

CORPUS CHRISTI SUNDAY

If you drive down Nile Road in Forrest Hill at the moment, you will come across some major road works with a sign telling you that the road is being “rehabilitated” I can’t say that I have ever seen that word applied to roadworks before. Why a road should be in rehab is beyond me. Perhaps it has a drug or alcohol issue.

If you want to use the word, “rehabilitated” in a slightly different way then you might want to do that today. Some church traditions celebrate the feast of Corpus Christi, the body of Christ or in other traditions it is celebrated as, The Day of Thanksgiving for the Institution of Holy Communion (Corpus Christi). But in most protestant churches it is not celebrated at all. So, it is a day when many in the church acknowledge the special place of the Eucharist/Holy Communion in their life and worship. Sometimes I feel that in the Presbyterian tradition at least, the eucharist does need “rehabilitating,” restored to its normal and rightful place. It’s delegation in some quarters to a quarterly celebration, something that just adds an extra 15 minutes to the service, seems to me to prevent us from recognizing just how significant, central and fundamental the Lord’s supper is in our faith journey.

For some time we have had an occasional series on spiritual practice. During that time we have considered a number of spiritual practices that Christians have found over the centuries, to be enriching and helpful in their faith journeys. All of these are practices that are carried out by an individual but today I want us to ponder, a corporate or community spiritual practice, one that can really only occur in community, “Where two or three are gathered..” The bread we take as the body of Christ also points to the body of Christ who are Gods people gathered in that place.

So today the community practice of the Lord’s Supper/Mass/Holy Communion/Eucharist - whatever the various traditions call this central act of worship and participation.

Now whether the Lord’s Supper is celebrated in a High Mass at St Peter’s basilica in Rome, or in a small room in a student flat, there are four basic actions which will take place. These mirror the actions and words of Jesus that we find in both the gospel and the letter to the Christians at Corinth. Jesus takes the bread, gives thanks, breaks, and gives/shares it.

The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you...”

“...taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd”

These four actions are fundamental to any celebration of this meal whether the liturgy is complex or simple. Take, Thank, Break, Give.

Four words which are not just limited to their place in our liturgy and worship but might be translated into our lives. Henry Nouwen talks about not just celebrating the Eucharist but living, “a eucharistic life”. Living a life that draws its life from the eucharist, from Christ’s presence. So maybe it’s not too much of an exaggeration to say our faith is a eucharistic faith.

Take... We are offered the rich resources of grace. We are invited to drink from the refreshing waters of life. Could it be that it is not God’s reluctance to give, but our hesitation or even unwillingness, to receive, whether it be our pride or a false sense of humility. The Eucharist reminds us that Jesus so often ate his meals with the marginalized and outcast, offering a gracious and generous hospitality, not asking that they pass some sort of holiness or eligibility test, but simply be drawn by their need to be fed. “To whom would we go, you have the words of eternal life.” The wounded and the weary are always welcome, always welcomed by a compassionate and accepting presence.

So Jesus also takes us, takes us as we are, yet offers possibilities for transformation and change and new beginnings, calls us to be his “co-workers” for the life of the kingdom, as inadequate and as flawed as we are.

Thank... Eucharist, thanksgiving, gratitude.

Richard Foster says a “grateful centre: at the heart of our lives gives us a reference point from which to face struggles and hardship”

So in the light of that we can ask ourselves about our own senses of “entitlement”, what we think or believe we “deserve” or “have a right to”.

Eucharist offers us the question,

“Whatever my experience of life, how can I still look at the world gratefully or deepen my sense of gratitude for the wonder and mystery of life?”

Break... I remember being on a couple of retreat teams with an Anglican clergyman who when he came to the point in the liturgy in our daily communion where he would

speak the words, "Jesus broke the bread..." he would break the wafer with an audible snap! In one context we are made aware of the brokenness and suffering of Christ but of course we come to this meal bringing our own brokenness, bearing the wounds of our own failures, but it is in that very brokenness lies the possibilities for a new beginning, a resurrection.. Those often quoted words of Scott peck from *A road less travelled*...

"Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult-once we truly understand and accept it-then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters." (Scott Peck)

Richard Rohr often speaks of the pain, the woundedness and the brokenness being the very places where we might know new growth.

When life is hard we are primed to learn something absolutely central. Our wounds are God's hiding place and hold our greatest gifts. It is no surprise that a dramatically wounded man became the central transformative symbol of Christianity.

I do not find these words easy words to hear, but something tells me that they are true even if I do not want to face them. When Jesus broke the bread with his friends on the Emmaus way, the text says that it was in that moment that they recognized him. Suddenly all the pain and grief that they carried was transformed by this insight.

Breaking offers new insight and recognition that Christ is truly present in this.

If you open to life's pain, then with it you shall reign

And allow your heart to weep and with Him you'll rejoice

Open to His Cross the wounds of each day's love

Then you'll know the splendor of His kingdom above - Clare of Assisi

Give... *Freely you have received, freely give.*

Jesus final words were an act of trust, *"Father into your hands I commend my spirit.."* (*I give my very life*)

Yet I wonder if our lives are more often characterized by, "hold on to..." rather than give. One commentator remarked how anxious the disciples must have been when

Jesus started giving away the few loaves and fishes that at least would have provided them with a modest meal. Our fears and insecurities make us similarly anxious... we find it hard to let go of our trust in what we have gathered round us, yet somewhere the bond which ties us to these things must be broken, for bread cannot be given(shared) until it is broken. That something must die for something new to be born. *Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it abides alone.*

Finally, this reminds us of the connection of all our eating and drinking (including the Lord's Supper) to the issues of poverty and hunger in our world. We eat and drink in relative prosperity whereas so many of the world's population will not know when and even if food and clean water will be there for them. So how do we as individuals and Christ's community respond to this either by our giving or by our lifestyles or by political activism?

The words of Jesus in the gospel are particularly powerful; when taken in a wider sense than just the feeding of the five thousand. When the disciples came to him and asked that he do something to feed the hungry crowds – his answer was “you give them something to eat”. Every time we eat the bread and drink the cup, we are invited to hear those words, “**You** give them something to eat!” The richness of the idea of Christ being in some sense “in” the bread and wine (as well as the gathered community) is that he was broken and given for the life of the world – and so we, as the continuing “*corpus Christi*” – (the body of Christ) are reminded of that challenging, and perhaps not very inviting idea, that we too are to ready to be broken and scattered for the life of the world. The bread does not remain as a whole – it is only valuable when it is broken and distributed and consumed. We are one of the ways in which the bread of life is given to the world around us.