

'We Will Take What You Offer: Communion as a Counter-Cultural Act'

By Muriel Pearson, Minister at Cranhill Parish Church, Glasgow

'We will take what you offer
We will live by your word
We will love one another
And be fed by you Lord.'¹

Cranhill Parish Church, a tiny community of faith in one of the poorest areas of Scotland, celebrates communion once a month. This was the custom before I arrived in December 2004, and, as the film shows, it means different things to different people. I am convinced, however, that it is one of the key reasons the congregation are able to cohere, and cope with the changing circumstances they find themselves in. When I arrived, there were about 25 people worshipping on a Sunday. Today there are still 25. I estimate that around 40 people have come or gone in the meantime.

I think the congregation are remarkable in their love and concern for one another, and for the community they are set in. This can be seen in their willingness to allow their building to be taken over –literally overrun- by a community project which brings together people of goodwill across the community, and currently involves over 400 people each week through the community café, the nearly new shop, the food co-op, English classes and advice for asylum seekers and refugees and integration events and celebrations.

But it is hard to see this as a 'church'. And it is hard not to regret the days of big services with elders in suits and a Boys' Brigade that marched the length of Bellrock St. It is hard not to see the 'remnant' of these 'glory days' as failure.

One of my key concerns over the short time I have been with them has been to foster a sense of what God can do through small things, and to find ways other than numbers to measure 'success'. We recently adopted the aspirational description of ourselves as 'a small community of faith with a big heart...' I believe that the pattern of monthly communion is a crucial factor in both owning this description for now and seeing it as something we can live into.

A turning point in self perception for the congregation was an 'away day' in October 2007 facilitated by Irene Bristow where we shared what it is we value about our congregation and community and explored together the parable of the yeast, by making and then sharing bread in communion. Not only did this communion speak to us of the potency of small when in God's hands, but of the potency of Eucharist itself. As the yeast transforms the dough, so communion transforms the community...and not once only, but every time we take the bread and drink the wine.

Again and again as we engage with Scripture (following the lectionary) we take succour from the fact that the small communities of faith we call the early church were beset with difficulties

¹ Words and music J.L.Bell 'There is one among us', Wild Goose Publications 1998

and challenges every bit as overwhelming as ours. And again and again we find that to remember our Lord as he commanded sustains us and directs us and gives us courage to go on.

In his book 'Pray, Love, Remember', Michael Mayne says, 'When the first Christians came together to celebrate the weekly Easter, the 'anamnesis' of the crucified and risen Lord, they believed he would be present in all his living reality in their midst. For them every Eucharist bound together both past and future: the lakeside meals, the Maundy scene of foot-washing, Golgotha and the Easter appearances, as well as the anticipation of what shall be: the whole Gospel is remembered, re-present-ed, put together and made present again, in the 'now' of faith in all its saving power.'²

The 'now' of faith contains both a realised and future eschatology: woven together, in tension, looking to the future Heaven, but also defiantly proclaiming 'Heaven starts now!' and so seeking it, and proclaiming it, and finding it in daily life.

And so sharing communion is a profoundly counter-cultural act. In the short time I have, let me try to expand what I mean, framed by the wee worship song from the WGRG with which I began.

We will take what you offer...

Often theology around the Last Supper or communion focuses on the remembrance of Christ's death, as place to 'taste and see' God's salvation through Jesus' death. Of course it is this. But it is also an enactment of resurrection as the broken bread is remembered in the community of faith.

Traditionally, our statements of faith emphasise Jesus' birth and then move directly to his suffering and death. Ann Morisey, who was the Church of England's Director of the Commission on Urban Life and Faith, highlights the importance of the comma between 'born of the virgin Mary and 'suffered under Pontius Pilate' in the Apostles' Creed. She says that for renewal of the church we need to rediscover what the comma covers: the life and teaching of Jesus as a radical non-violent champion of the poor, prophet, teacher, healer, social commentator.

From the time of the explosion of liberation theology in South America and South Africa there has been a rediscovery of the radical strand of Christian thinking which has always been there, though sometimes submerged by Christendom and all the hierarchical values implicit in that concept. Whether you picture Jesus as Che Guevara in sandals or not, there is unquestionably a counter cultural edginess to Jesus that is often overlooked. He is a man from the margins, in an occupied country, where extremes of riches and poverty were evident in the prestige buildings of the Romans and the Herods, built by bonded labour, in a society where many hung onto life by a fingernail, and illness or death or a poor harvest meant starvation and death.

Far from being about 'pie in the sky when you die', communion teaches us not to wait for a future Heaven, although that is promised, but to work for it now. An ideology of 'Kingdom

² Mayne, Michael 'Pray, Love, Remember', DLT 2005 p126

theology' emphasises the 'already' over and against the 'not yet' of the expected fulfilment of God's reign. Just as the whole earth is full of God's glory, so ordinary life is the site of our discipleship. Communion is the acting out of the transformation that is life in Christ. As others have said, the Last Supper summarises the entire mission and life of Christ. In taking bread, giving thanks, breaking and sharing he is speaking of his own sense of what his life and death means, and also modelling the life he wants for the followers of the Way.

In his book exploring the possibilities of 'religion-less Christianity' as teasingly hinted at in Letters and Papers from Prison by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Drury writes that the centre of our religion is not a binding and holding to dogma or 'truth':

It will have to be a centre at which breaking and giving away is at least as permanently at work as joining and holding. There is an image of it in the central Christian rite of Holy Communion: the focal 'body' of Christ broken and given.³

Human impulse is to hold and to hoard. Breaking and giving away or sharing is profoundly countercultural.

Walter Brueggemann has powerfully demonstrated the tensions between the myth of scarcity and the reality of God's plenty, if it is shared, as evidenced throughout the Hebrew Bible.⁴ He reads the whole sweep of the story of land and slavery, Law and jubilee as a struggle to realise God's politics. Jesus stands firmly in the tradition of the Hebrews prophets. In breaking and sharing bread, Jesus is challenging the human impulse to grab and hoard. It is a counter intuitive, counter cultural action.

Further, communion is often seen as an intensely spiritual experience for the individual: our emphasis on taking it together and on the communion between and beyond us is also countercultural. Communion is not only about me and my Jesus. As Richard Chartres said, 'The Christian task is to renew the local Eucharistic communities that already exist in their thousands. Too many of them at present are aggregations of people, who, in a parody of the consumerist culture around them regard the church as an institution that ought to cater for their religious needs and feelings. Real conversion involves a passage from a consumer-style Christianity, where most of us naturally started, to a sense of Christian citizenship in which everyone of the faithful understands what God is calling them to be and do in order to build the future of Jesus Christ (in London).'⁵

Citizenship of God's realm speaks of hospitality, generosity and transformation held as values over and against the values of an individualistic, consumer culture. The breaking and sharing of bread connects through time and across borders in a challenge to the impulse to gate and police the boundaries of our communities. Bread and wine are staples of human survival as well as potent symbols of faith, and recognition of that challenges the dangerous dualism that separates sacred from secular, Sunday from Monday, orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

³ Drury, John 'The Pot and the Knife', SCM Press 1979, page 4

⁴ See Brueggemann, Walter 'The Word that redescribes the world: the Bible and discipleship' Fortress 2006

⁵ Richard Chartres, 1995, quoted in Davey, Andrew, 'Urban Christianity and Global order' SPCK 2001

Taking what God offers is an act of solidarity with these countercultural values.

We will live by your word...

The New Testament and especially the gospels are stuffed full of communion...the wedding at Cana to the Road to Emmaus... and many meals, and many stories about meals, in between. And then, of course, the defining Hebrew story of deliverance from Egypt and daily desert food, and the ritual remembrance of Passover itself. This is not very surprising in a subsistence society, where one failed harvest meant disaster for many and especially the most marginalised...widows, orphans, those who could not work because of disability or mental health problems. But in our resource-rich society we share the same vulnerability, although we do not know it.

As we follow the common lectionary we encounter these episodes and stories all the time. Each communion service, once a month, can emphasise a different aspect: hospitality; abundance; sustenance for the journey; Jesus' presence in us, the body of Christ; invitation to lost and least; word become flesh; nourishment; broken bread that we might be whole; hunger for justice; harvest; ecology; communion with saints...the depths are unplumbed. Sharing a meal with thanksgiving expresses our sense of our fragility and our dependency on what earth provides, and our dependency on one another.

We also encounter communion in other places. In the DVD Jean describes being profoundly moved by a Passover meal shared with friends from the neighbouring RC church...but we experience communion not only in overt moments of worship, but in the soup and sandwiches we have together on other Sundays, and in the community café through the week. And we can look for it round every table at which we eat.

We will love one another...

Jesus' whole life models communion ...thanksgiving to God...the breaking of bread...sharing...pouring out self for others...We know that the breaking of bread together was a very important part of the liturgy of the Early Church, probably weekly, and we know most about that practice because Paul had cause to write to the Corinthians, whose Eucharistic practice reinforced rather than challenged the social inequalities of Roman society. For Paul not only was Eucharist a commemoration feast, as was the practice in contemporary society, it was a transformative experience.⁶

In the DVD Lily correctly uses the word 'ritual' to describe the first communion of 70 years ago that is still so memorable, but she corrects herself because 'ritual' has come to have additional nuances of hollowness or emptiness. In sociological terms, though, ritual is much richer. Any formalised behaviour is ritual. Ritual studies suggest a dialectical relationship between ritual and social structure. Some theorists see this as essentially conservative, a protecting of boundaries, but others, following Victor Turner, see ritual as a 'form of protest against the existing social structure (which) ...contributes to social change.'⁷

⁶ Meeks, Wayne, 'The First Urban Christians', Yale University Press 1983 p 162

⁷ Alexander, Bobby, 'Victor Turner revisited: Ritual as Social Change' Scholars Press, Atlanta, Georgia 1991, p 1

Bobby Alexander takes this idea of protest further in his study of a black Pentecostal church in the United States, arguing that:

...ritual does not merely mirror nor rest on the surface of more fundamental social processes that underlie or precede it; it is not simply symptomatic of more primary social activity. Rather, ritual is part of the process of social change, given its capacity to generate new, communitarian social arrangements.⁸

Alexander's argument is that given an accompanying and overtly articulated ideology ritual action is in itself transformative. This seems to be what Paul is doing when he gives the Corinthian house-church a rubric to accompany their eucharist, a rubric which underscores the egalitarian nature of the meal (Even if he does not go so far as to say the rich must share their food with the poor, it is a logical next step, and social reversal is so central to Jesus' own meal practices.)

And the central ideology expressed in communion? Love. When we make this explicit, participation in the ritual of remembrance is a recommitment to community shaped by love of God and neighbour.

It can be argued that communion is in this sense not so much pastoral as political. 'We all think we go to get something from it, to feel better, to get a spiritual buzz, but I can't find that in any scripture passage about communion and all the fellowship meals Jesus ate with sinners and prostitutes and the rest. It was a political action of radical inclusion and defiance. Even the Last Supper wasn't about feeling better. It was an act of defiance against the dark powers and for the power and sacrifice of love. The only tingle comes from the daring that Jesus broke the bread and went to the cross trusting love, not expecting resurrection.'⁹ So communion is the continual living of a story of changing and transforming the world not with force but with breaking bread.

And be fed by you lord....

In a recent episode of Eastenders after yet another awful traumatic incident, the Mitchell sisters suggest a family meal. Phil protests, 'I can't celebrate with you lot now!' He, along with many in our culture, can't envisage eating together as a source of comfort or hope, as a sign of solidarity or as an act of repentance and sign of forgiveness. Communion has all this richness to offer.

The wee worship song I've been using to shape my reflections can also finish 'and be led by you Lord' and as disciples we want to follow Jesus. But for a small, struggling community of faith to be *fed* is somehow more potent. We know our reliance on God. There is a need to be reminded that God provides daily what we need. There is a need to be reminded there is sustenance. Was it Bonaparte who said, 'An army marches on its stomach?' If we are to continue the struggle of the incarnation we need to take him into our body as he takes us into his. And then we need to live out of that impulse of thankfulness and breaking and giving away. When we do that, as Margaret put it so beautifully in the DVD something new happens: its resurrection now.

⁸ Alexander, 1991 p19

⁹ Hamilton, Roddy 'This elastic is going to snap' Friday 31 August 2007 <http://abbotsford.org.uk/>