

## **Trinity 7 2014 St Marylebone 11 am**

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

If we want to find the earliest account of the Eucharist in the New Testament we have to turn, not to the pages of the Gospels, but to Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians<sup>i</sup>.

Written, perhaps as early as 57 AD, probably from Ephesus, St Paul was concerned about a whole string of abuses which were in danger of bringing this normative and formative Christian community meal into disrepute.

At the very point when they were most meant to be united, one with each other, one with Jesus, one with fellow believers throughout the world, the Christians in Corinth were breaking into factions, quite possibly based on social class and standing in the pagan community in which they lived.

If that was not enough, some families were bringing along hampers full of good things to supplement the bread and the wine, whilst others were going hungry,

looking on with envy at their richer, better fed neighbours.

Some people were even getting drunk!

The *agape* meal, which lay at the very heart of Christian identity and hope, had become, in Corinth, a source of scandal and schism. The fellowship meal which was meant to proclaim the unity and equality of all believers was becoming an occasion for highlighting difference and engendering dispute.

What a long way the Corinthians had travelled from the disciples who had gathered together before Passover to share a meal in Jerusalem; the meal at which Jesus had prayed that they - and those who would come after them - 'would be one'; the meal at which Jesus had taken and blessed and broken and given bread and wine, identified as his body and blood, to be the tangible, palpable foretaste of the Heavenly Banquet laid out at the heart of God's Kingdom.

This morning we have heard again the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand<sup>ii</sup> and earlier today, at the 8.30 am celebration of the Eucharist, those who

gathered around the altar heard the story of the Feeding of the Four Thousand<sup>iii</sup>.

Whenever we read one of Jesus' feeding miracles, and there are six of them in the gospels, we have to read them with the Eucharist in mind.

And, just as we have to have the Kingdom in mind when we read the parables, we have to have the Kingdom in mind too, when we read the miracles stories.

Whether Jesus is feeding four thousand people or five thousand people, whether there are twelve or ten baskets of food left over, whether the loaves and the fish are provided by a small boy from the crowd or by one of the disciples, the message is the same:

God comes alongside his people, meets their need and in so doing the Kingdom comes.

It would be going too far to say that the feedings of the multitudes on the hillsides of Galilee were the first celebrations of the Eucharist, Jesus had not yet identified the cup of wine with his blood nor the broken bread with his body, but the events in which bread was

taken and blessed and broken and given, intentionally prefigure the Eucharist and they transport those who feed on bread and fish on the hillsides of Galilee into the Upper Room in Jerusalem to be numbered among the disciples as they eat and drink the bread and wine of the Kingdom at Jesus' hands.

In the same way, St Paul, was eager that the Christians of Corinth should sort themselves out, so that they too could be one with the disciples and in Jerusalem and one with those who had received food from Jesus on the Galilean hillsides.

In bread and fish, in bread and wine, God, in his divine compassion, gives himself to the world and reveals his Kingdom.

God comes to be with his people, Emmanuel, sees their need and provides for it, and God does this not by conjuring up legions of angels, the extraordinary and the awe inspiring but through giving bread and wine and in the case of the feeding miracles, fish; simple things, everyday things, the most basic things of life: but things which are, in the hands of Jesus and his Church, the very stuff of the Kingdom.

Jesus invited the crowds on the hillside s to sit down with him and eat.

Jesus invited his disciples and the Christians of Corinth to sit down with him and eat.

Jesus invites us to draw close to him and to take what he offers and in so doing become subjects of his Kingdom.

Jesus invites us to offer to him the little that we have, so that he might take it and bless it and give it back to us transformed.

We need bring nothing but who we are, to know that our status, our wealth, our quarrelling, our disputes all count for nothing and need to be left outside.

George Herbert<sup>iv</sup>, the great Anglican poet and divine of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, recognised what the Corinthians would not recognise, and what those gathered on the Galilean hillside could not recognise; that when God invites us and welcomes us to eat with him and to enjoy the fruits of his Kingdom, we need bring nothing but ourselves:

LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,  
    Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
    From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
    If I lack'd anything.

'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here:'  
    Love said, 'You shall be he.'  
'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,  
    I cannot look on Thee.'  
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,  
    'Who made the eyes but I?'

'Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame  
    Go where it doth deserve.'  
'And know you not,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'  
  
    'My dear, then I will serve.'  
'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.'  
    So I did sit and eat.<sup>v</sup>

---

<sup>i</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew 14.13-21

<sup>iii</sup> Mark 8. 1ff.

<sup>iv</sup> 1593–1632

<sup>v</sup> Arthur Quiller-Couch, ed. 1919. *The Oxford Book of English Verse: 1250–1900*