

Sunday 21 February 2010: First Sunday in Lent

Taken, blessed, broken, given

Readings: Deuteronomy 26.1-11; Luke 4.1-13

My niece, Molly, who has just celebrated her 9th birthday, recently came home from school saying that there was a play at the Rose Theatre in Kingston called 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' that her headmistress had told them needed school children who wanted to play the parts of fairies. Molly has never shown a particular interest performing, but she thought she would like to be a fairy and so she filled in the form and applied. Her father became far more alarmed than her when he discovered that six hundred other children had applied for the parts of four fairies and that Molly would have to audition on the Rose Theatre stage in front of a panel of selectors. He emailed me to ask me how on earth she should prepare for this ordeal. 'Just let her be herself,' I replied, 'if they choose her it will be because they want someone who is natural and unaffected and kind. She always seems to be far more interested in what others are doing than trying to show off herself. Whatever you do don't make her feel she has to perform, it doesn't seem her nature.' A few weeks later, Molly went for her audition. She followed on from recitations, children singing, dancing, performing tap and ballet routines. Matthew, her father, was doubled up with anxiety when he saw the line-up, fearing his daughter would be publicly humiliated. Molly came onto the stage, said that she was going to do a dance from 'Slumdog Millionaire' which she had learnt for her school assembly and that it was about poor children the same age as her in India. They asked her what music she was going to use and she said it was in her head. And then she danced without music, just simply, without embarrassment. Later in the afternoon the theatre phoned to say that Molly had been chosen. "Are you sure you've got the right name?" her Mum asked on the phone, "Molly was the one who did the silent dance..." "Oh yes; quite sure. She's the one. It was really unaffected and beautiful." Last week, Molly had her first night. "Were you nervous?" I asked her on the phone. "No," she said, "you can't see the audience, the lights are too bright. So I just listen and watch and we dance round this really nice old lady called Judi. She brought me a birthday cake." The review in the Independent said that this Judi, Judi Dench, stole the show. 'She seems,' it says, 'to have a very special relationship with the fairies.'

Picasso, in his old age said "I have spent all my life learning to paint like a child." Peter Brook, who is one of the most innovative and acclaimed directors of contemporary theatre, writes that the performance of child presents a tremendous challenge to an adult, for often the adult will struggle through intellect to reach the point which the child has arrived at naturally. But the moment a child tries to perform he or she becomes unattractive. When a child is not acting, when he is just being, then what we see is full and completely satisfying. One is in contact with something very precious: 'the image of life flowing.' 'An actor' says Peter Brook, 'has to forget making an impression, he has to forget showing, he has to forget fabricating, he has to forget making effects, he has to get away from the idea he is there as a showpiece and in its place he has to open himself to the notion of being the servant of an image that will always be greater than himself.' 'What are we making?' Brook asks. 'We are making relationships. But we can't make relationships, we can only **let** relationships, because that is the heart of what any story, any play, anything human, is about: relationships.' The word Brook comes back to time and time again is 'transparency'. In a word we are learning to unmask rather than mask. We are discovering how to be truer to a deeper humanity.

The reason I am quoting this, is because what I am trying to articulate is very much at the centre of our worship, our Eucharist, today – not a masking, not an externalising, or even a theologising but an unmasking, and a disclosing of truth through the simple actions of Christ.

Timothy Radcliffe's book *Why Go to Church?* which we will use in this year's Lent course, talks about 'the drama of the Eucharist' – the drama of discovering who we are and what we might become in Jesus. He says the drama of the Eucharist is the drama of our whole lives: birth, to death and beyond. Lent is the season in which we are encouraged to unmask our lives, to pare away all that is inessential and discover or rediscover the truths of the essence of the life which flows in us and the relationship both with God and one another that sustains us.

In the Gospel we heard the story of Christ struggling with the devil in the wilderness. We may not name our own temptations 'devils', but we face the same struggles: how to live with integrity, how to be true to the gift of life given to us both in relationship to God and our world. In facing that temptation Christ is facing the false gods and idols that hold us, addict us, mislead us.

The first temptation is to turn the stones into loaves of bread – the temptation that the way to salvation is by satisfying one's own material needs. How often we long for a faith which will give us what we want and that our prayers will be answered in a direct and palpable way. Jesus, in his response, points to a still deeper need – a need of God that is even more essential than the need for food. He himself is going to become the bread, not a handout staving off hunger for another day, but the Bread of Life.

Jesus' second temptation is the temptation to submit to the devil himself, and in this way to possess everything he desires by choosing to follow the path of evil. Jesus responds "Worship the Lord your God and serve God alone." We have to go on reaching towards the good however remote it may seem, and however seductive or desirable the power of submitting to the ways which fall so short of the love of Christ. This path will need courage.

Jesus' final temptation is to throw himself from the top of the temple in the faith that God's angels will protect him. How often we too may have sought a faith that will protect us, provide the miracle and the answer, become the insurance policy when all else fails. Jesus responds "Do not put the Lord your God to the test!" What is rejected here is a religion based on creating a profit for oneself – material profit, spiritual profit or the profit of power. In stark contrast, Christ embraces a very different path – a path exposed and vulnerable, which lets go of outward defence – a transparency that opens up a deeper humanity – disorients us but holds us – a truth, a vision of the life we recognise in part and long for in its fullness, and yet perhaps also fear.

It is this path, the way of Christ, the path of unconditional love, that we reach towards in this Eucharist. This is the essence of all that is to be expressed here. Here in this Eucharist, in these words, in these simple actions. Here is a life offered in love for all of us, now. Here, we witness to a life which has been taken, blessed, broken and given.

Pope Benedict describes how as a child he gradually awoke to the beauty of Eucharist: "It was becoming more and more clear to me that here I was encountering a reality that no official authority or great individual had created. The mysterious fabric of texts and actions had grown from the faith of the church over centuries. It bore the whole weight of history within itself, and yet, at the same time, it was much more than the product of human history... its proper gift was the encounter with the mystery that was not our own product, but rather our origin and the source of our life."

I remember at the Theological college where I studied, the Principal saying to me that you cannot improve upon the Eucharist. You see, it is not a performance, it is Christ's presence in our midst. Christ is made present in the gathering of his people in all their complete infinite

diversity. We are not a club of like-minded people who share the same hobby. We are the broken body of Christ who come, not in self-satisfied righteousness, but in need of God and his love which alone can hold us together. Christ is made present in the Word that is read from the scriptures – his voice, filtered through time, and culture, and the context of our lives. Christ’s Word – challenging, puzzling, encouraging, loving, seeking to dwell among us and to be carried away with us. Christ is made present in the word and action of this sacrament as we do what he did on the night that he was betrayed – the very same words, the very same actions. It will be for each one of us a sign which mirrors the brutality, injustice and suffering of our world. Christ’s body torn apart – broken for us, blood spilt for us, but it will also be a sign of the life of Christ within us, sustaining us, leading even through death to resurrection and new life. This is Christ made present as gift, in bread and wine, where each one of us who receives Christ is called to become the one who bears and carries his presence into the world, and whose presence must be revealed in the actions of our lives. In this sacrament Jesus Christ lives in you. It is the most beautiful of sacraments in which we ourselves, *receive* the sacrament and *become* the sacrament – visible signs of God’s invisible grace. God speaks these words to each one of us: “This is my daughter, this is my son, this is my beloved, on who my favour rests... listen.”

I have never thought of Lent as a time of misery and wallowing in our sinfulness. Far from it, it is a time of homecoming – of coming to our senses, like the Lost Son, and realising who we belong to. As the Week of Accompanied Prayer begins, as the Lent Course seeks to explore the Eucharist, as members of the clergy team and lay members of our congregation reflect upon its meaning – our hope and our prayer this Lent, is that we, as individuals and as a community, will make the journey of The Eucharist – a journey through the hopes and struggles of our lives, through pain and loss, to an empty tomb and the risen Christ breaking through locked doors and calling us to share his break-fast; opening our eyes in the breaking of bread to his resurrection. May all of us, whoever we are, taste that homecoming. The Eucharist is indeed an event which is at the core of our humanity. It is what John Henry Newman called “God’s noiseless work”. Like a child dancing to the tune inside her. It is God’s life flowing to us and from us.