

Eucharistic Ministers

Killyclogher 09 December 2014

Introduction

To begin, a few quiet moments in which we become aware that we are in the presence of God and each other. The poet Mary Oliver speaks of prayer as a

‘... doorway into silence, in which another voice may speak’.

So, let us go through the door of our heart, into our inner room, closing the door on all that has kept us busy, so that we may listen in silence to another voice - the voice of God

Unworthy?

Sometimes when we undertake this ministry or when we come to receive Holy Communion ourselves we can feel or think ourselves unworthy. There is a text which I find very helpful in this regard. It is the second reading in the Missal for Ash Wednesday, from St. Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians where he says

‘For our sake, God made the sinless one into Sin, so that in him we might become the goodness of God’. Paul is reminding us that Jesus took on our sinfulness, and that when we are incorporated into Christ through by Baptism, we actually become ‘the **goodness** of God.’ We incarnate that goodness in our human person.

And Pope Francis in his letter *The Joy of the Gospel* writes:

‘Appearance notwithstanding, every person **is immensely holy...**’ Therefore there is no need for us to hold back from carrying out this ministry – we trust in the power of God working within us and through us.

The Body of Christ

Let us ponder now what we are about when we take on this task of Eucharistic Ministry. We will focus on the words we say when we give Holy Communion: **The Body of Christ**. Those words have a threefold meaning: firstly they refer to the **historical Jesus** (the Son of God who became a human person and lived on this earth more than 2,000 years ago); secondly they refer to the body or community of believers - **the Church**; and thirdly - the **Body of Christ** means the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist under the appearance of Bread and Wine. This evening I will say something about the first two meanings.

The Son of God who became a human person

When we consider more deeply this understanding of the Body of Christ as The Son of God who became a human person, we need to take in the full reality of what that means – a human being like us in all things except sin. Looking at the interaction of Jesus with those who came to him in need, we see that he didn't heal from afar. He wasn't remote or cold. His healing contact was fleshy, warm, human. In the Gospels we hear about Simon's mother in law ill in bed with a fever. When Jesus heard she was sick he came and **took her by the hand** and lifted her up. Then the fever left her and she began to serve them. A leper came to him begging him and kneeling he said to him if you choose, you can make me clean. (Notice the word *choose*. It seems as if the leper expected a sort of cerebral, distant encounter). Jesus stretched out his hand and **touched him** and said: I do choose. Be made clean. And the leprosy left him. We read about the little girl, the daughter of the leader of the synagogue. When Jesus goes to her house: He **took her by the hand** and said: Little girl get up: and immediately the little girl got up and began to walk about.'

Jesus didn't use just words to comfort and heal; the warm human element of physical touch and engagement was there too. Where does that leave us? We can no longer physically touch or be touched by the **historical Jesus** who lived

more than 2,000 years ago. So where do we do in our need? We have the Body of Christ in the Eucharist.

Encountering Jesus Now

When as a Minister of the Eucharist we stand at the altar or are sent out to the sick, we say to each one: **The Body of Christ**. Each one needs the touch of Jesus just as much as his contemporaries did in Palestine. In that line approaching you, the young come forward needing this touch of Jesus in order to grow in 'wisdom, age and grace'. Those who are worried, anxious, burdened come seeking relief: 'Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened and I will give you rest'. Those struggling to live well, who know their need of this nourishing healing food will come forward aware of Jesus words: 'He who comes to me will never be hungry'. Those in poor health will come forward or wait for you in the Nursing Home or hospital. They are relying on you to bring them the healing body of Jesus who laid his hands on the sick and cured them. Others come conscious of weakness demons and frailties. They are seeking to be touched by Jesus who said 'Has no one condemned you; neither do I.' The older members of our community come or wait, longing for this pledge of eternal life as they realise that there are more yesterdays than tomorrows: 'Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day'. Moreover, all who come, regardless of situation or life stage come with longing for that deep union with Jesus, who calls us friends and wants us to remain in his love. 'As the Father has loved me so have I loved you, remain in my love'. This is what we facilitate in our ministry: union with the touch of Jesus.

The Body of Christ – The community of believers – the Church

Then there is another level of meaning to the phrase **The Body of Christ** said to us or said *by* us. It is this: we are being told, and we tell the other that you, receiving this Eucharist are now the Body of Christ; you as a baptised Christian are the visible sign of Jesus in the world. The healing, forgiving, caring, serving that Jesus did is now up to you. YOU are the Body of Christ – you are the Goodness of God. Christ has no other hands but yours. Our Amen (and the

Amen of those to whom we minister Eucharist) is our assent, our agreement that we will take on the mission of Jesus, we will live what we have received.

Personal Experience

My experience over the years has been mainly to the hospital and to the sick at home or in the Fold. I set out thinking that I was the one giving something. As I settled in to the Ministry I realised that I was the one being served. I have been and continue to be, enriched, and humbled and strengthened in faith by the experience. From being the one giving or helping or serving I became the one being helped, being served, receiving.

This visit bringing Eucharist is often the high point of the week ... looked forward to from one visit to the next. I have been enriched by the faith and reverence of those I visit: A person praying when you arrive and saying: 'I've been getting ready for you all morning'. Many have enriched me by their acceptance of the Eucharist as healing for body and spirit. Sometimes a person in pain or discomfort will say: **This will help me now or I feel the better of that.** I've seen a face light up, and noticed a whole change of expression, as if the approaching encounter with the Divine is somehow shining through – the 'immortal diamond', which Hopkins writes about radiates forth.

In the midst of illness and debility I am touched and warmed by the others ability to be unselfish and to think about my welfare. People express concern for my health, pray for a safe journey, wonder have I had a holiday break. The tables are turned: I set out to and I am cared for; I go to give and I receive.

It takes something out of me. I am reminded of my mortality and vulnerability. I am brought face to face with the losses and diminishments that life can bring: health, appearance, home, mobility, intellect, memory, and independence. There is always the stark reminder: 'This could be me'. It is challenging to hold on to St. Paul's words: **'He will transform these lowly bodies of ours into copies of his own glorious body'**.

At times someone I visit will remind me of a person whom I have lost through death and that event is brought alive for me again: as Patrick Kavanagh wrote: 'Every old man I see reminds me of my father, when he had fallen in love with death, one time when sheaves were gathered ...'

I feel loss when a person dies to whom I have been bringing Eucharist. I think there is some unquantifiable quality to the relationship that grows over time even if a person is deaf or confused. Some sort of Mystical link is formed as the Christ in the other meets the Christ in me in this encounter.

We are in this together

Pope Francis describes us as 'all in the same boat heading towards the same port'. When we go with Eucharist we are bearing witness to this. We are saying: we are with you on this life's journey. We haven't forgotten you. We value you. We treasure you even though you can no longer be active and visibly engaged with us. Out of sight does not mean out of mind.

Finally the prayer said over us as we are sent out: at the end of Mass the priest, in the name of the congregation and of the whole Body of Christ says: The Ministers of the Eucharist will now take Holy Communion to those who are housebound,

As you go take with you **not only** the Sacrament we have celebrated

BUT ALSO the Word of God which we have heard

AS WELL AS the *love and affection of this community* – notice the warmth of those words. Like Jesus, we are to be warm and compassionate in our ministry. Pope Francis writes that: 'The Son of God by becoming man summoned us to a revolution of **tenderness**'. This ministry gives us a great opportunity to be tender and gentle.

AND ASK those whom you visit to pray for us in return – with those words we are reminded of our inter-dependence. There is a cycle of giving and receiving – I come to Mass to be nourished: as a Eucharistic Minister I facilitate the nourishment of others; and nourished by the Body of Christ, those whom we visit nourish and support the Parish Community with their prayers and sufferings. There is a constant cycle of receiving, giving, receiving.

And then realising that we cannot fulfil this ministry on our own we respond

We will –with the help of God!

