

Sermon for Sunday, 8 July 2018

“Jesus is not a donut, and certainly not a chocolate donut with sprinkles!”

This shrewd observation was made recently by one of my fellow Curates. In the weeks preceding our Priesting, the Coventry Curates were gathered together to consider the Eucharist. It promised to be a lively exchange, with Anglo-Catholic advocates of “Real Presence” rubbing shoulders with “Memorialist” Evangelicals.

However, nothing quite prepared us for what ensued. We were encouraged to lay aside our theological differences for the evening, and to work together in groups to develop credible liturgies for which an assortment of various Bread products might be employed successfully for a Communion service in a specific worship context.

The only stipulation was that we were not allowed to write off or dismiss any particular bread item because it offended our aesthetic, theological or personal sensibilities regarding the Eucharist. We could be “challenged” by the use of a particular item – say – brioche or poppadums – but were encouraged to resist the urge to take offense from its prospective use; and, rather frame a legitimate, canonical argument for its deployment.

Ironically, as one of the stalwart Anglo-Catholics in our cohort, it was a tremendous shock to everyone – including me — that I was the one person in room to provide the credible case for the chocolate donuts.

Clearly, I'd come a long way in my thinking. I recall during my first term at theological college, spending a rather intense residential weekend exploring the Sacraments. I had anticipated this particular module with all the zeal a budding Liturgist could muster!

We were joined on this occasion by a group of Pioneer Ordinands, each a radical visionary, with a rolled up sleeves and “smelling of the sheep” approach to ministry and mission.

Their eyes glazed over as our tutor guided us through the practical mechanics of presiding at the Eucharist, their sighs audible, as he noted the patens, chalices, corporals, cirboria and chasubles! Cranking myself to my full height, I turned round stiffly in my seat, and shushed them, glaring at them with a hard stare worthy of Paddington Bear!

In defiance, the most outspoken member of the Pioneer group piped up: “So, all this ‘stuff’ is fine, but, in my context, with my people, why couldn't I just do the Eucharist with pizza and Diet Coke?”

I gasped -- and nearly fainted.

Histrionics aside, I was shaken to my core by the very thought, and by my tutor's response. I had expected the arrogant, upstart Pioneer to be firmly put back in his place. On the contrary, to my horror, he was not. As I walked out of that session, I felt as if I were walking through quicksand.

In tears, I felt lost at sea, adrift. The Eucharist has always been my anchor. A precious gift. Never merely something to "do", but a sacred action, to be approached and appreciated seriously, lovingly and reverently.

From childhood, as a Protestant child, attending Catholic school, sitting in weekly Mass, I longed to participate, but was gently yet firmly excluded. The nuns would tap your hands with a ruler if you put them up to try and receive Communion on the sly.

And who wouldn't dare to try? It was all so otherworldly — there were bells, a few words in the strange language of Latin, and so much smoke you couldn't see — amazing. I hungered to be a part of Jesus's great mystery. The Eucharistic drama. That which cannot be had, becomes the thing most desired. My vocation story is anchored by this desire and longing. I once had a vivid dream — a vision — seeing myself presiding at the Eucharist.

Since that time I have come to know the many shapes of forms of human longing and desire for the Eucharist, for knowing Jesus and connecting with Him in Communion. Do this, Jesus tells us, in memory of me. In the Eucharist, we recall God's extravagant love for us, we connect and re-connect to His sustaining power, we are overshadowed by His Grace - when we receive His Body and His Blood. The Eucharist, Mass, Holy Communion, The Lord's Supper, however it is known, it holds special meaning for each of us, particularly those in dire circumstances.

Stories of the faithful celebrating the Eucharist in extreme conditions are at once remarkable and humbling, revealing extreme depths of faith. There are notable accounts of prisoners of war steeling their courage with secret communion services behind bars, such as the internees of Changi Prison in the 1940s, where inmates endured three and a half years of torture sustained by a daily communion service led by their Bishop consecrating of grains of burnt rice and boiled water.

Diaries of Christians imprisoned in China during the Mao regime reveal similar tenacity and determination to celebrate and live the Eucharist - without vestments, or candles, with a stool as an altar and vinegar for wine. One priest recalled: "I presided over fifty-nine times, always escaping the attention of the guards, who repeatedly came into

my cell while I was celebrating but never realized that I was performing the most sacred act that there is.”

One of the most powerful examples comes from Armenia, during the Turkish genocide. In 1915, the village of Tzitogh was invaded and its inhabitants imprisoned. As their wives and children looked on, 4,000 men were shackled together and led on a death march. On their journey, food ran out. Among them was their parish priest who felt compelled to prepare his fellow villagers for their deaths. With shackled hands, the priest invoked the presence of the Holy Spirit, as he scooped and blessed handfuls of earth for them to ingest.

Closer to home is the story of my friend, Barbara, a member of the Altar and Flower Guild at my former parish, Church of St Luke-in-the-Fields, Manhattan. Through the sirens, noise and confusion of 9/11, as the Twin Towers blazed and crumbled, my brave, mild-mannered friend picked her way through Lower Manhattan, and threw open the doors of St Luke's. Although she was not ordained, nor ever served on the altar, she donned a cassock alb, retrieved the Reserved Sacrament from the tabernacle, and poured wine into chalices. She distributed Communion to all who came through the church doors: the injured, the frightened, the faithful. I am still in awe of Barbara's impulse, that in that

terrible, horrific, life-altering moment, the Eucharist – sharing the love of Christ – was her first instinct.

It is Barbara's story that came to mind that night we Curates quibbled over bread in Coventry. "No, Jesus is not a chocolate doughnut," I concurred. But, I pray that if faced with such an extreme situation, that sharing Christ's loving Presence, through whatever material was to hand, would be my first thought.

As I preside at the Eucharist for the first time today, it is a moment that is literally a dream come true, a moment captured beautifully in the words of poet-priest Malcolm Guite:

"Maundy Thursday"
by
Malcolm Guite

Here is the source of every sacrament,
The all-transforming presence of the Lord,
Replenishing our every element
Remaking us in his creative Word.
For here the earth herself gives bread and wine,
The air delights to bear his Spirit's speech,
The fire dances where the candles shine,
The waters cleanse us with His gentle touch.
And here He shows the full extent of love
To us whose love is always incomplete,
In vain we search the heavens high above,
The God of love is kneeling at our feet.
Though we betray Him, though it is the night.
He meets us here and loves us into light.