

Corpus Christi
14/6/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 14:18 - 20

Psalm 29

1 Corinthians 11:23 - 26

Mark 14:12 0 16, 22- 26

Living the mystery that is God: the Lord's Supper

Today we are celebrating *Corpus Christi*: a thirteenth century feast that saluted the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, strongly supported by the hymns and theology of Thomas Aquinas. In celebrating this feast we are not seeking to revive a colorful mediaeval tradition. Rather, as one of a minority of Uniting Church congregations that celebrate the Lord's Supper weekly, we are taking the opportunity to reflect on the origin and meaning of this sacrament, which nourishes us as we seek to live the mystery that is our life with God.

Paying attention to *Corpus Christi* is true to the deep traditions of the church and does not negate our Reformation heritage. While the Reformers varied in their attitude to the doctrine of the real presence, they valued the Lord's Supper highly and, in common with many modern theologians, recommended weekly celebration. And we are being faithful to the *Basis of Union* that says:

...Christ has commanded his Church to proclaim the Gospel both in words and in the visible acts of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. [and that] Christ himself acts in and through everything that the Church does in obedience to his commandment...(Paragraph 6)

In the early centuries of the Christian Movement, converts did not receive communion until after their Baptism at the Easter Vigil. Once baptized new members of the church received further instruction in the meaning of the Lord's Supper. The word for this post-Baptismal teaching was "Mystagogy", because it unfolded the sacramental mystery to the initiated. Western Christians would possibly prefer to think of this as Christian Education or liturgical instruction, but the notion of mystagogy has its roots deep in the theology of the Byzantine church, which holds that "*the church is heaven on earth, where the God of heaven dwells and moves*". (Germanus I Patriarch of Constantinople [715-730]) This means that when the church is at worship the power of the Holy Spirit draws us into the life of God, and we "[proceed] *from the visible to the invisible, from the sign to the thing signified, from the 'sacraments' to the 'mysteries'*". (Baumbach, Gerard F, *Experiencing the Sacred Pause of Easter*, Paulist Press, 1996, p xi.) In other words, in the liturgy we are gathered into heaven. By the power of the Holy Spirit, God is with us and in this place the universe is transfigured. On this understanding the Liturgy is the place where we are formed in the faith and empowered for service, through the preaching of the word and celebration of the Eucharist. And because the liturgy links heaven and earth, by implication everything we do in liturgy is allegorical: each element has to be seen as suggesting a link beyond itself. (Cabie, R, *The Church at Prayer*, Vol II Eucharist, 1986 p 148)

Our stage of life in the history of the church is beset by many problems and doubts about the credibility of the church's story and its role in the world. But we also share the ongoing richness of intense interrogation of the foundations of our faith and life, and some peak moments in liturgical and theological renewal, particularly the Liturgical revival of the decades following the 1960s.

Because of this we have a much better understanding of how the tradition of the Lord's Supper grew from Jesus' custom of sharing what were normal Jewish ritual meals in a culture where food was received as an expression of God's goodness. Sharing food joined a person in a common life with others, under God. The ritual meals of Christian antiquity varied in form but the most important ingredient was the thanksgiving or blessing over the bread and wine, which acknowledged them as gifts of God. Godly food created a community of godly people.

The earliest accounts of "the breaking of the bread" in the New Testament most likely refer to meals that began simply with the blessing and sharing of bread. (Acts 2:42-47) But as the Christian message spread, there were encounters with various forms of sacrificial meals, which called for the Lord's Supper to be more carefully defined. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11:17 – 34 seems to be warning his flock to be wary of false practices and his words, the earliest we have that refer to the Lord's Supper, reports a tradition that quickly grew from Jesus' ritual of breaking the bread at the Last Supper.

In the second and third centuries writers (Justin Martyr [100 – 165] pointed out that the Christian table of celebration where bread and wine were shared involved communion with the presence of the risen Lord. In the same period sects emerged which introduced a spiritualising trend that is still with us. They said transcendent power could not be known through the material realities, therefore talk of body and blood and bread and wine were of no worth. Against this threat (Irenaeus of Lyon [130 – 200]) spoke strongly, bringing physicality to the fore, making the link between the transfiguration of the bread, and those who ate it, into the body of Christ:

"For as the bread which is produced from the earth, when it received the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, the earthly and the heavenly, so our bodies are no longer corruptible, but have the hope of resurrection."

(Macey p 25)

This was a saving meal made of two realities at once. Common things conveyed deep spiritual realities to the receivers. This idea challenges our sensibilities and yet we know that things we possess can have more than one meaning. A book may be reference material, a source of enriching and inspiring insight, and a cherished gift from a loved one who is remembered every time we read. In the same way terms like "the body of Christ" came to have several meanings: the bread used in the supper; the Lord who is present with us in faith; the Christian community, which shared the bread; and the Christian life itself.

Every time we read about bread and wine in the New Testament, we have to allow for multiple meanings. Mark's account refers to the context of a Passover Meal in which Jesus is the end-time prophet, who brings the presence of God to us. Mark's community clearly understood that the cup conveyed participation in God's gift of freedom and life (salvation) through Christ. For him "this is my body" and "the blood of the new covenant" are two ways of talking about Jesus' total self-giving: "his life poured out for the sake of many". In the light of his impending death, Jesus' action creates a prophetic association. The bread and wine become bearers of the divine presence and God binds himself to the future of many. Mark is saying what the Eastern Christians still say: Christ is present for us here, ministering the life of heaven to us who are still bound to earth. Nourishing us in our pilgrimage towards fullness of life with God.

Every time we participate in a liturgy we are called to be people of God by participating fully and consciously in God's work of loving us into being out of nothing, a gift that comes to us before we ask. In worship we lay ourselves open to being transformed from children of earth into children of God. And we are challenged to renew our response: to offer ourselves in return to God who sends us into the world to embody divine, self-giving love.

The church's guiding story may have run into trouble in our time of cultural collapse and change, but in seeking a way forward we are blessed with a long history through which we have access to a residual form of our culture. What is residual is not necessarily out of date or untrue, and may have within it the power to help overcome our cultural memory loss and bring renewal when least expected. The one thing necessary is for church to be willing to be eccentric enough to continue with this story, trusting the one to whom it points, who comes afresh to us in word and sacrament. The name of that reality: Emmanuel, "God with us" is a sign of hope that gives meaning and purpose to the human project far beyond the secular ideologies and imperialisms that oppress us. And the wonder of all is: this name has the power to redeem us by turning us out from ourselves.
