

Deuteronomy 8:2 – 3, 14 - 16
Psalm 34
1 Corinthians 10:16 - 17
John 6:51 - 58

The food of our pilgrimage

Last year I went to a Synagogue with a friend for the Friday night service. It consisted of numerous Psalms sung with the help of the Rabbi and Cantor, a Sermon, and at the end a simple sharing of bread and wine. I was surprisingly moved at seeing and hearing the roots of our faith displayed in this way. What was interesting was the joyous and free way in which the bread and wine were shared at the end. It made me wonder about the long path the sacrament of the Eucharist has travelled since the night in the Upper Room when Jesus, on the night of his betrayal, shared a meal like that.

There is some distance between the meal that was the Last Supper and the Sacrament of the Eucharist. There is no definition of Sacrament in the Bible. In the New Testament the Greek word for “mystery”, later translated “*sacramentum*” in Latin, refers to the presence and purpose of God made known in Jesus Christ. The starting point of faith and our life together as the Church is the belief that the extravagant love of God became available to the world in a special way in Jesus Christ. That love reaches us in two ways: through preaching – the verbal witness to Jesus and what he does for us. And through the sacraments –“visible words” – enacted testimonies, which enliven and nourish our faith and confirm us in the knowledge that in Jesus Christ God reaches out to us with forgiving, renewing love. The Sacraments - the enacted testimonies to Jesus - always relate to things he told us to do, but they also express the whole meaning of his life and death. Jesus did give us certain words connected with the Eucharist. But it is equally important that the Eucharist is an enacted sign of his whole life of self-giving love, which expressed the life of God amongst us. This is the sense in which we want to talk about sacrifice as redemptive suffering. It was Jesus’ self-giving that made God known to us in a new way, rather than some other senses of sacrifice sometimes associated with the Eucharist.

The word “Eucharist” comes from the Greek word “to give thanks” and reflects the thanksgiving or blessing Jesus offered over the food and wine he shared with the disciples at the Last Supper. From that time, whenever the Disciples gathered to eat, they continued to break bread and give thanks in memory of Jesus’ redemptive love believing in his continuing presence with them in the Spirit. What was originally an ordinary festive, memorial action at a meal gradually became separated off from a more commemorative, symbolic sharing of bread and wine. The key actions of blessing and breaking the bread were connected with prayers and readings from Scripture, and included a homily from the presiding clergy. So began a process of elaboration and modification of the Eucharist that has continued to the present.

At the Reformation a build up of philosophical ideas and ideas of sacrifice

surrounding the Eucharist were broken down. Martin Luther offered the idea that after the words of institution were spoken there are two realities co-present under the appearance of bread and wine: the foods themselves, which can be recognized by the senses; and Christ himself who could be known by faith and experienced through grace. The elements changed in the giving. We know this ourselves. A box of chocolates on the shelf in a shop is just that, but purchased, wrapped and given, it also becomes a gift, a symbol of a relationship to be cherished and enjoyed. And if this was the last gift ever received from a friend before the person died, those chocolates, and that type of chocolate would have continuing significance for us. At the Last Supper the bread and wine is changed in the giving to become something else. They are not only bread and wine, but gifts, signs of Jesus' deepest giving of himself for us.

A variety of ideas emerged from both sides of the arguments of the Reformation, but today these are not limited to opposing Catholic or Protestant positions of those times. A great deal of variety exists even within so-called monolithic churches. But although diversity reigns, some core elements still stand.

All celebrations of the Eucharist relate worship to the Last Supper, to Christ's obedience, which lead him from death to resurrection, from death to life. They speak of his ministry of embodying the Love of God, and to the formation of the local Church and the linking of that Church to the universal church. It is Jesus' life of self-giving love that is the source of the church's life. The complex and startling section from John is a call to indwell Jesus – to abide in a relationship with him. In this way he himself is the food for the journey we are given, as referred to in Deuteronomy.

We understand well that when a sermon is preached we normally hear a section of Scripture interpreted that will enable us realise we do not live by bread alone, that there is more to life than physical reality. And it will cause us to think over how we aim to respond to the Gospel today.

The same principle applies with the enacted signs of the Gospel, the sacraments. When Christians enter into the ritual enactment of Jesus' last supper, they open themselves to receive again what Jesus gave, and to hear again his call to live as he did. They are invited to share their lives: to pour out their energies in the service of others confident that their love will be God's renovating love, reaching out into the world. And at the Eucharist Christians find themselves prophetically reminded that just as many grains make a loaf, and many grapes make a cup of wine, they are called to be one with each other, as Jesus was one with God. Indeed, this eating and drinking causes us to be physically joined by the same substance, as well as the same Spirit of faith.

When put it like this, it is clear that the Flesh and Blood as mentioned in John do not refer to things that are somewhat repugnant: they are meditations on Jesus Christ and his life given for us.

And Jesus' statement that he is the living bread that came down from heaven means we are not dealing with the manna the ancient people ate in the wilderness. We are being addressed by him in his life lived to God. A life that was honoured by God in the resurrection, and which has the power to draw us into God.

Eating does not mean what it literally says: it means feeding on him by faith, in our hearts. And yet in another way it does mean eating: when we put out our hands for the bread we physically open ourselves to be nourished by God's gift to us in him.

The manna in the Wilderness was regarded as God's provision for the people's journey through the world to a better place. At the end of Communion we often use the words "As we go with the food of our pilgrimage..." A link is made with the manna, but we are saying we have drawn on enacted a sign of the Gospel amongst us. This sign has the power to feed us again with the life of Jesus, who is our strength for living.

This is the gift of the Eucharist, for which we give thanks today. This is the action that has the power to fill us with freedom and joy. Thanks be to God. Amen.
