

The Eucharist as a sign of the Kingdom of God

John 6:51-58

Over the last couple of weeks we have been reflecting on Jesus as the Bread of Life and what this means for the world and for us, both as a Christian community and in our individual faith journeys.

Last week we explored the concept of Holy Communion, the Eucharist, as thanksgiving – thanksgiving for the self sacrificing love of Christ and the life we have through his offering of himself. We also explored the idea of Eucharist as a *kairos* experience – an event where the past, present and future are all drawn together and we enter God’s time, God’s vision, God’s resurrection power.

Today we will continue this theme as we begin to think of the Eucharist as a special entry point into the kingdom of God, and the way this impacts upon the ministry and mission that flow from us into the world.

Holy Communion, or the feast of thanksgiving, is the feast of the Kingdom of God, it draws each of us into the heart of God. It is here that we are reminded that the Kingdom of God turns the values of the world upside down. In the eyes of the world the cross of Christ is seen as foolish, in God’s eyes it is divine wisdom. In the values of the world the cross is a sign of great weakness, in the kingdom of God it is a sign of great courage and strength. To the world, the cross ends in the failure of death, in reality we know the cross is the beginning of victorious and eternal life.

It is in sharing in this holy meal, that we experience most fully the mercy and forgiveness of God. Through sharing in the bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ, we are drawn into communion with God and with each other; and this is a communion in which everyone is welcome, everyone has a place.

I have a friend who says: *In heaven you’ll most likely be sitting next to someone whom God loves but you don’t like, so you’d better get used to that now!*

We see this in Jesus’ ministry and mission throughout the gospels. There are many stories about Jesus eating with all manner of people – the rich and influential, the beggars on the street, those who had been ostracized and

alienated because of disease or immoral behaviour, the talkative and the quiet.

He told stories about hospitality and those whom God welcomes to his table – some of which were quite shocking to his hearers.

Both before and after his death and resurrection, hospitality, ministry and proclamation are all closely intertwined for Jesus and this is the life he invites us into.

In the Eucharist all are welcomed, all are gathered in, all are honoured guests – the blind, the deaf, the lame, the outcast, the sinner, the young and the old, the poor and the well off – because that is what Christ does. All are welcomed and all are made whole through the grace of God.

This is vitally important, not only for whom we as a community welcome to God's table here, but how we take this value of the Kingdom of God into ministry and mission in the world. Do we welcome the stranger? Do we treat all people, no matter what their appearance, background or abilities suggest, with equal respect, generosity and love? Do we seek to be agents of healing and peace?. Do we seek to create community and relationships or are we exclusive and selective about who is deserving of our attention and time? In our ministry with others are we life-giving or are we patronising in our behaviour and our assumptions?

I want to tell you a story of two churches. Both had developed ministries into government housing blocks close by to them. Both had a desire to show the love of God to others and to reach out to those in need, but they went about it in very different ways.

One church set up a place within the housing block for people to come for lunch and to receive food parcels. The volunteers from the church made sandwiches, served teas and coffee, did the washing up, and handed out food parcels while the residents came to the kitchen servery to receive their food and then went and sat on individual chairs to eat before drifting off.

The other church handled things differently. They invited the residents to their place, where everyone helped to prepare the lunch, some of the residents even brought some food to share. People served each other with tea and coffee, the volunteers sat with the residents around a large table and shared lunch and much conversation with them, and then they all helped with the washing up before saying goodbye.

One church's ministry, although genuine in its desire, acted more like a charity with very clearly defined lines of demarcation between the helpers and the helpees. The other created a Kingdom Feast and developed life giving relationships. This is the challenge and the inspiration for us as we seek to share God's hospitality with others.

The Kingdom of God also challenges us to live rightly within the world, not only within our relationships with others but with the whole created order. The Eucharist reminds us that all we have is a gift from God – the bread and wine are a gift of creation, the body and blood are a gift of love, forgiveness is a gift of grace, the offerings *we* make to God are also, originally, a gift from God to us.

And so, as we go out into the world we must go with an attitude of service and stewardship, of thanksgiving and praise. This is a way of life that directly challenges the self-reliant and self-centred attitudes of the culture in which we live.

As we are drawn into communion with one another we are also being drawn into solidarity with those who are suffering and in need. As we share in this holy meal today we share it with Christians in Southern Lebanon, in Palestine, in Southern Sudan, in Indonesia and in other parts of the world where our brothers and sisters in Christ are in pain, poverty or suffering persecution. We share in their sufferings, we commit ourselves to working for justice and peace, and we share their hope in the power of the resurrection.

One theologian, Ian Bria, says: *All kinds of injustice, racism, separation and lack of freedom are radically challenged when we share in the body and blood of Christ.*

To share in such a meal is to be conscious and compassionate towards those in need and this must be reflected in the way we live our lives in the world.

Ian Bria also describes the Eucharist as food for missionaries. I really like this description. *The body and blood of Christ become for us food for the journey, the pilgrim's road stop if you like.* Nothing like McDonald's or Hungry Jacks on the Hume Highway where everyone eats separately, quickly and on food that does nothing for the health or life of the body; but instead the Eucharist is a gathering place, a camp by the roadside where all travellers are welcome to share in life-giving and re-creative food that will nourish and sustain us in God's service.

One of the great tragedies throughout the history of the church is that we have not always understood the Kingdom of God very well. We think *we* have to build it – usually in our own image - rather than sit under it, be challenged by it, and participate in it.

We do not build the Kingdom of God, God does. *We* do not own or rule in the kingdom, Christ does. The power of God's reign does not come from us, it is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

We are called to be an active and joyful part of the kingdom, to courageously live its life-giving values, to have faith in the salvation we have in Christ, and to share with others - in word, sacrament and deed - the love of God.

In John 6:56 Jesus says: *Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.*

As Jesus makes his home in us may we make our home in him. May we learn to see the face of Christ in each other as we hope and pray others see the face of Christ in us.

Let us serve him with reverence, with faith, with joy and with thanksgiving.

The Lord be with you.