

LET THERE BE LIGHT

I'm beginning to feel uncomfortable with "celebrating" Mass on my own – I had not really done it before this coronavirus lockdown. Perhaps it was at first, the novelty of it all that somehow made a solitary experience "meaningful". The zoom Masses have certainly helped me to have a deeper connection with other parishioners, but it came home to me quite clearly last Sunday, the feast of Corpus Christi, that I was really the only one actually eating the bread drinking the wine. It seemed so unjust that I alone was receiving holy communion in the sacred food and drink of the Eucharist, while I left everyone else to make their "spiritual communion". Even though there were many as seventy people "together" for the zoom Mass last Sunday, we were not a congregation, still less an Assembly called to gather as Church. I'm sure that everyone who saw me eat the bread and drink the cup, believed in what was happening, but they must have felt the sorrow of not being able to take part.

Even if we have our churches re-opened from around the 4th July, with all the social distancing rules and the excess clinical cleansing that has to take place, I still doubt that a gathered Assembly and full participation will be possible – no one in arms reach of anyone else; no communion; no sign of peace and no congregational singing! Is this really a community gathered together as an Assembly? As the official Church seems to be offering us little guidance in these matters, I began to turn towards the early Church to see if there was anything in those basic, first communities that might give us a glimmer of hope as we continue to make our way out of this dreary lockdown.

Saint Luke's early part of his Acts of the Apostles and the Eucharistic events of the Emmaus story and the meal at that first Easter weekend in his Gospel (Luke 24:13-35) give us food for thought. These stories reveal that very soon after the Lord's Resurrection the emerging Church did celebrate the Eucharist. What exactly was going on in this Eucharist? Was it simply a meal with family and friends? Or was it a special meal for the local followers of the Way? Did they have a person to preside at this Eucharist? Whatever it was I am sure that these early disciples were not deprived of the sacramental presence of Christ? Or could there have been a gap of many years or even decades from the time of the passion and resurrection of Jesus to when the apostles started to appoint priests and define a role for them, even liturgically? Don't forget that the Acts of the Apostles was probably written around 80 AD and Paul's first letter to the Church in Corinth was probably around 57 AD.

It was clear that the early Church lived a shared communal life; they were a truly catholic cosmopolitan community and were largely centered in Jerusalem in those early years. James and Peter sometimes differed strongly over traditions and innovations, with the Holy Spirit swiftly resolving them in favour of innovations of inclusion, over concerns for traditions and exclusion.

Luke tells us in Acts 2:42, "They remained faithful to the teaching of the Apostles, to the community, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers." There is no mention of priests, only deacons (7 of them) who became central to "preaching the Gospel". The only priests mentioned are converts from the Jewish Temple cohorts (Acts 6:7) who made submission to the Faith. There is neither any mention of presiders in the churches. However, Paul did appoint presbyters and elders, but their role is not prescribed. So, did the community then just simply remembered Jesus, or was Jesus truly present to them, as we would say, sacramentally?

Saint Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth talks about the centrality of unity and participation in the community, especially the Eucharist. Paul is rightly appalled at the class distinctions evident at their supper Eucharist. He strongly criticises them: ".....it is not the Lord's Supper that you are eating, since when the time comes to eat, everyone is in such a hurry to start his own supper that one person goes hungry while another is getting drunk."

(1Cor 11: 17-34). So it makes me ask myself: "How can a priest alone be nourished by the Eucharist, devoid of a communal setting, while everyone else "goes hungry?" Can it in fact be truly a Eucharist in the absence of the Community? I have always believed that it is the Community that makes the Eucharist real and that the Eucharist makes and feeds the Community.

Is the Holy Spirit trying to show us what is essential to be Church, to shorn the Dark Ages and Mediaeval "traditions" that seem to be hampering what it means to be Church in a Eucharistic Community? With a sharply declining number of priests can the early Christian Church teach us a new lesson that was so fundamental to them?

But today, especially because of the coronavirus pandemic, the Holy Spirit seems to be showing us new ways to be Church, perhaps by going back to its roots as in the early Church. I remember a couple of years ago I came home from a priest's conference to find that my house had been broken into – it was a mess, not only things were stolen, but lots of things destroyed. While I was rummaging around I noticed lying on the floor was my pot candle holder, not quite smashed, but nevertheless broken. I picked it up and put it on my lap. It was just about getting dark and as it was time for my prayer, I lit the candle and held the broken pot in my hands. As I held it I thought of all the broken people in my life who had held my hand and asked me "Why?" Why has this happened to me? Why has my loved one died? Why did I get this cancer? Why? Why? Why? Of course, I do not know why, nobody knows why. But the little broken pot in my hands seemed to tell me, in its own silent way, that we are all broken in one way or another and in some mysterious way, this brokenness somehow makes us even more human in our vulnerability and need for care and compassion. All of us feel the brokenness in our hearts.

I looked at the little broken pot and noticed that the candle seemed to highlight all the little pots imperfections, which cast new light that shines through the cracks and reveal its inner beauty – it became almost a new work of art – perhaps a symbol of light shining in the darkness. The pot did not even look broken anymore – its fragility only seemed to deepen its translucent beauty. As I continued to look at the pot, it seemed to let me know that we do not have to be afraid of being broken for it is through our brokenness that we become more sensitive to the brokenness of others and more open to give and receive care and compassion. It is then our hidden human beauty is most revealed, precisely through our fragility and brokenness. Perhaps that is why we often light a candle when a loved one dies. I found in that broken pot an eternal beauty hidden within each human soul and sometimes it can only be seen when we are at our most vulnerable - for it is then that the light shines through our brokenness and makes us whole again. We are, through this coronavirus pandemic, in many ways a broken community, but our light will shine through and we will find healing and strength once again. After going through a somewhat broken Lent, a scarred Holy Week and a less than exuberant Easter, next Sunday we return to what is normally called "Ordinary" time. But there is nothing ordinary about these times we live in at the moment. Let us pray that we may never lose sight of what it means to be Church and turn to the Lord Jesus the most extraordinary, ordinary person who ever lived and may his Holy Spirit show us the way to be a true Church for our times.

PS The old ones are the best: Did you hear about the Buddhist who refused a painkiller at the dentist's? He wanted to transcend dental medication.

A man goes into a newsagent and asks, "Do you, replies the keep stationery here?" "No" replies the sales assistant, "sometimes I move around a bit."

Three soldiers were facing the firing squad for desertion. As the firing squad took aim the first soldier shouts, "Avalanche", and as the men look around, he runs off. When the squad take aim again the second soldier shouts, "Flood", and as the men look around, he also runs off. The third soldier waits until the squad take aim for the third time, and then grins and shouts, "Fire".