

## The Staff and Stuff of Life

### Maundy Thursday, Mass of the Last Supper

#### St Paul, King Cross

Just near our tiny cottage in Northumberland are the Ford and Etal Estates. Owned by Lord Joicey whose family made their money in the eighteenth century from coal, they are managed with great imagination. There is a working blacksmith's forge, a joinery workshop, a model railway and acres of productive farmland. The centrepiece in some ways is Heatherslaw Mill, a working water mill grinding wheat into flour. We've used their flour ourselves to make bread. The mill narrowly escaped damage in last year's floods. It gives vivid insights into that which is both the staff and stuff of life – bread. Modern steam bakeries and huge flour mills have distanced us from this. David Scott captures this perfectly in his poetry. He writes:

'We have come so far from bread.  
Rarely do we hear the clatter of the mill wheel;  
see the flour in every cranny,  
the shaking down of the sack, the chalk on the door,  
the rats, the race, the pool,  
baking day, and the old loaves:  
cob, cottage, plaited, brick.'

Later he continues:

'I go on about bread  
because it was to bread  
that Jesus trusted  
the meaning he had of himself.  
It was an honour for the bread  
to be the knot in the Lord's handkerchief  
reminding him about himself. So,  
O bread, breakable;  
O bread, given;  
O bread, a blessing;  
count yourself lucky bread.'

Of all days in the year, even saving Corpus Christi, this is the night upon which we dwell on bread. This is the Mass of the Last Supper. But perversely, look at our gospel. It is moving, tender, in some ways anarchic, vivid – but there's no mention of bread. It is, of course, the foot-washing. Admittedly it happens within the supper, but – uniquely among the four gospels – John's account is of a supper with no bread – nor indeed of wine. The nearest we get to any description is at the beginning when it mentions in passing: 'And during supper ...' Then later – we missed it out in fact – there is mention of a morsel being dipped at the time when Judas is about to betray. But there's no mention of a loaf. In a rather different sense to that meant by David Scott's poem, in John's gospel 'we have come so far from bread.'

Indeed in this gospel there is no institution narrative. By that I mean that there is no description of Jesus taking the bread and wine and asking us to eat and drink in remembrance of him whenever we do the same. The only mention we've heard of that was from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. That's perverse too, for elsewhere there is hardly any mention in Paul's writings of any incidents or stories from Jesus' own life – other than his death and resurrection. Nor does Paul often quote Jesus' words – yet Paul does choose to mention those few words over the bread and the cup which John misses out. But we'll stick with John – at least for now.

What is John on about? As ever in his writing he is saying several interwoven things at the same time. Central here, of course, is something about the nature of the community of which Jesus is the heart. The pattern of community here is utterly transformed.

It is transformed in a revolutionary – as I said almost anarchic – manner. Here is a world where the Lord washes his disciples' feet. But even if bread is lacking, this event happens too at a common meal. At this meal, there is a body of people, nourishing their bodies through the stuff or the staff of life. At this meal, Jesus offers himself to others in service and humility. At this meal, Jesus turns the world upside down. So this is no ordinary meal. It is a meal which embodies the ultimate self-giving that Jesus is about to offer on the cross. Let's return for a second to our poem. Scott reflects later:

'Not that I am against wafers,  
especially the ones produced under steam  
from some hidden nunnery  
with our Lord crucified into them.'

For us, in the hosts we use at the Eucharist, Jesus' offering is often stamped into the stuff of life. That reminds us that tonight's great gospel is by no means John's last word about bread. For, indeed, almost the whole of chapter six, which begins with the feeding of the five thousand, is about bread. The climax is I suppose those great declarations: 'I am the bread of life; I am the bread which came down from heaven.' Jesus reflects further: 'For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world.'

There are echoes, of course, of the manna, which brought salvation to Israel in the wilderness. Here Jesus identifies himself with bread that nourishes, which gives life and which saves. It is a scandalous, bizarre, almost deranged thing to say; 'I *am* the bread of life which came down from heaven.' But Jesus is bread indeed, for he is the focus of our redemption and the saving of the entire universe.

We might be tempted, like the poet, to say 'We have come so far from bread' because we know that Jesus was a man and not a foodstuff. But what if we dare to take Jesus at his word? Jesus is saying that he *is* himself bread. In a cosmic transformation, bread here is the life of the world at a deeper level than we can imagine. It does not simply feed us daily and nourish us. It is the very ground of our existence – or should I say *he* is the ground of our existence; Jesus is the ground of our existence.

Again we might be tempted to think: 'how far we have come from bread'. And yet the truth is the simple stuff of life and the divine staff of life really are utterly interwoven with each other are. Bread and divinity come together. The end of that poem is interesting in all this. It goes:

'Better for each household to have its own bread,  
daily, enough and to spare,  
dough the size of a rolled towel,  
for feeding angels unawares.  
Then if the bread is holy,  
all that has to do with bread is holy:  
board, knife, cupboard,  
so that the gap between all things is closed  
in out attention to the bread of the day.'

That is where our attention is on the most holy night: on the bread of life, Jesus our Lord and Saviour. That too is why the truth is that John does not explicitly exclude bread from the last supper. Jesus *is* the bread who offers himself, who gives himself away in the most simple of rituals – in the washing of feet and in the service of others. As he washes the feet, it is as if he may as well be saying, 'This is my body, given for you, do this in remembrance of me.' Here the whole of life is made holy and transformed.

The simplest of things – sharing a meal, washing a foot, bread – are bearers of divinity. Jesus is found at the very heart of our everyday lives: ‘Jesus the Lord said I am the bread, the bread of life for the world said he.’

Amen.

#### READINGS

Exodus 12: 1-14

I Cor 11: 23-26

John 13: 1-17, 31b-35