

Holy Week Messages – St. Mark's Cathedral, Bangalore, 2004.

1. An Eucharistic Community

Maundy Thursday is special to us. It commemorates the institution of the Lord's Supper as a sacrament. Depending on the denomination we belong to and sometimes even depending on whether we belong to the High or the Low traditions, the regular observance of the Lord's Supper has come to be called by different names such as the Mass, the Service of Holy Communion, the Eucharist, the Breaking of the Bread...etc. Except for small groups like the Quakers and the Salvation Army, all Christians hold regular participation in the symbolic supper important.

There are differences with regard to the question of "How often?" Some think it is important that we participate at least once a week, as was the custom in some early churches. Others say the Passover, during the celebration of which Jesus instituted the sacrament, was an annual event for Jews so it is enough if we have a commemoration once a year. And, yet others would like a daily celebration even if they do not necessarily receive communion because the celebration tells the story of the Gospel dramatically and acts as a means of incorporation into the divine act of redemption.

There is a very wide spectrum of belief with regard to the real significance of the Lord's Supper. What kind of transformation takes place in the communion elements of bread and wine? What kind of bread and what kind of wine should to be used in the celebration? White wafers made in convents or bread specially prepared by the celebrant the night before? And, wine, can it be fermented wine? Should it be unfermented grape juice? Or can it simply be synthetic syrup with no relationship to any of the fruits of the earth? What kind of prayer effects the transformation? Who is fit to say this set prayer and consecrate the elements? What happens to the believer when s/he receives consecrated bread and wine? Who is fit to receive the consecrated elements? The various answers given to these questions have tended to divide the Church so much that we take pride in codifying with whom we can be in communion and with whom not.

Often it is easily forgotten that an unquestionable intent of the celebration is to symbolize the unity of believers and

foster it by bringing people together around a common table to share as equals in a common meal. There are those who exclude others saying "We exclude only those who are not real believers whom God would not want us to associate with, least of all share a common meal with!" Many of us readily exclude our own children whom we would like to be nurtured in the faith. For we believe that they are not ready to participate until properly indoctrinated and have pledged to remain faithful to a particular version of the faith. Practically all of us exclude people of other faith communities.

However, I do not think it would be useful now to have a discussion on the questions outlined above. It appears that over the centuries, the sacrament has become an empty ritual that no longer forces reflection and recognition on what the meaning of the sacrament really is.

To begin a reflection on the meaning of the sacrament, I would like now to draw your attention to the Fourth Gospel's understanding of the significance of the Eucharist. The author of the Fourth Gospel refrains from mentioning the institution but emphasises instead the real meaning behind the ceremony. It is ironic but true, that it is the chronologically last of the four gospels that seems to preserve the original teaching of Jesus. The other three gospels where the story of the institution is preserved intact somehow seem to reflect a later development. The Fourth Gospel, however, as keen bible readers may have noticed, deliberately avoids any reference to the institution but nevertheless places a premium on actually eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the 'Son of Man'(see John 6:26-65). In order to fully grasp his concerns and appreciate his perception, let us first try to trace very briefly the story of the observance of the Lord's Supper as a sacrament from very early times.

The narratives of the Lord's Supper chronologically are as follows: The first narrative is by Paul recalling the Tradition of the Lord's Supper he had received from the first Apostles directly commissioned by Jesus during his life time – I Corinthians 11:23-26. This letter of Paul was perhaps written in early 50s of the first century. Then follow the accounts in Mark's Gospel Mark 14:17-25 – probable date 60-65 A.D. ; in Matthew 26:17-29 ; and Luke 22: 7-23 – both these latter accounts could be approximately dated in the late seventies of the first century.

The first Church in Jerusalem, according to Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, "And all who believed were together

and had all things in common; And day by day attending the Temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts praising God and having favour with all the people." (Acts 2: 42-47). And, in the same book of Acts when Luke describes the third missionary journey of Paul he mentions the Church in Troas meeting only on the first day of the week to break bread. (Acts 20:7). The practice of having all things in common and having all meals together seems to have been already given up and the practice of meeting to break bread once a week on Sundays seem to have come into practice. However, when they came together it was for a common meal, which culminated in the commemoration of the Last Supper. And even the once a week common meal seems to have become an occasion for revelry of the affluent who indulged in eating and drinking ignoring the needs of those who could not afford to put in their share in accordance with the standards of the rich. (1Cor 11:20-29). The warning words of Paul that those who eat and drink without discerning the body bring judgement upon themselves is with reference to the unity of the body of Christ, the sacred fellowship of the community of believers. Earlier in chapter 10, talking about participation in pagan worship Paul refers to the Lord's Supper and says "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body" strongly echoing a widely prevalent Jewish sentiment that bread represents the gathered together community from an original state of having been scattered. So Paul was not concerned merely about the attributed 'sacred' status of the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper but about the oneness of the community. The Lord's Supper ceases to be what it was meant to be when the consciousness of the oneness of the community comprising rich and poor, women and men, the Jew and the Gentile character of the Church is treated with disdain.

The perception of the meaning of the observance of the Lord's Supper also seems to have undergone a development. For the words of the institution especially with reference to the cup undergo an expansion to include, "poured out for many" (as in Mark) and "poured out for many for the remission of sins" (Matt. 26:28) ." These developments seem to indicate that a different perception about the significance of the Lord's Supper had grown as early as the end of the first century. It had come to be viewed as the means of appropriating the forgiveness of sins. So the emphasis on community and sharing in a common meal to experience the presence of the risen Lord

in community gives way to a symbolic token observance of the meal.

The author of the Fourth Gospel, who writes the last of the canonical Gospels seems to have been disturbed by the abandoning of the practice of sharing in a common meal and going in for a token meal to commemorate the Lord's Supper. He is disturbed because thereby the nature of the redemptive work achieved by Christ the 'I am' through enlisting the participation of the suffering people into himself as the 'Son of Man' is left out of account. He is also worried that the believers were shifting the emphasis on a sharing community towards individual appropriation of the body and blood of Christ.

Therefore, John resorts to two things. First, he reminds his readers that the Lord did not spring a surprise during the Last Supper (John 13:2-35) he shared with the disciples by asking them to eat his body and drink his blood. Rather, he has been teaching them for a long time as to how any loaf of bread signifies the cooperation between God and human beings in the work of providing for the needs of the world. So he chooses not to mention the institution but instead asks his disciples to serve one another by giving them a model by himself taking on the duty of a slave and washing their feet. Thereby John attempts to emphasize the need to be a new community of service and sharing. In a way Luke also shares this concern for a community conscious of service. for he alone mentions the dispute about who is great among them on the occasion of the Supper and Jesus' reminder that he was among them as One who Serves.(Lk 22: 24-27), but his emphasis in the narrative, however, is on the institution.

Second, what John does is to shift the context of the teaching of Jesus about bread being a simple but powerful symbol depicting the ongoing nature of God-human cooperation to the discourse that follows on the feeding of the five thousand in which John alone tells us the story of the little boy willingly giving up his packed meal (John 6:5-13) . The twin concerns of enabling believers to keep intact the joint venture of God and suffering humanity in the work of redemption and of God's purpose to bring about a new human community of sharing and service to one another, both are thereby emphasized together.

These implications are by no means immediately obvious to us. That is because while writing John could assume that his readers knew what we do not know. Especially, John could assume that his readers knew the traditional Jewish

prayer of thanksgiving which Jesus used regularly to give thanks over the bread and wine, he could assume knowledge of the meaning of Jesus' self designation as the 'Son of Man' who has come down from heaven". It is because of our ignorance of what is taken as prior knowledge that we fail to understand what it is to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the 'Son of Man'. Therefore let us first remind ourselves of the earlier teaching of Jesus as recorded in the Fourth Gospel. The most important section of the long discourse on bread from Heaven is: "I am the bread of life, those who come to me shall not hunger, and those who believe in me shall never thirst"; (Jn 6:35) and again, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the 'Son of Man' and drink his blood, you have no life in you; those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed and my blood is drink indeed. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them." (Jn. 6: 53-56). Three things in this text call for special comment. They are, 'I AM' the bread of life; eating the flesh of the 'Son of Man' and drinking his blood; and, they abide in me and I in them. These three phrases could be understood only in the light of the Prayer of Thanksgiving customarily used during fellowship meals observed by the Jewish people, by taking note of the import of Jesus' self-designation as the 'Son of Man' and the Johannine meaning of abiding in Christ and Christ in us.

Let us first take note of the Prayer of thanksgiving Jesus or the host of the occasion would have used on every occasion of giving thanks over the bread during the many fellowship meals he frequently shared with his disciples, with friends like Simon, Mary, Martha and Lazarus and also with those deemed as sinners. The prayer went somewhat as follows:

" O Lord, God of heaven and earth, we thank you for rain, land and seed and for the gift of human labour, that as the seed that is scattered grows and multiplies and is gathered into this bread. So we pray that we who are scattered over the earth may be gathered into one community."

Bread symbolised for the Jewish people the cooperation between the Lord of creation and humans in producing food for the world. We may add that God would very much like us to continue in that cooperation first in the matter of due recognition being accorded to the exploited labour involved in the matter of producing food. Bread also symbolized for

the Jewish people the hope of being gathered together from their state of being dispersed over the diaspora. They looked forward to the day when they would one day be a sovereign nation. To these well-known sentiments Jesus adds another by describing himself as living bread. Just as food sustains physical life through giving itself for human consumption Jesus as the eternal 'I AM' and as the 'Son of Man' gives himself for the sustenance of life in terms of just relationships, in terms of sustaining a sense of vocation and service... weaning people away from selfishness and self-centredness... i.e. in terms of all that we would call the realm of spirituality. Real spiritual values can govern life only through incessant self giving of the divine to the human. Self-giving to support another is the essence of life.

We in fact see this in the way the animal world lives. All life depends on other forms of life for survival, and as far as human life is concerned there is a heavy interdependence on one another in familial relationships, societal responsibilities, trade and commerce arrangements, the list is endless... Interdependence is never evenly balanced either in the realm of nature or in the realm of human relationships. Some give a lot more of themselves for the well being of others and some get away by contributing little. The very fabric of life is made that way. No matter how social structures are rendered and working conditions, fair wages and mutual obligations are corrected to reduce the imbalance, a big debt will still be owed by those destined to be beneficiaries to those whose destiny it is to give more. For example, the debt owed to mothers by their children through the long years of dependence, the debt owed by husbands to their wives, the debt owed by the wealthy and the comfortable to those who serve to keep them in comfort... and in the realm of nature the debt owed by the predators to the preyed upon animals... All these can never be repaid.

Self-giving is the essence of the divine. God has created life to reflect God's own being. So those who give more than they receive are incorporated into the divine. So when Jesus says he is the living bread from heaven he sustains the entire process of self-giving that sustains life. The problem is that those of us at the receiving end do not want to acknowledge this and we tend to demand even more and continue to exploit our benefactors with impunity. It is here that there needs to be a thorough heart search and repentance.

All of us know that we seldom acknowledge the hard labour that goes into producing food. When we sit down for a meal we do give thanks to God occasionally including in that thanksgiving the "loving hands that prepared the meal" but never think it fit to thank God for God's partners the exploited labourers whose labour took a major share in the process of food production.

According to John, our Lord would have us acknowledge the exploited labour and only then shall we be led to see the way in which the entire suffering community as incorporated into the divine endeavour of redemption.

In order to perceive this meaning we have to understand Jesus' self-designation as the 'Son of Man' who came down from heaven and who is the bread of life. The title 'Son of Man' tries to do justice to the joint endeavour of God and suffering humanity in the process of redemption. The eternal 'Son of God' became the 'Son of Man'. It is not a simple reference to the incarnation. It assumes a very deep significance through an allusion to Scripture. The allusion is to the 'Son of Man' Daniel saw in his night vision which is found in the seventh chapter of the book of Daniel. The 'Son of Man' in Daniel is the name given to the people of the most high who are the people who were persecuted by the Greek tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes. The persecuted people were also a struggling people. They did not submit themselves to the tyrant who wanted to corrupt their religion and culture. They met with severe reprisal. (Daniel 7:13-27 to be read in the light of I & II Maccabees from the Apocrypha) They took courage by remembering the valiant struggles of Daniel against Darius (Dan.6:1-24) and of Shadrach Meshach and Abed Nego who did not bow down to the statue set up by Nebuchadnezzar and were thrown into the furnace. They experienced God walking with them and bringing them out of the furnace (Dan.3:1-30). Daniel already foresaw (i.e. in his night vision in ch. 7 already referred to), the sufferings during the time of Antiochus and saw in his vision the deliverance of the suffering people. This collective of the suffering people of God, Daniel designated as the 'Son of Man'. So when Jesus the 'Son of God' assumes the title 'Son of Man' what is plainly given to understand is that the collective of suffering humanity on whom arrogant rulers inflict pain are incorporated into the 'Son of God' himself. Their suffering is to be subsumed into the suffering of the 'Son of God'/'Son of Man' to make a pool of redemption for the whole of humankind.

Therefore, the primary meaning of eating the flesh of the 'Son of Man' and drinking his blood means that we eat every morsel of bread, every handful of rice and every piece of idly, dosa or chapatti ... in the consciousness that those who laboured for it, some of them at least are hungry, even as we receive it thankfully as having come to us by God's providential care. We therefore are eating the flesh of the 'Son of Man' and are drinking his blood. Once we begin to do that the next step of seeing the whole collective of all those who suffer unjustly can be seen as suffering together with the 'Son of Man' or vice versa and thereby we owe our redemption as much to them as to God and the 'Son of God' who has become one with them. If only the world of humanity is enabled to become Eucharistic (i.e. become a grateful community) a true community of peace, justice, of mutual concern for one another, of willingness to serve the least as representing the 'Son of Man' ... will emerge. This is life eternal, this is life abundant. This way the world will abide in Christ and Christ in the world.

The 'abiding in Christ and Christ in us' is not about an emotional Christian experience. It has strong practical implications. Christ is the 'I AM'. This means the 'I AM' of Midian who was revealed to Moses as one who had always been suffering together with the people as he spoke out of the burning bush, which symbolized the experience of slavery and tyranny of the people in Egypt. So the practical implication of abiding in the 'I AM' means we too seek to be in solidarity with those who serve and toil for us then we can be forever Christ's friends and companions. Though we can never repay the debt at least the poor and the oppressed shall accept us as friends. We shall thus be on the march towards the new human community. It is towards this we commemorate the institution of the Lord's Supper. Exactly how it is done liturgically is unimportant if the consciousness that through this act we become a Eucharistic Community is the consciousness that occupies and guides us. No matter how beautifully and correctly the service is conducted if we are not taken up by a true Eucharistic spirit then ours will be a form of religion devoid of the power of the Spirit of God. May God fill us with a spirit of thankfulness to God revealed in Christ and also to the entire human collective of suffering who are indeed God's partners in redemption. We shall then experience afresh God's breath being breathed into us by the Crucified and risen Lord whose body is still being broken and whose blood continues to be poured out for us. Amen.

