parable of the great supper: thanks for the invitation, but there are other things on my mind just now, so this week it remains ritual, maybe I’ll have time to engage with it properly next week. Yet having the Eucharist every week has given me more opportunity to think about it, in those long pauses where you are waiting for the back pews to come forward, the choir has stopped singing and you resist the temptation to look at your watch! But the other thing that really made me think about what it meant, and what it meant for me was that when we first came Michael didn’t come up to the rail. Why? Because he felt for him, at that time, it was purely ritual – and he was more honest than me; I was more concerned about what others would think if I didn’t come up. So, without knowing it, he challenged me to look at my own motives and to consider what I really felt about it.

Part of the reason I resisted any deeper contemplation of the Eucharist was because I find the sacrificial imagery of it deeply disturbing – eating (even if symbolically) the bloody flesh and drinking the dripping blood from a tortured and dying man. Seen through the eyes of my secular friends it is barbaric, tormented – perhaps demented – and seems to have little to do with a Christianity whose message is the Love of the risen Christ, compassion and tolerance not the worship or glorification of violent death. A few years ago I walked out of a Catholic church in Brittany, overwhelmed by the oppressiveness of death – images of tortured and dying Saints every way I looked. Where was the joy of Christ? Shouldn’t Christianity be about the risen Christ – the lightness, the hope, about the beauty of holy things through which we come to know God?

But violence, and the fear of violence, is – of course – all around. The origins of my own fear stem, I think, from early childhood memories of the years we spent in a turbulent post-Biafra Nigeria in the 1970s, when there were several military coups. My recurrent nightmares – then as now – were always of armed soldiers invading our house or chasing me to kill me, violently seizing my peace, my courage and all that I loved. Nothing is so utterly undermining for a child as to see the power armed men have over the adults in whom their entire understanding of existence is held – knowing that your protectors can no longer protect you. It is why I still have a deep abhorrence of all armed conflict. Not that our house was ever attacked, nor were any of us, but the sense of apprehension and fear is all-pervasive and children have sharp ears. It is the way I think the disciples must have felt as they watched Jesus crucified – deeply afraid, utterly bewildered, and desolately alone.

As an adult, through my work as a researcher at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine I have witnessed other kinds of violence. A few years ago we were asked by the National AIDS Control Programme of Pakistan to investigate the health service needs of drug users among whom HIV was beginning to spread. I added a component to document the human rights abuses experienced by them too in an endeavour to make the Government realise that unless they addressed the human rights abuses of drug-users, the HIV situation would not improve. As well as a large survey we got to know a small group of a dozen men over several months. They told us their life stories – how they got into drugs, playfully, through curiosity, because they were bored, because they were tricked, and how they were now trapped. It is true that the eyes are windows onto the soul – and these men were utterly broken: ragged, emaciated, beaten, incarcerated, totally rejected by family and society, never trusted, desperate for money for their next shot – they had lost all their human dignity. One of them, trying to describe what he was going through, said ‘I can’t describe what we feel, I weep tears of blood’.

In Swaziland, where we are currently working with HIV+ people to understand the best combinations of services for them, half the population is HIV+: every second person I watched on the streets of Manzini was infected with the virus: it’s the highest rate in the world. It also has one of the highest rates of abuse against women. Many girls and women are raped, become HIV infected, are brutally beaten then thrown out, like refuse, by their families and left to die. The suicide rate among people with HIV is frightening. The individual stories we heard, of such pain, were told without bitterness, but with a hopelessness that was almost worse.

Then there is the personal pain, the one closest to home, of watching my father die, slowly and painfully of cancer, knowing that we could do nothing to prevent it. It is not true, what the doctors tell you (including some of my colleagues) that they can control pain. They can’t. Not without making you comatose in the process and my father was having none of that!

So the torturous image of the Eucharist evokes for me the pain of all these people, the memory of their haunted eyes, anger that they should suffer so much, bitterness for my own helplessness to do anything – or at any rate very much – about it and guilt at my own life of privilege. And it evokes my own fear, especially of pain and the fear of pain ... and of the unknown.

But, it is precisely these fears, this pain – mine, theirs, humanity’s – that Christ invites us to bring to the Eucharist, where we ‘enter into his space’, just as Katherine described Lent on Ash Wednesday. We enter into his space just as we are, with our fears, doubts, our pain and it is Christ who meets our pain with his own ... and overcomes it. And if I have the humility to look at those whose suffering I claim to share, they already knew this; they were the outcasts and the dying who had already accepted the invitation to the host’s supper while I was too busy being angry and upset to notice:

All of the twelve drug-users we met in Pakistan were Christian – because that was the one faith that welcomed and accepted them for who they were. When we left they asked us for just one thing: to pray for them.

For many of the women and men dying of HIV in Swaziland, the Church offers support, courage, dignity and a hope that all their suffering is not in vain – that Christ suffers with them, and has already triumphed over death.

And my father, in the last weeks of his life, had accepted his situation, was reconciled to God and knew a peace that I can't describe.

Christ has already taken the burdens of the world from our shoulders, if we are only willing to acknowledge this, and having done so, he invites us to a deeper intimacy with him at the communion table, just as we are, and from the encounter arise refreshed and renewed:

'Come you who have been often, and you who have not been for a long time; Come you who have faith, and you who would like to have more ... it is Christ who invites you here.'

The birth of our daughter, Anna-Elisabeth, as well as bringing us immeasurable joy, has brought back to me the importance of becoming like a child again. To take delight in her face, her dimpled smile, the mischievous laughter in her eyes; share with her the beauty of simplicity, the gladness of seeing the sun light the trees, watch the birds flit through the branches, observe the beauty of the flowers; and to learn from her the unconditional acceptance of love.

She has taught me the greatest lesson, to receive the Eucharist with the openness and simplicity of a child, secure and trusting in the sure knowledge of Love all around. Christ's Love, that can never be undermined, by armed men, fear, helplessness or anything else. As George Herbert says:

Love is that liquor, sweet, and most divine,  
Which my God feels as blood, but I as wine.

I want to close with the second reading – another of George Herbert's poem called 'Love', that for me perfectly encapsulates God's presence at the Eucharist and our response to it:

### Love

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,  
    Guiltie of dust and sinne.  
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack  
    From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
    If I lack'd any thing.

A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:  
    Love said, You shall be he.  
I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,  
    I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
    Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame  
    Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?  
    My deare, then I will serve.  
You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:  
    So I did sit and eat.

George Herbert 1593-1633