

# Sunday 14 March 6.30pm: Fourth Sunday of Lent

## Reflections on the Eucharist

**Readings: Luke 24.28-35; Romans 12.1-5, 9-13**

It was an incredibly poignant moment.

Six members of my immediate family were huddled around my father's bedside in Coventry General Hospital. It had been months of waiting. We sat, holding hands and praying, sharing in a timeless moment of communion; of love for one another, of trepidation and awe at what was about to occur.

Minutes later my father was wheeled off on a hospital bed down the ward, through the double doors, and into the operating theatre. An hour later my mother too was wheeled off down the ward, through the double doors and into the operating theatre.

“This is my body, given for you”.

That day – back in 2006 – my mum donated one of her kidneys to my dad. It was gift. A gift of love. A gift of new life; an opportunity to end the bondage of living on a dialysis machine. Taken. Blessed. Broken. Given.

It remains one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen to see that kidney work for the very first time. Indeed, the beauty of this memory triumphs over the pain of events that followed – the unrelated infection, the long days in intensive care, the shock and grief surrounding my father's death.

This whole event speaks to me of Eucharist. My mother was offering her body in love, to be a living sacrifice, just as Christ offered himself to us on a cross, in a covenant of love knowing no bounds.

For as St Augustine says: “You are the body of Christ. This is to say, in you and through you, the method and work of the incarnation must go forward... You are to be taken, consecrated, broken and distributed, so that you may now be the means of grace of the eternal charity”.

In Luke's gospel we hear of Jesus being recognised in the breaking of bread by the couple at Emmaus. Their *eyes were opened* to the presence of Christ in the eating and sharing.

I want to share with you something of my own journey of having my *eyes opened* to the significance of the Eucharist. It's been a journey from rocky beginnings to a new-found discovery, through Christian meditation, of a God participating within the very depths of my being whether I chose to 'tune in' or not, it's been the discovery of a God of love who waits patiently, like Christ on the road to Emmaus, to be invited in to lavish his infinite healing and reconciling and creating and forgiving work within me through the Eucharist.

It is only from this point of departure, of discovering the fullest meaning of the Eucharist first and foremost within the heart, beyond wordy liturgies, beyond time, that I can conceive of even beginning to find the compassion required to be sent out to be a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

I grew up going to Church both in a home parish and in prison, where my dad was prison chaplain. Because I stubbornly refused to get confirmed until the age of 24, it is with a genuine degree of sadness that I now reflect back on how the Eucharist in my teenage years was associated with an awkwardness, an unease, a tiresome set of *ad intra* questions lingering at the back of my mind as to whether or not I was welcome, whether or not I was knowledgeable enough to receive the body of Christ. How my image of God has changed since then. Ironically, once confirmed then began my very extensive connections with the Roman Catholic Church. Most of my closest friends are Catholic and I've worked all my life in faith based research connected to Catholic institutions – first at Ushaw College in Durham and now at Heythrop. So this wrestling with the pain of a closed communion has been a very real part of my journey.

And yet I now see that I was totally ill-equipped to link up the drama of the Eucharist with the rich tapestry of my daily life. As a teenager I worked on night shifts at the local homeless shelter in Lincoln, the Nomad Trust. At 7pm each night there would be a queue of colourful and diverse faces peering into the hatch waiting for the invitation to eat. We would eat together. Whilst my heart burned with compassion for the people I was encountering, I can now see, like the couple talking to Jesus in Emmaus, that I lacked the language and the humility to recognise Christ in the guests I was serving. On your service sheet is a print by a German artist of the Lords Supper. Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, is holding the tea-pot. I love this image because it reminds me to keep *my eyes opened* to the Christ in-dwelling in every breaking of bread. Behind me, Rublev's icon of the Trinity also stems from Abraham's generous hospitality to strangers in the desert.

This Christmas just past I was in Lincoln, and we hosted our usual bunch of international guests – a Zimbabwean social worker, a Senegalese refugee, a German artist along with other family and friends. But one particular extra guest left a profound impression on me. Pavel is a young Polish man working 8hour shifts a day in washing up at Lincoln Pizza Express. He turned up at our Church on Christmas day, thinking it was a Catholic Church, and saying he had no plans, he accepted our invitation to lunch. It was in the course of our seemingly banal explanations about why we set alight to puddings and why we pull crackers, that Pavel suddenly broke down in tears, telling us that in three years of being in the UK – moving from city to city – this had been the first and only time he'd been welcomed in to a British home. His own mother had died recently and he was overwhelmed by the reminder of what it was like to be part of family. I could see the Christ in Pavel as we ate together. He enriched our Christmas and brought alive a deeper significance of the Eucharist for me.

Eucharist is what I experience as I stand in the breakfast queue in the French community of Taize along with thousands of other young people all seeking reconciliation and peace; Eucharist is what I seek each Holy Week on an annual pilgrimage to Walsingham in Norfolk where a motley bunch of Student Crossers – Anglicans, Catholics, Methodists – break bread together in a muddy field as we soothe each others tired feet; Eucharist is what we shared on the Mount of the Beatitudes in Palestine, the idyllic view of the sea of Galilee below such a bitterly cruel contrast to the stories of death and destruction we'd just heard on the West Bank.

The Eucharist then, re-enacted time and time again here at St Martin's and around the world, is a gathering of every single moment of our lives, of the life of all creation, all our pain and sorrow, all our laughter and joy gathered into a single timeless moment in which Christ is revealed.

As I draw to a close, I want to return to the place where I said I find fullest meaning in the Eucharist, which is through the eyes and ears of the heart. This has been revealed to me most

starkly in the last six months as I've been off work with a debilitating illness of fatigue, following a virus. There have been many, many weeks where I've been unable to get to Church to participate in the table fellowship of the Eucharist. Stripped of the ritual, like all housebound, simply all I could do was to feed on him in my heart by faith and with thanksgiving. I began to meditate in my six half hour rests a day and this became a whole new way of being. Even on the worst of days back in December, when the phone had long stopped ringing, I would set myself the task for the day of seeing beauty in one thing and savouring it - a bunch of flowers, a smile from the postman, a snow painted garden.

In this experience, and the others I've described, I am learning to live Eucharistically. Christ invites us all to see everything we do and everyone we meet through grace-tinted spectacles. And as I reflect on how to go out and be a "living sacrifice", following in my mother's footsteps, I can see that it is much less about counting the costs and gains of our own efforts, and so much more about celebrating the liberation, hope and joy gifted to us at the heart of the Christian story.

I leave you with the prayer of St Teresa of Avila:

"Christ has no body now but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on the world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world."

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