

Sunday 14 March: Fourth Sunday of Lent

Broken

Readings: Joshua 5.9-12; Luke 15.1-3, 11b-end

I admit to thinking that perhaps I drew the short straw in our sermon series this Lent. We are exploring the meaning of the Eucharist with the themes Taken, Blessed, Broken, Given, as we look at the actions of Jesus at the last supper on the night of his betrayal. Today we are well on in our journey and have arrived at Broken.

Of course each of the actions and themes relate and connect with the other and last week Nick our vicar led us to an understanding of how being *Blessed* could only be understood if we first acknowledge ourselves as in some ways wounded or broken, coming with real lives in need of the blessing of God's forgiveness and renewal. But if the Eucharist is a drama, as Timothy Radcliffe describes it in his book *Why go to Church – The drama of the Eucharist*, the book that is inspiring our Lent course this year, then in Broken we find ourselves at the climax of the story. There is no drama without the breaking.

The story of the Prodigal Son, our Gospel for today is only a story (or drama) because of its climax or turning point, when the Son comes to and finds himself far off, in a place of broken hopes and dreams, having cut himself off from those who love him, and from himself, literally starving, and abandoned by those who had courted him in times of plenty and extravagance.

This point in the story is the climax, because as well as being the place of rock bottom it is also the place where life and hope are able to break in, where the son is able to literally turn around and begin the long journey back home. The place of brokenness becomes the place of life and transformation. It is only through an experience of being utterly spent and lost, that the son is released from his desires and selfishness and pursuit of false dreams, and begins to come home to real love.

Like the Prodigal Son, when the floor of our world has collapsed, either through our own failings and failures, or because of events outside our control, and our life is in bits; when we find ourselves in a totally new place and totally new landscape, with life taking on a more painful reality than we have ever known...and our guard is down...we can be open to God's love for us. The love of a father or a mother who 'when we are far off, sees us and is filled with compassion'.

Lent is a time of journeying and coming home to God's love and faithfulness as his daughter or son. Perhaps this exploration of the Eucharist is helping us to sense God '*seeing us*' in some of the distant lands or wilderness places that we each inhabit and know his compassion for us as we turn to him and he comes to meet us with love and forgiveness. The few words of our reading from Joshua speak about homecoming. For the first time after their years of journeying in wilderness places, the Israelites are eating the food of the Promised Land. They can truly say they are home, aware of the love of the one who in all their wanderings has never lost sight of them, as evidenced by the manna that has daily sustained them.

The biblical scholar Frances Young writes movingly about brokenness, often using her experience as a mother of a son with severe learning difficulties to express the deeper understanding of coming home to God that this has led her into. For her she says, disability or brokenness is a way into life and an experience of hope and freedom. She speaks about

being with members of the L'Arche Community where she and her son spent much time, where the condition of being broken or disabled is the reality of everyday living. Of those in these communities she says;

*'these ordinary pots stand for human bodies created out of clay... fragile, vulnerable, potentially broken and not easily put back together. Yet these are the containers of light and life and wisdom.'*¹

We do not will brokenness in any form but perhaps it is the lens through which the love of God in the actions of Christ can be felt and received most beautifully and why L'Arche communities, where brokenness is a condition of life, are places where that love can be deeply felt and shared.

Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche writes (words we heard last Sunday evening...)

*Our brokenness is the wound
Through which the full power of God
Can penetrate our being
And transfigure us in him.*²

What is it in these turning points or experiences of fracture or conditions of brokenness that particularly open us to God's love dwelling and working in us?

When we break the communion wafer we break it significantly into two. But then we go on breaking it into smaller pieces; fragments on a silver paten. It would take some time to put the jigsaw of these fragments back together again. The point is we don't. Christ isn't put back together again. And when we are broken neither are we. We can never be the same again. Christ was broken. For us. For all time. And in his actions he took bread and he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said take, eat, this is my body which is given for you, do this in remembrance of me.

Being broken is what makes us. It makes us a community, diverse fragments of Christ's body together making something whole. Expressed by the words we use in Lent at the Eucharist '*We break this bread, communion in Christ's body once broken*'.

It is in our being broken, by life, sometimes by God that new understanding comes. Not a brokenness to be repaired or stuck back together but broken for life, for beauty, for being in the world as his people, like the fragile clay pots, filled with his love. At our weakest, most open to receive the greatest love; his life laid down for us. Because in weakness we know that.

When we are not - he is
He is the yes, when all around are saying no
He is the hope when all feels hopeless
He is the life when everything speaks of death
He is the wholeness when everything speaks of brokenness

¹ Frances M Young, *Brokenness and Blessing – Towards a Biblical Spirituality*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007. p. 74

² Jean Vanier, *The Broken Body*, Paulist Press, 1988

When we receive communion we receive a broken piece, perhaps a rounded bread but broken all the same. It is a reminder that God in Christ meets us in brokenness...and holds us there.

Held by words of peace whispered in times of agony; small signs of life in a landscape of desolation; small steps on a journey back to the father that seems as if it will never end; words that say... this is my body, broken for you. I meet you in brokenness. Let go into my love.

The altar is a place of homecoming. As Timothy Radcliffe says in the Eucharist we place all of ourselves there, the gift of our lives. Knowing that in Christ he too offers all that he is to us. God blesses all that we are and makes it holy...makes holy our brokenness.

At Worth Abbey last year I went for a few days retreat before starting at St Martin's. An image from that time continues to stay with me. One afternoon I went into the abbey church for some time of quiet and prayer and found there up on the platform where the altar is, one of the teachers from Worth School showing a young boy of about ten and his parents around, clearly a prospective pupil. His younger sister was there too, to one side and it was she who struck me. ...she was lost in her actions, using the stone altar like a ballet practice bar, dancing alongside it... flowing freely, being herself, completely unselfconscious, not realising anyone was watching her. .. in the middle of the church. My first reaction was to think that she should stop, that she shouldn't be playing there and then I realised that in her and through her God was showing me something that was truly liberating. The altar, the place where Christ gives himself as gift for us, in brokenness and blessing, is a place of utter and complete freedom.

We are called home to his table as ourselves, free, uncomplicated. Broken and blessed, his life flows to us, and through us, in his action of taking, blessing, breaking and giving. Being broken is part of that freedom. Why pretend we are not broken, when it is most especially in being seen and known in brokenness, that we know that we have truly come home to the love of the Father.

Taken, blessed and broken, in the Eucharist we let go into his love...