

HOW THE CHURCH SHOULD EAT ITSELF

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Proverbs 9:1-6

Psalm 34:9-14

John 6:51-58.

Jesus said: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."
(John 6.51)

So here we are, about to engage in what many would argue is the single most important act Christians can perform together – sharing bread and wine, so that our process of being transformed by Christ into his Body can continue. Everything else in the Christian life depends, in a certain sense, not just on doing this, but on the way that we do it.

Sharing bread at the Lord's table is an important act not least because it is, practically and historically, a profoundly dangerous one. For it calls into question who we are, who Jesus is, what bodies are, what sacrifice means, how God's kingdom comes, and what is truly involved in sharing – or not – the very stuff of life.

What's more, since I am an Anglican in the presence of Anabaptists, none of us can afford to forget that some of my ancestors killed, and many of your ancestors were killed, in disputes over what the bread of life really amounts to.

And they did this, Catholics and Protestants alike, without apparently realizing that they were desecrating the very Body they sought to honor by their supposedly God-fearing actions. The warning to us about how we administer the table could not be stronger.

Yet the table of the Lord is still a place of conflict and division. In most cases, thankfully, Christians do not kill each other over doctrinal disagreements (like whether a piece of bread remains a piece of bread) today.

But we still, as Christians, deny each other in the presence of the Feast of Life. In my Anglican Communion, for instance (I'm sure you can name your own examples in the Mennonite Church) there are many senior bishops who will not share Communion bread with the Archbishop of Canterbury, because of a disagreement about whether certain people can be holy and acceptable before God.

The disagreement is theoretically about what we call today (in a way our New Testament forbears would not quite understand) human sexuality. But in fact it is also about who has the right to receive or deny someone at Jesus' table.

Jesus himself was decisive about this. If you read the Gospels you will see that he caused a scandal by sharing bread and table fellowship with all who sought him –

whether clean or unclean in the eyes of the law, acceptable or unacceptable to the religious authorities.

This wasn't an undemanding liberalism, however. To take his place at the table, the tax collector Zaccheus (in the famous story recorded in Luke 18:10-14) needed to restore his relationship with those whose livelihoods he had robbed. Not because they wouldn't accept him (Jesus ate with him before his conversion), but because he needed to accept them as brothers and sisters. The blockage was in *him*. And eating with Jesus was its medicine.

God's realm is like this, says Jesus. It is a feast. And all are invited. The only issue is how we respond, whether we are prepared to be humble enough to share, whether we are willing to be changed forever by sitting at God's table as equals – rather than as rich and poor, Jew and non-Jew, male and female, taxed and taxing.

But at the moment of real crisis, his impending death at the hands of those who saw God's presence in him as the ultimate threat to their power, Jesus did something even more shocking. In talking to his friends, he spoke of his body as food, and he said that that as 'the Body', those who feed on Jesus, they (and we) are called upon to be consumed by, and consuming of, the divine love that becomes bread and flesh for us - is made available in the material.

The immediate response was confusion. Is this man mad? How can a piece of bread be confused with flesh, and how can we possibly eat the flesh of Jesus? According to St John, Jesus is exasperated. How can these people be so dumb? In speaking of himself as bread, Jesus is saying that the way, the life and the truth that he embodies (enfleshes) is the very substance of life – a kind of life that cannot perish and cannot be limited, because it is sustained by God not mere molecules.

That is, the bread that Jesus is, that Jesus gives us and that Jesus invites us to *be*, is *unlimited*. It is a never-ending feast, and it cannot be the case that in consuming this bread we take food out of the mouths of others.

The bread of life is like the manna the wandering Hebrews found in the desert. There is enough for all and it goes on multiplying, so long as we do not try to restrict or hoard it. This is the way we are to live in a world where, as Tolstoy put it, "food for myself alone is a material issue; food for my neighbours is a spiritual issue."

That is, bread is spiritual. That *doesn't* mean it is 'non-material', it means it is for sharing and developing life (which is precisely what the word 'spirit' means).

So when Jesus gives himself to us, inviting us to be one body with him (to consume him and to be consumed), it is life feeding on life, life generating life. This is the opposite of parasitism. The more we eat the more there is. The more there is the more we share. The more we share, the more people eat and the more there is to eat. And so on.

This is God's economy of plenty, and it works in almost the exact opposite way to conventional economics – because its currency is grace and friendship, not money and stock exchanges.

However, the church that claims Jesus, God's person, for its own, often operates in a quite different way. We feed not on Christ, but on each other, parasitically. We eat in an unhealthy way, seeking a monopoly on the Bread of Life - which is actually sheer gift. We seek to deny bread to others because they threaten us (by being "not like us" in certain ways).

In so doing we betray the life-giving bread that Jesus is, and we demonstrate that we need to learn to eat anew. To "lay aside immaturity, simple-mindedness, and live, and walk in the way of insight", as the Book of Proverbs puts it.

In finding the table that truly is the Lord's (and not ours, in any of our denominational guises) we will, says the Psalmist, "depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it."

But this is only possible if we are able to be transformed. And we are transformed by becoming Christ's body, by being united with his flesh – which carries the ineradicable scars of crucifixion, but is also risen (glorified by the life-giving that is God's very self).

Being transformed, says Jesus, isn't a matter of being clever enough to think ourselves into the right state. It happens in a much more ordinary way when we eat bread together in his presence – as a matter of habit, rather than when we choose. It involves sharing bread with friends, and *especially* enemies. And it means seeking Christ's presence in the most unlikely, awkward, broken people – such as those we see seated around us this morning, perhaps!

This for me, as an Anglican, is what the whole ritual of Communion is about. Not mindless repetition, but an action through which the whole of the Gospel is made known, and I am located in God's story and united to others in Christ, continually and repeatedly. It is a way of learning bodily (not just in my head), of practicing Christly gestures that become part of who I am when I am not at the table as well as when I am.

Of course, as those who know me best would be the first to tell you, this is a slow and painful process which sometimes shows the barest fruit. But that is why I need to be incorporated into a Body that does it with me and for me. I cannot do it on my own.

Let's just think about how this process works and how it re-tells the story of who we are. We have bread and wine (or something a bit like wine) before us. We toiled for them, but they are still finally gifts. And we are thankful for them, for the life that God gives. We take the bread, we break it and share it. There is enough for all. No one is outside the invitation to this feast, but there is a warning. If we truly share and eat we will be changed.

As we eat the bread which is Christ, he becomes us. We become his body. So as we eat his body we eat ourselves – but not in a way that destroys, rather in a way that multiplies bread, flesh and hope. It isn't magic. You don't need Aristotle's theories of essences and accidentals to understand what is going on. It is simply a way of saying that as we consume and are consumed by the love of Christ in each other, we nourish each other and are nourished.

So is Christ present in this bread and this wine as we share them? That is the question that the church has often fought over in bizarre metaphysical ways that show us how easily we miss the point.

Of course Christ is present. But not in the bread and wine alone (the Roman Catholic Council of Trent called that idea "the sin of specificity", you may be surprised to hear). Christ is present in the *whole event* – in the people, in the sharing, in the words, in the gestures, in our hearts and in the new possibilities that will flow naturally if we allow Christ's presence to change us.

But Christ's presence is not just a comfort. It is a challenge, a test of our integrity. In our Anglican services we say these words: "We are one body, because we all share in one bread."

And the world shouts back, silently: "Hey, you Christians. Is that really true? Are you one body? Do you share the bread of life, or do some get loads of it while others starve? And not just at the Communion table, but in the *real world*, for Christ's sake! How goes the economy of Christians? Do they live as brothers and sisters who sit at table together? Does this breaking of bread mean anything, or are you kidding yourselves? The test is how you live. That is how we will know whether you are united with Christ, or just going through a little act."

This is why the Eastern Orthodox talk of service in the community as 'the Eucharist after the Eucharist'.

Let me end with a story which, for me, sums all this up. Some 23 years ago I was in Turin, in Italy, sharing Communion with a small group of Catholic Christians living on a run-down estate in the poorest part of town. They met weekly in an apartment to read the Bible and to reflect on their involvements in the work place and in social action. Always they shared bread and wine to remember Jesus' death at the hands of the powers-that-be, and to anticipate with celebration the solidarity of his risen life.

It was, in most respects, a standard Catholic mass patterned on the Western Rite, though with prayers and words of their own, too. Significantly, the bread and the wine were blessed by everyone together, not a priest apart. There was also an urgency about it all. These people didn't need God's presence tomorrow, they needed it *now*.

Then something amazing happened. Right at the end, in Anglican and Catholic Communion, a priest will gather up the remaining bread and wine and consume it, to

make sure nothing profane happens to it. It has always struck me as a little obscene that one person, representing the church as a whole, should gobble up the remaining Bread of Life while many in the world starve.

But, thankfully, that didn't happen in this community. Quietly, while we were still praying, olive bread and pizza, tomatoes and fruits, more wine and all kinds of other food began to appear on the Lord's table, which was at the same time a lunch table. And the bread and wine that had been our sacred meal suddenly became part of a huge feast to which everyone was invited.

These Christians went ringing on the doorbells of all their neighbors with the good news. Free food, come and share! And if you want, bring some more to add to the feast. Needless to say, we were there all afternoon. And it was one of the most moving events of my life. The way they put it was that "life flows into the Eucharist and the Eucharist flows into life." And that's just how it felt. *This* is the kingdom. *This* is Communion. And it makes all the difference in the world.

So you and I will now the bread of life. And here is a humbling thought. However you understand that piece of wheat as it is pressed into your hands, there is a true sense in which what is happening is that Christ is voluntarily putting *himself* at your disposal. In the act of Communion, God, the alpha and omega, is choosing to be dependent upon us, deeply fallible human beings.

This may only be half the truth, but it true nevertheless. And it dignifies us beyond belief. The question is, what we will do with Christ and the bread he gives us. Will we share it, will we hoard it, will we waste it or will we let it rise up in us to transformation? The decision, says God, is yours. But know that I will always go on giving life.

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