

## **Sunday 7 March 6.30 p.m.: Third Sunday of Lent**

### **Taken, Blessed, Broken, Given - Reflections on the Eucharist**

#### **Readings: 2 Corinthians 4.6-12; "The Broken Body" (Jean Vanier)**

Three days before the start of Lent I flew back into London from Haiti after a week there reporting for BBC Radio on how the people of Haiti were coping and how the aid operation was going after the earthquake. Jean Vanier's references to "this world of darkness", to "brokenness", have a particular echo for me...of the most devastated areas of the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, with their collapsed buildings and huge piles of rubble and the certainty that there were still bodies lying beneath them.

We drove through the still dark – very dark – streets of Port-au-Prince early on February 12<sup>th</sup>, a day of national mourning exactly one month after the earthquake. There was a big church service to come later in the day in the city itself, with the president and other dignitaries in attendance. But I had been told that mass would be celebrated shortly after daybreak at the site of earthquake victims' mass graves ten miles or so north of the capital, at a place called Titanyen. It seemed to me there could hardly be a more powerful way of reflecting the national mood than to report live on that mass.

We turned off the main road on to a rough, dirt track which wound up into scrub-covered low hills. We stopped at one blackened, wooden cross on a mound. Titanyen has local notoriety as a place where political victims of Haiti's past, dark dictatorships would often be buried. Then we turned a corner and before us were the mass graves of many of the earthquake's two hundred thousand or more victims, the stony soil used to fill the graves still more freshly turned and smoothed over than the surrounding land. There were a number of small, new white wooden crosses. A table had been placed on top of one of the mass graves to serve as an altar. In a semi-circle to one side stood perhaps fifty people...Haitians and a sprinkling of foreigners, aid people, church workers and several nuns. On the other side of the table a priest and a bishop. The priest said that though "dumped" here, the earthquake victims had not been thrown away. "Tend to your brothers and sisters," he said, "calling out from under the ground." For one young worshipper the emotion of the occasion became too overwhelming...she quietly moved to behind a nearby vehicle and knelt there, with her head in her hands, for the rest of the service.

Bishop Pierre Dumas celebrated the Eucharist. He then led everyone present around the mass graves, sprinkling them with water and swinging incense across them. When I interviewed him a few minutes later he spoke of "this place of suffering" needing to be changed into a place of hope...of giving some dignity, through the mass, to the hasty burial of the dead.

After several days spent going to the crowded impromptu camps of the homeless that sprung up after the earthquake – and hearing many people say they were still in need of food and water as well as shelter -- I could not help but see the practical symbolism, too, of the bread and the wine of the Eucharist. I had watched people lining up for sacks of food when there was a distribution taking place, and at water tankers and temporary standpipes. Now, here, over the mass graves, the sacramental sustenance was offered, and received.

Taken, Blessed, Broken, Given.

For a clear and effective description of the significance of Lent I think it might be hard to better this passage from the Eucharistic Prayer we are currently using: "...For in these forty days you lead us into the desert of repentance, that through a pilgrimage of prayer and discipline we may grow in grace and learn to be your people once again. Through fasting, prayer and acts of service you bring us back to your generous heart. Through study of your holy word you open our eyes to your presence in the world and free our hands to welcome others into the radiant splendour of your love..."

Sheila Cassidy calls her book *Good Friday People* a book for Lent, the story of the journey towards the Cross...and beyond the Cross to the resurrection...told through the lives of people who are victims of violence, or physically ill. As you may know, Sheila Cassidy is a doctor who was arrested and tortured in the turbulent Chile of the 1970s for treating a revolutionary. One of the chapters in her book is called "Last Suppers", and she writes about final, poignant and important events in the lives of some of her *Good Friday People*. She goes on to point out that, on the night before he died, Jesus did not tell his followers that they would be known by their purity, by their ascetic behaviour, by their piety or by their distinctive dress but by the love they have for one another. She speaks of Jesus doing a role-play of how they should behave...pouring water into a bowl and washing his disciples' feet. We know quite well what he was saying, Sheila Cassidy says, but somehow we forget. He was showing us that loving is inseparable from service and that we must not stand on our dignity but must humble ourselves and do menial, earthy, bodily tasks for each other.

One of Sheila Cassidy's *Good Friday People* is Archbishop Oscar Romero, the archbishop of San Salvador, assassinated in 1980 as he celebrated mass. He had just read the gospel: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.... Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains only a grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit..." The principle of life through death, which John illustrates from the plant world -- the kernel must perish as a kernel if there is to be a plant.

"Let your church be the wheat which bears its fruit in dying."

Archbishop Romero was delivering the homily -- during which he spoke of the Eucharist as an act of faith -- when the shot rang out. He was shot in the heart and fell to the floor behind the altar, at the foot of the crucifix. The people carried him from the chapel to a truck outside. He was at the hospital five minutes later, and there he died...the once rather conservative archbishop who became a world renowned champion of human rights. In February 1980, a month before he died, he said this: "My life has been threatened many times. I have to confess that as a Christian I don't believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people."

"We are" -- we heard in our first reading -- "afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."

When I come to the altar rail during the Eucharist, I sometimes bring with me a strong, insistent memory of something I have witnessed at first hand as a journalist during the previous days or weeks, of an individual's very moving plight perhaps or of a place enduring particularly hard times. Or it might be a concern much closer to home. At those times and in that very intimate act of communion -- of receiving the bread and the wine -- I am, I suppose, hoping for

nourishment, a reinforcing of my faith and through that of my ability to be a more effective person, in thought and action...though I am only too well aware that I have to give in order to receive.

If “love your neighbour” is one of the central tenets of our faith, then I value the “neighbourliness” if I can put it that way...the ubuntu, the shared humanity...of the line of people receiving at the altar rail...the sense of inclusion...the levelling, at that moment, before God. But I equally value the fact that clergy from my 91 year old mother’s local church in Dorset will take communion to her at her home and I know how meaningful that is for her and for many other people like her across the country who do not enjoy the mobility they used to or who become ill and housebound -- the bread and the wine going from the altar out into the world.

For me, the Eucharist would be far from complete without the prayer that follows -- “Send us out in the power of your Spirit”. That transforms it from a rite – however deeply spiritual that rite might be – into a very real ambition to make the command “love your neighbour” actually mean something. Or at least, I hope, to lengthen the time before I inevitably fail...and to help me reduce all those missed opportunities to be a better neighbour. If we are to turn the Eucharist from symbolism to reality, we must surely hope that it will help us to hold on to the essentials as all those preoccupations crowd in on us as we face a new week. As God accepts us -- warts and all -- at the altar rail in the Eucharist, then “going out in the power of the Spirit” perhaps we can be more accepting of others...less concerned for self-preservation and more willing to take risks to “do the right thing”...more ready to encourage and support than to lay blame. I know that I hope for that.

Our communion hymn at this morning’s Eucharist ended with these words, as I will too:

“And at communion, shape your hands  
Into a waiting cradle;  
The gift of Christ, receive, revere,  
United round the table.

Put Christ into each other’s hands,  
he is love’s deepest measure;  
in love make peace, give peace a chance  
and share it like a treasure.