

Storms and Picnics Week 5

Sermon

Has it ever struck you how strange the things we say at Holy Communion really are?
How odd it is to hand someone a piece of bread with the words 'The body of Christ broken for you'
Or to hand them a cup and expect them to drink from it when told 'the blood of Christ shed for you'...?

At the very beginning of her book, *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion*, Sara Miles writes

"One early morning when I was forty-six, I walked into a church, ate a piece of bread, took a sip of wine. A routine Sunday activity for tens of millions of Americans - except that up until that moment I'd led a thoroughly secular life, at best indifferent to religion, more often appalled by its fundamentalist crusades. This was my first communion. It changed everything.

Eating Jesus, as I did that day to my great astonishment, led me against all my expectations to a faith I'd scorned and work I'd never imagined. The mysterious sacrament turned out to be not a symbolic wafer at all but actual food - indeed, the bread of life. In that shocking moment of communion, filled with a deep desire to reach for and become part of a body, I realised that what I'd been doing with my life all along was what I was meant to do: feed people."

Later she writes

"Holy communion knocked me upside down and forced me to deal with the impossible reality of God."

It is easy, at times, for our experience of Holy Communion to become common place - for us to become so used to it that it becomes a habit and we lose a sense of its power and extraordinariness.

But even in the midst of the regular practice we can be surprised by its power once more - as the William Cowper hymn says
'Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings;
It is the Lord, who rises with healing in His wings:'

In describing such a moment someone once wrote
"I was a student in college. Each day I went into the chapel for morning prayer and Holy Communion. Each day we used the same words, followed the same order, often sat in the same places, next to the same people. The pattern echoed and held us. All was always the same, expected and ordered.

It was the same that morning. The liturgy followed its usual pattern, leading us on in the familiar rhythm. Prayers were said using the same words we'd used countless times before. The peace had been exchanged and the prayer of Great Thanksgiving echoed around us. There was nothing to suggest anything out of the ordinary.

Then came the point when bread is broken - the same wafers as always. The same priest holding up and breaking.

And then the shock. It was as if the whole building shook with the force of that crack as the bread broke. As if somehow it had entered me and pierced me viscerally.

I was overwhelmingly aware of the huge import of what we were doing: my body shook with it. Here are some words I wrote at the time:

The broken Body

The crack echoed

Sound of a shot

Hitting, entering me

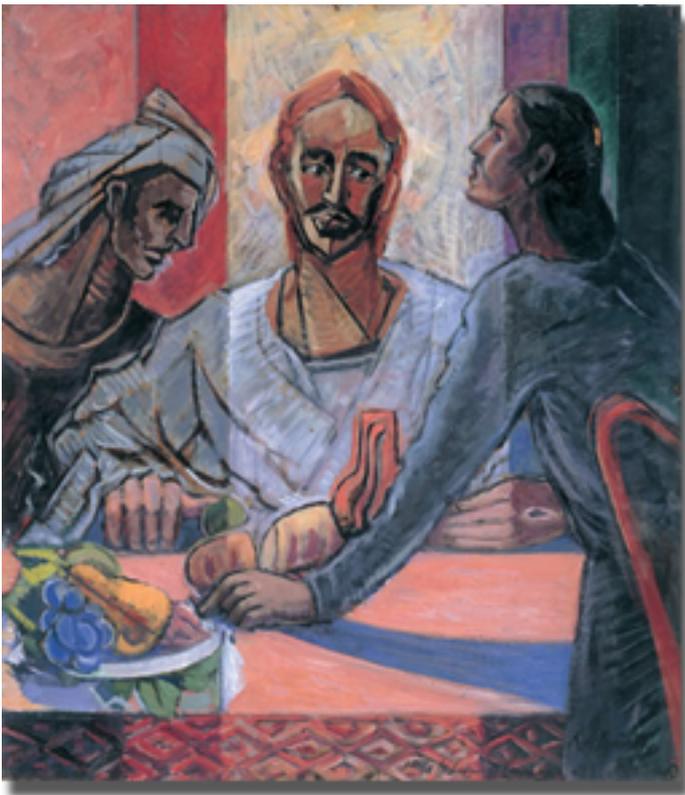
Like a bullet

Tearing through me

Shaking me

Piercing the heart of me

*Your body
Split in two for me
Broken with a crack
That echoed round the universe
Shaking the world's foundations
Sound
That threatened chaos
But brought order
Noise
That caused pain
But gave wholeness
Shot
That required death But births life
And now years on, whenever I take bread into my hands and break
it, that feeling echoes within me drawing me back into that
enormous life-giving mystery."*



Could it be this kind of shock of recognition which the disciples experienced at the moment Jesus broke the bread at Emmaus as is shown in today's picture from the Methodist Modern Art Collection?

In The supper at Emmaus, Roy de Maistre (1894-1968) paints that moment when the disciples recognise the risen Christ as he breaks the bread at supper.

The light of recognition seems to fill the centre of the canvas drawing us, and the disciples into it.

And yet there is also a feeling of the disciples drawing back and remaining in the darkness of the other two thirds of the scene. As if they are struggling with what has been revealed.

In this the picture seems to reflect the disciples feelings on the road as they talked: their despair at Jesus's death, their bewilderment at the possibility of resurrection.

It also seems to reflect the feelings of the crowd who surround and debate with Jesus:

- their longing to be fed and to gain life that we have heard in their request for bread
- but also their revolt at the thought of Jesus offering himself as bread of life.

And who can blame them?

In a culture where all meat is drained of every last drop of blood and washed through with salt so that no blood may be eaten by mistake, the thought of consuming any creature's blood was repellant and enough to turn stomachs, let alone a man offering his own.

These comments of Jesus go against the grain. They are intended to shock us out of the familiar. To set us thinking and feeling.

The language Jesus uses is striking,
calling on us not merely to take a detached and symbolic nibble

but to bite, munch, chew, gnaw on the bread of life.

We are reminded of the barley loaves and dried fish shared as he fed the crowd and the amount of chewing they would have needed

before swallowing. This is not pureed baby food that slips down easily. It is a meal that cost God and that will change us in the eating

We heard earlier the story of King David which tells of a time, towards the end of his life, when he is at war with the Philistines who have occupied Bethlehem. In the heat of battle David finds his throat parched and longs for a drink. He gazes at his home town, now a Philistine stronghold and estranged from him, and sighs of his longing to be able to drink from a familiar well within it.

On hearing this three of his strongest and bravest men broke through the Philistine army, collected water from the well and brought it back to David. When he received the water 2 Samuel 23:16-17 tells us

But he would not drink of it; he poured it out to the Lord, for he said, 'The Lord forbid that I should do this. Can I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?'

So could Jesus' be asking us to profit from his risking (and losing) his life in the way that David refused to profit from the risk of his men's lives?

Are we ready to feel and to be changed by the full impact of that love and that risk? To open our lives, all that we are to the full reality and wonder of the bread of life?