

## **Sunday 21 February at 6.30pm: First Sunday in Lent**

### **“Taken, Blessed, Broken, Given - What Eucharist means in my life”**

**Readings: Luke 22.14-20, 39-46; John 2.1-11**

Thanksgiving. That's what it means, Eucharist. What does it mean in my life? That sounds like an exam question. Meister Eckhart, the thirteenth century German theologian, is quoted as saying: “If the only prayer you ever say in your whole life is thank you, that would be enough.” One could stop there and say that's the answer to the question. But exam questions tend to have after them the innocent words: “show your working”. So I will try. I will try to say something of my experience of the meaning of “remembrance” and of the invitation we are given to do it. And because for the last twelve years I have been part of this community, it will inevitably have something to do with what goes on in this place. In fact, if life is a journey, one could say it began here. Something over fifty years ago a couple knelt at this altar rail and exchanged marriage vows. The priest prayed, as priests do, that they would be blessed with children. Happily they were, for the couple were my parents, and the priest was my grandfather, who had worked here on the clergy staff in the 1920s.

“Do this in remembrance of me.” In the words of Dom Gregory Dix, the Benedictine monk who wrote a book in the 1940s called The Shape of the Liturgy:

“Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacle of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. People have found no better thing than this to do for monarchs at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; ... for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover; ... — one could fill many pages with the reasons why people have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them. And best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this to “make holy the people of God”.

Remembrance. The opposite of forgetting. In reflecting these last weeks on the Last Supper, I don't think I had fully caught until now the note of desperation which the words also contain. I had always approached the Eucharist as a gift, a source of profound gratitude and a matter of awe. But “do this to remember me” also contains the urgent human response of one who knows he is about to face death: “Don't forget me; don't forget what I did for you.” I have heard more than one plea like that from those I have known who were nearing their own death. “Do this in remembrance of me” is spoken immediately before one of the most shocking scenes in the scriptures: the garden of Gethsemane. We have just heard St Luke describe it with these words: “In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.” These are not “comfortable” words. The swords are being unsheathed as they are spoken.

Where was God in this? I was very struck by some words which Nick Holtam, our Vicar, used a few years ago in a three hours service on Good Friday. He spoke of the paradox of a God who has known the absence of God. There is an echo in that of the words of Dietrich

Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor executed in a concentration camp in 1945. Bonhoeffer wrote in a letter: "Only the suffering God can help". We have another sense of it in Timothy Rees's hymn which we will sing later, "God is Love":

"And when human hearts are aching  
Under sorrow's iron rod  
Then they find the self-same aching  
Deep within the heart of God"

It is a hymn we have sung here on two occasions in the last few years that I will carry with me all my life: both broadcast on Radio 4, both led jointly by the Vicar of this Church, a Rabbi and an Imam, in the respective aftermaths of 9/11 and the 2007 London bombings. A God who suffers with us, yet who is apparently absent when we are suffering. I heard the Archbishop of York on the radio a few weeks ago being challenged by an angry John Humphrys about exactly where God had been when the earthquake struck Haiti. I thought then, and I think now, that in reality we would find God where we always do: tearing at the rubble with his bare hands. Sweat like drops of blood. Giving out life till there is no life left and it stops. Yes, only a suffering one will do.

Stops? That's the strangest thing about it. The thing about the Eucharist is that it doesn't. Like the wine at the wedding of Cana, it keeps flowing when it ought to have stopped. The violence and the hatred and the narrowness and the selfish back covering that led from Gethsemane to Calvary didn't stop it. They didn't, in the end, have the last word. One of the inspirational figures of the twentieth century whom we remember often in this place is the former Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, who in the context of the apartheid struggle wrote:

Goodness is stronger than evil  
Love is stronger than hate  
Light is stronger than darkness  
Life is stronger than death  
Victory is ours through Him who loved us.

After their experience of the Resurrection Jesus's closest followers, that gloriously dysfunctional group who protested one moment that they were willing to go to prison and death but when the moment came "all of them deserted him and fled" – they - emerged into a group who were somehow different: stronger, courageous, willing to risk their own lives to bear witness. They remembered the command. To do the remembering.

Re-remembering. The other meaning of that word is the opposite of dismembering. As Michael Mayne, the late Dean of Westminster, put it<sup>1</sup>:

"To re-member someone is to do what all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't do to Humpty Dumpty: put him together again. It is to do what only God can do." To be re-created, put together again, but in God's likeness, as He had always intended us to be. "For to be re-remembered is our destiny. In the end that is our end, our purpose: that is why we are here." Like the penitent thief who says: "Lord, remember me when you come into your Kingdom", our prayer is: "Lord, re-member me, refashion me, so that I may share the life of your Kingdom. Remake my life in the shape of your own."

And his answer? "If you would truly remember me, if you would bring me out of the past into your present, then do this with bread and wine." And in our imagination we

watch him as he takes bread in his hands and offers it, thanks God for it, breaks it, shares it. Says (by implication): "This is me. This is the pattern of my life. You are now to re-member me, that is to say, to be my body in the world, your lives offered to God, your lives lived thankfully, your lives broken and shared in the costly service of others." ... We are presenting, in these four acts of taking, thanking, breaking and sharing, the proper pattern and shape for all human life. "

St Martin's as a community is, I think, good at the re-membering that involves putting back together, in two different ways.

Many memorial services are held here, often for people who had no connection with this church. Most movingly, there are the annual services of remembrance for those who have died homeless and for those who have died through acts of violence. All such services can be powerful ways of reassembling the whole of a life, of bringing the past into the present and giving thanks for it. At one level, of course, that is what the Eucharist is. The early Christian communities met to relive the Easter experience, bringing the past into the present, reliving the encounter they had had with the one who had shown them what life could be like if lived in deep intimacy with God, and looking to the future when the whole of creation would be caught in that updraft – renewed, restored, made whole. "God is love, so love for ever/O'er the universe must reign."

This type of re-membering runs deep in the habit of a community where the recalling of the Last Supper is what we "do". An easy example of it is of Dick Sheppard, the Vicar who was appointed here at the outbreak of the First World War and whose vision of St Martin's as an open, inclusive community with a vocation to serve the marginalised, is remembered here, even though the work that is carried out here has moved on and the society it serves is very different.

Another group who are often remembered here are the six members of the Melanesian Brotherhood who in the first years of this century lost their lives going in search of one of their brothers, who had himself been captured and killed during the ethnic conflict in the Solomon Islands. Some of them had visited St Martin's and others from that community still do. And Richard Carter, our Assistant Priest who was then their Chaplain, wrote a profoundly moving account of their story in his book *In Search of the Lost*. Significantly, in the message which he sent out as the news of their loss reached the community to which they belonged, he wrote: "I would like to tell you a little about each one of them for each one will be so missed." And then he told their stories. They are remembered here, and the story of their sacrifice, of what it costs when unconditional love is taken to its limits, has become a part of our story.

There is also a less obvious type of "re-membering" that goes on here. It is not only the work of The Connection at St Martin's, the charity based here which cares for homeless and vulnerable people. But something less visible. Its inclusive welcome, the welcome to a feast of which the Eucharist is the most potent of signs, embracing all who walk through its open door, of every faith and none. Putting people back together. Making them feel more "whole" than when they came in. Helping each one of us to become all that we can be.

And the invitation to do that remembering is best expressed in the words which we sometimes use at the Eucharist:

Come to this table  
You who have much faith and you who would like to have more.

You who have been to this sacrament often, and you who have not been for a long time.

You who have tried to follow Jesus, and you who have failed.

Come.

It is Christ who invites us to meet him here.”

It is an important moment in any service, but these words I believe capture the spirit of George Herbert’s poem “Love bade me welcome”. The unconditional welcome, the acceptance, the sense of being met and known, warts and all, and still being invited in. As Archbishop Rowan Williams put it, commenting on that poem: “Heaven is complete unequivocal welcome, such as none of us can imagine. It’s knowing that we are utterly at home where we were made to be.”

Interestingly, in a sermon preached here at his induction<sup>ii</sup>, when he described the sort of church that he hoped St Martin-in-the-Fields might become, Sheppard used the same word: home.

“I stood on the west steps and saw what this church would be to the life of the people. They passed me, into its warm inside, ... with all their difficulties, trials and sorrows ... and often and often tired bits of humanity swept in ... And I said to them as they passed: 'Where are you going?' And they said only one thing, 'This is our home. ... And day by day they told me the ... Lord's Supper was there on his altar waiting to be given. They spoke to me two words only, one was the word 'home' and the other was 'love'.”

Does Eucharist work for me as a sign of that? Yes. For it takes us *back* to the wedding at Cana, at the start of Jesus’s ministry, the story of which begins with the significant words, “on the third day”. Back to the beginning, the endless cycle of renewal which brings hope out of the most desperate of circumstances, when pain and loss threaten to overwhelm us. When the wine has run out, at the point where human endeavour is tempted to give up, God demonstrates again and again the inexhaustible abundance of God’s love. And that nothing – no situation, no relationship, no loss, disaster, disappointment or tragedy – nothing is beyond redemption. It doesn’t make them any the less terrible when they are happening. But in the end, what is left, what endures, is love - unconditional, sacrificial love. *Taken, blessed, broken, given*, over and over and over again. A pattern written deep within the structure of human experience, as real as the structure of DNA with its double helix, endlessly repeating. For me the Eucharist works as a sign of that reality. And that *is* a cause for celebration. For thanksgiving. One prayer, in that sense, is enough.

I began by referring to life as a journey, so perhaps I should end by mentioning that there is a small milestone in my own coming up: I will be 50 in a few weeks. Henri Nouwen, the Dutch born priest and theologian, near the end of his life wrote a short but powerful book called Can you drink the cup? He writes of what he has learned of the need to embrace all that life brings, good and bad, looking to Christ as the model in voicing the trust to “drink the cup” which he understood was being given to him by his Father. The same trust which later transforms the words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” into the final acceptance: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Recalling the Hebrew toast, “*L’Chaim*” (“to life”), Nouwen writes:

“We must dare to say: ‘I am grateful for all that has happened to me and led me to this moment’. This gratitude which embraces all of our past ... erases bitterness,

resentments, regret ... It transforms our past into a fruitful gift for the future, and makes our life, all of it, into a life that gives life.”

The birthday itself falls on Good Friday, and I can think of nowhere else that I would rather be than in this place, listening again to the familiar yet ever new story, in which all our stories are ultimately gathered up and given meaning.

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<sup>i</sup> In Pray, Love, Remember

<sup>ii</sup> when he explained, as his biographer R. Ellis Roberts says, 'into what manner of church he had seen St Martin's transfigured' when he was serving as a wartime chaplain