

Sunday 28 March: Palm Sunday

Taken, Blessed, Broken, Given – What Does the Eucharist Mean to Me?

My Mother, Marietta is not very well. In fact that is something of an understatement. Her decline with Alzheimer's has been consistent over the last 8 years as forgetfulness moved to repetitiveness and comfort with the familiar moved to a sense of bewilderment with life and her surroundings. After Christmas she had a small stroke and now a hysterectomy. I make no apology for the medical bulletin, for this community has been generous enough to pray for my mother. Those prayers help to sustain us as a family in some grim times. The naming of the sick can seem slightly routine in our 10am intercessions but in the naming and in the silence that sometimes follows there is a wealth of support and even power.

After a pretty dire experience with one nursing home in January, Mum is now being looked after in a home which was founded by the Roman Catholic nuns of St. Vincents. They still have a fair amount of influence in the home and quite a few nuns are resident. There is Morning Prayer and a Eucharist each day. For those who cannot make it round the corridors to the small bright chapel the service is relayed on channel 6 on the televisions in the rooms and lounges. Attendance is not compulsory but a nun will often pick Mum up as she passes and help her along if she feels like going. She was brought up a Roman Catholic but converted to become an Anglican but that really is another story.

What is so powerful to me about this Eucharistic community is the way the residents and the staff support one another. Both metaphorically and literally at times the nuns feed each other. Mum is not an imposition or burden on the frail but *compos mentis*, they describe her as part of their family. There can be no better example than St. Vincents of the living out of the statement 'we are one body because we all share in one bread'.

So what does that sharing in one bread mean to me? That was the question posed to each of us who have spoken at these 6.30 services through Lent. I wondered if there would be enough to say for a whole series. How wrong I was but I am no theological expert. It is a witness to the depth and power of the Eucharist that we could have gone on around the community for several more weeks delving into the significance of this simple act. It is the simplicity of the act is so intriguing. At the Eucharist the whole of our Christian experience and indeed the whole of Christ's life is broken down to a symbol – Bread and Wine. In this act of breaking down, first demonstrated at the Last Supper, is defined, a vital element that drives much of the history of the World.

My mother's condition helps me explain this concept. Alzheimer's literally breaks down the brain. The bits that previously joined up to make sense of the world are split apart. It is cruel. But, in my mother's case what is left behind is the essence of the woman we knew. She was a teacher with a great love of children. She was a magnificent linguist with a desire and a huge ability to communicate with people and make friends. Wherever we travelled as a family, whatever queue we stood in mum would, sometimes to our teenage embarrassment, instantly make friends. And that is the bit of her that remains. She greets people, all be it slightly randomly, she reaches out a hand, she tells us she loves us, she hugs the children, she loves to be in the company of the other residents of the home. And they respond to her. 'Oh yes Marietta' they say, 'we love having her around'. Despite the ravages of a cruel disease, in the breaking down, the essence of the person remains with us. It remains with us always.

This breaking down but staying with us is the story of Holy Week itself. Jesus arrives seemingly triumphant and then is broken down – He is literally broken up and killed and then raised again. It begins with what some portray as the triumphant procession into Jerusalem – Donkeys, Palms and Hosannas. We do our best to recall it with the donkey crossing Trafalgar Square. The logistics are complicated, never more so that this year, and so is the message. Jesus being lauded but arriving on a humble beast, the donkey, reminding us perhaps of Christmas and the journey to and from Bethlehem. The C-Club love that image and ask ‘do you think it was the same donkey they used before’. (Well we were reminded this morning the donkey in our procession was the one that modelled for our crib but that is as far as it goes.)

From here on we see our Lord live through many of our own worst nightmares. He is falsely accused, he is mocked, he is deserted and betrayed and denied by his friends, he is killed. Little wonder then that when many of us get to the end of the Three Hours on Good Friday we are as our Vicar Nick puts it ‘Good For nothing’ and just have to walk away from the portico. For me I have to drag myself away as I struggle to leave the foot of the cross longing for the dawn of Easter Day to rise sooner and bring with it some shred of hope amidst the desolation.

But how does Jesus sum this up? At the Last Supper he knows he is to be broken but he wants us to re-member him. The ceremony is not complicated. It is incredibly simple: He takes the bread, breaks it and shares it and then shares the cup of wine. ‘Do this in Remembrance of me’ he says. It is one of his rare commandments where he gives us a specific thing to do. Hold him in our hearts. Here is the essence of Jesus Christ, not all the complex theology or a religion’s complex history or tradition. Here is something very simple. In the Eucharist Christ is calling me to put him back into my life; to witness not just to the Last Supper or to his death but also to his resurrection. In some small way to take on the essence of Christ at the Eucharist.

It is often said that St. Martin’s is a Good Friday Church and does Good Friday so much better than it does Easter. We are more at home with the pain and the suffering, we live with the mess of the world and we engage with it daily, even hourly. We are better at crying out for help than proudly rejoicing. It is why we sing ‘When I survey the Wondrous Cross’ rather well on Palm Sunday and Good Friday but we are a little muted in our ‘He is risen indeed Alleluias’ in Easter Day. Perhaps Easter Day is a little bit ‘happy clappy for us. Rosemary Lain-Priestley put it better than this in her searingly honest Easter Day Sermon here 4 years ago.’ She said:

‘Hope is hearing the melody of the future. Faith is to dance to it.’ Perhaps St Martin’s is better at doing Good Friday than Easter, but then Easter is so much harder to do. We don’t know how to describe the offer, the reality of something that is so hard to understand and to touch, something in which we invest such hope. . .

On this Easter Day we offer you what we hope is a melody of certainty that sings with the notes of eternity. We offer you, we all offer one another, our belief that one day, in spite of our broken knees, we will be able to dance to that music.’

It is an Iranian, Moslem, Woman sculptor who, for me, has done most in our building to sort out the Good Friday – Easter Sunday thing. Shirazeh Housiary gave us a magnificent gift when she designed the East Window. I kneel before it each Sunday and gaze up towards its centre piece until just before the host arrives. It means different things to me on different days. On Good Friday or when I am sad it is the wrought, stretched, broken figure of Christ tortured on the Cross. On Easter Day or when I am joyful it floats majestically – the host is carried up, it is as Rowan Williams suggested the cross reflected peacefully in water. I love

to let the window carry me through the narrative of Easter. As Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane 'take this cup away from me' on Maundy Thursday I watch the window darken. It is broken down to its essence – the egg, the head or the host in the centre as we strip the altar. It suffers through Good Friday as the image of Christ's pain but then come at dawn on Easter Day, and in the greatest service of the year celebrate the Eucharist before the window as the light shines through and he reigns in glory.

Jesus is broken down to his essence but as James Johnston reminded us in the first of these talks he and we are not left broken down. In the Eucharist and at Easter we can be remembered or made whole. I was discussing this recently with a dear friend Revd Malcolm Rogers who is a Vicar in Bury St. Edmunds. He is an expert on Russian Orthodoxy and explained to me that in Russian the Verb 'to Eat', 'Yest' is the same word as the verb To Be. So imagine the translation not simply take eat but '**Take ! Be!** For this is my body .' The Eucharist enables us to be. It enables me to go on. I thank God that this is an inclusive invitation not just to the holy amongst us but as the invitation says it is for those who have much faith and those who would like to have more, those who have tried to follow Jesus and you who have failed.

In a few weeks time I will stand down as Churchwarden having been privileged to hold that position for 6 years and witnessed close to the extraordinary renewal of our buildings. In helping draft our new mission action plan during Lent it has been good to look to the future. Whatever else we are or will be; we remain at our essence a Eucharistic community. Never mind the buildings, the events or the business, we exist as our mission statement says 'to honour God.' There can be no better way to do this than to obey Christ's command and to eat and therefore to be. To 'Do this in Remembrance of him.' This is our calling. The nuns caring for Mum at St. Vincents have found their way to live out that calling. We are called to find ours as individuals and as a community.

The introduction to the Mission Action Plan which was in last week's newsletter points the way with the phrase: 'Our aim is not to provide simple answers but to uphold one another in living with the questions, to seek the deeper truths, and to be a place of encounter between people and God.'

So the Eucharist is an act of this witness. In this act we put Christ back at the centre of our lives and with the sending out we are empowered as the prayer says 'to live and work to his praise and glory'. Amen,