Holy Communion – Week SIx
A Meal of Transformation, Revolution and Drama

Reflection

How did you experience Holy Communion this Sunday?

Spiritual Reflections on Holy Communion

At the Last Supper with his disciples Jesus commanded two actions for his disciples to repeat: to wash each other's feet and to eat and drink bread and wine in his memory. Had the church chosen to repeat the former as its pattern of worship, we would have had theological debates on the whether or not to use soap or just pure water in the basin, papal decrees defining the exact point at which the foot ends and the ankle begins, and spiritual reflections on such topics as "The Five Toes of Humility". As it is, the church chose the latter as its central act of worship. In this study so far we have discussed some of the doctrinal issues that have exercised Christian minds for 2000 years.

Tonight we conclude with a brief consideration of some of the ways that Christians have reflected spiritually on the sacrament. The three we'll look at are chosen quite arbitrarily as ones with which I'm personally familiar and because they represent a range of spiritualities. Many, many more writers and mystics have written on the subject and you are invited to think about the matter yourself and read further if you wish.

Transformation

Henri Nouwen was a Dutch Catholic priest and academic who worked and wrote in the field of psychology, pastoral care and spirituality. His early work was particularly noted for his attempts to build a bridge between psychotherapy and pastoral care – across a gap that had opened up in the middle of the 20th century. His 1972 work, The Wounded Healer, is still regarded as a classic text on the subject. His later work was mainly in the area of Christian spirituality and his informal, vulnerable writing style make his profound reflections on faith, life, death and ministry easily accessible.

In his book *Life of the Beloved* (1992) Nouwen investigates the question of human identity. He sees people in their hunger for success, popularity and power as being trapped between self-rejection and arrogance by the internal and external voices that keep questioning whether we are "good enough". The way out of the trap, says Nouwen is to listen to another voice, God's voice, assuring us that "we are the beloved. We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children and friends loved or wounded us."

To claim our belovedness Nouwen invites us to contemplate how Jesus may transform us as He transformed the bread at the Last Supper by taking, blessing, breaking and giving it.

Taken – In this section Nouwen speaks about the way that God's children are God's "chosen" ones. He distinguishes between the competitive choices that are best known to us in this world, eg. if 15 players are chosen for a rugby team then many more are rejected as not being good enough, and the compassionate choices within God's kingdom.

> "Instead of making us feel that we are better, more precious or valuable than others, our awareness of being chosen opens our eyes to the chosenness of others. That is the great joy of being chosen: the discovery that others are chosen as well. In the house of God there are many mansions. There is a place for everyone – a unique, special place." (pg 52)

How are we to reclaim the truth that we are God's chosen ones when the world does not choose us? First, be ready to unmask the world's voices for what they are: manipulative, controlling, power-hungry and destructive – or even just wounded themselves. Secondly, seek out places and people who remind you of your deepest identity. This does not mean surrounding yourself with sycophants who will only praise you but rather it means joining honest, supportive communities such as a church group, AA group, etc. And thirdly, celebrate your chosenness by practicing gratitude. Gratitude focuses our attention on what we ***do*** have and not on what we ***don't*** have.

Blessed – "It is not enough to be chosen, we also need an ongoing blessing that allows us to hear in an ever-new way that we belong to a loving God." Nouwen notes that blessedness is not the feeling we generally have about ourselves. It is much easier to have a sense that we are cursed. When we think about all the pain and suffering in the world as well as our own struggles with work, relationships and health, it is easy to hear voices that call us evil, worthless, useless or doomed. For Nouwen, these are lying voices. To feel blessed we need to listen to other voices that will speak the truth about our blessedness.

The best place to hear such a voice is in prayer – for here we hear the voice of God. Another way to hear such voices is by being more truly present and attentive to blessings. Nouwen points out how easily we dismiss compliments when others say good things to us, "Oh, don't mention it, forget about it, it's nothing" and so on. Thirdly, there seems to be a reciprocal relationship between claiming our own blessedness and blessing others. The more we feel blessed, the deeper our desire to bless others; the more we bless others, the easier it is to recognise our own blessedness.

Broken – Even God's beloved ones cannot escape being broken. There are many ways in which we experience brokenness – suffering, pain, sickness, rejection, failure and, ultimately, death. Nouwen points out that "Our brokenness is always lived and experienced as highly personal, intimate and unique." He sees it as an inevitable part of being human. But how to respond to our brokenness?

First, we should face it squarely and befriend it. This is not easy to do, nor is it easy even to describe what "befriending" our brokenness might mean. However, when we cannot face our pain and we run away from it, it can paralyse us and make us vulnerable to manipulation. Facing our brokenness makes it possible for us to "put it under the blessing." Again, a difficult task to define. Nouwen speaks about this as the way that we can come to see our brokenness as an opening towards the full acceptance of ourselves as the Beloved: We are beloved even with all our shortcomings.

Given – Just as the bread cannot be shared at the meal unless it is broken, so Nouwen sees a mysterious link between our brokenness and our ability to give to each other. Elsewhere he draws on Karl Menninger's principle: "the most personal is the most universal", meaning that our deepest personal experiences and truths (especially of suffering and pain) resonate most universally with others (especially in their own unique suffering and pain). Nouwen suggests that "our deepest human desire is to give ourselves to each other as a source of physical, emotional and spiritual growth" and that it is our brokenness, above all, which makes this possible.

Discussion

> ***How might we be transformed by recognising that we are taken, blessed, broken and given?***

Revolution

Research into the history of 1st Century Judaism has sparked questions about Jesus' understanding of his own ministry and his intentions when instituting practices like his fellowship meals which, as we have seen, eventually morphed into Holy Communion. Far from being incidental social occasions that Jesus just happened to enjoy, these meals are now understood by authors like NT Wright, Jon Sobrino, John Dominic Crossan and others as part of a deliberate programme instituted by Jesus with the intention to bring about religious, cultural and political revolution.

NT Wright, for example, sees Jesus' fellowship meals as part of his programmatic challenge to the symbols of Judaism (Sabbath, food laws, nation and land, and Temple) that marked out an exclusivist view of Israel as God's only chosen people. Through healing and teaching,

Jesus begins to reconstitute a New Israel, an Israel in which not just the morally and ritually pure (and those with the power to declare them so), but also those at the margins of society are included. Table fellowship which brought together rabbi, disciples, sinners and outcasts became the physical expression of this reconstituted nation. As Peter put it, "Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Peter 2:10).

In her book, *The Holy Thursday Revolution* (2005), Beatrice Bruteau points out that Jewish and Roman societies in Jesus' time as well as much of the world today were organised along lines of domination and submission. People were accustomed to being included or excluded from social settings and groups on the basis of honour and shame. These forces kept the whole of society subject to the will of the powerful. The powerful were invited to sit at tables where there was plenty and even excess. The powerless, those excluded by systems of shame such as the Jewish purity laws and the Roman class distinctions, were left hungry, fighting for scraps from the table. Jesus, by contrast, organised suppers to meet the practical needs of the people as well as to introduce his concepts of equality, reciprocity, mutual indwelling and abundance. She writes,

> "When people *share* what they have, they often find that there *is* enough to go around, even more than enough….This is a vision of *revolution*. It begins with a mystical experience, which is developed through thinking and feeling into a social program with economic and political dimensions. It begins with the realisation of divine filiation [i.e. that God is on our side] and works out as a multilevel human liberation." (pg 63)

This is not just about understanding history but bears deep spiritual reflection – especially if this was Jesus' intention. It is worth noting that these small communities which popped up across the Ancient Near East and spread throughout the Roman world actually did challenge and undermine the cultural and social powers that dominated the empire and finally did overthrow the political establishment. More than this, as Tom Holland has shown (fairly convincingly, I believe) in his book *Dominion* (2019), the Christian principles practiced first in these small communities based on Jesus' table fellowship became the foundational values of Western Civilisation – values so different to the Roman values which preceded them that the change can only be described as revolutionary.

Discussion

> ***To what extent, and in what way, might our table fellowship at Holy Communion and elsewhere foment a revolution today?***

Drama

In a series of books published in the early 1980's Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, developed the concept of Theo-Drama which takes seriously the narrative or dramatic way that God reveals Godself. God is seen as acting first within the inner relationships of love inside the Trinity, but then also in relation to the world through acts of creation, redemption and glorification. Theo-drama also implies that we, God's creatures, are invited to find our own stories taken up into the larger Story of the Trinity – we are given parts to play in the drama.

Starting "inside" the Trinity, we can say that God is not a static or monolithic being. The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that God is dynamic – there is a rich inner life of action or "drama" that takes place within God's being, as the Father pours himself out in love towards the Son, and the Son responds by pouring himself out in obedience and love towards the Father, and the Holy Spirit of Love binds them together as one. Incidentally, this reality gives the lie to the accusation often made by atheists that God is a needy despot who selfishly creates humans to worship him and so satisfy his own narcissism. The doctrine of the Trinity asserts that God is fully self-sufficient, enjoying the full experience of love and being loved. Creation then is motivated by an overflow of love that already exists and not by a desperate loneliness or need to be loved within God.

If we now think about worship in these dramatic terms, we can say that the whole drama of worship already takes place within the inner life of the Trinity. The Son offers worship to the Father eternally:

- Since the Ascension, the Son (in His full humanity) presents humanity before the Father in all its brokenness, sin and mortality;
- the Holy Spirit, Jesus tells us, acts as our advocate (John 14:26) to "remind" God of Christ's victory over sin and death on the Cross;
- the Son then speaks God's Word of reconciliation and we are forgiven;
- we are invited into the intimacy of God's family table;
- here the Son again offers intercessions for the whole world before the Father;
- and the Holy Spirit of Love is once again sent out to continue the *Missio Dei* (the mission of God) in the world.

What I have described here is precisely the order of worship we follow in church on Sundays. This is the "drama" of worship.

The first thing to say is that all of this can happen within the inner relationships of the Trinity without any input from us. Nevertheless, and this is the point of spiritual reflection, God invites our participation in the drama. At worship we are invited to be more than mere spectators.

Participants in the Drama

Railing against what he saw as the passivity of people at worship, Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard in 1847(!), accused congregations of treating the speaker in a sermon as an actor and behaving, themselves, as the audience sitting in judgement of the performance. He challenges congregations instead to think of the preacher as a prompter, prompting them to action (i.e. to be the actors) with God as the audience who will judge their performance.

Theo-Drama would push the theatrical metaphor even further than Kierkegaard did. In an age where much of what happens at church can be seen as a stage production – congregations sitting in rows as in a concert hall; musicians and choirs positioned in an area at the front (sometimes nowadays even called a "stage") facing the audience; and almost all liturgical actions, including preaching, carried out by just one or two leaders up front – maybe it is time to rethink the "roles" in worship. Theo-Drama suggests the following role division:

- God (as Trinity) is the primary actor in worship;
- Congregation members are invited to join the cast;
- Worship leaders (preachers, musicians, etc.) are the stage-hands and prompters who facilitate participation by the cast;
- The world is the audience.

The last point above, seeing the world as the audience, is not immediately obvious, until you reflect that worship in church on Sundays is only a microcosm of the much bigger Theo-Drama that plays out on the world stage. For Jesus is not only presenting before God the sin and brokenness of those who happen to be at worship on Sunday, nor was his reconciling death only intended for those who show up at church, nor do we only intercede for our own needs at worship. God's mission is wide, cosmic even, and we are invited to participate in the Theo-Drama at worship and in the world. Indeed, seen in this context, our participation in worship on Sunday should be the training ground for our participation, alongside God, in God's mission in every area of life.

Holy Communion is one of the key moments where the congregation is called upon to participate. It is worth thinking about Communion as a shared act of worship as a prototype for shared discipleship beyond the Sunday worship setting.

Discussion

> ***Are we an audience on Sunday? How can we deepen our sense of participation at worship and in life/mission?***