

## 2 The Open Table

WHEN PAUL RECALLS the significance of the eucharist for his Corinthian hearers he does so by rehearsing the tradition of the 'Last Supper', as we saw in the previous chapter. Paul scarcely ever appeals directly to the gospel narrative and it seems clear that by the early fifties of the first century this story was already a central part of the Church's liturgy, as it has remained ever since. This fact suggested to later theologians that what we have here is the account of the 'institution' of the eucharist. The command to 'do this in remembrance of me' was taken to refer to a set of liturgical actions – take, break, share. I wish to question both whether we can understand the command to 'do this' in terms of a ritual, and also to argue that our understanding of the eucharist is damagingly constricted unless we set it against a much wider background in the practice of Jesus than simply his last meal with his disciples.

Did Jesus intend to institute a ritual, on the night before his death? We cannot say this is impossible, but on the other hand it is not wholly consistent with what else we know about Jesus. According to Matthew he twice cites Hosea 6.6: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice', and reiterates over and over again in that Gospel that it is in 'doing' that discipleship consists and not in the 'Lord, Lord' of pious worship. Jesus clearly did not despise the practice of either synagogue or Temple, but ritual practice is equally clearly not at the forefront of the training of his disciples. In the great humorous parable of the sheep and the goats nothing is said about ritual or religious practice narrowly defined. What counts, in the final reckoning, is feeding the hungry, showing hospitality to the stranger, clothing the poor, visiting the sick and those in prison – all the traditional virtues of Israel. This is the significant 'doing' at the heart of Jesus' teaching, and it seems more plausible to read the command to 'do this' in the light of that. To take this further we need first to turn to the question of Jesus' 'doing' in the Gospels, and especially to his table fellowship.

That table fellowship was an extremely important matter to Jesus is one of the best attested facts of the New Testament. From his critics we hear the angry question: 'Why does he eat with tax- collectors and sinners?' (Mark 2.16). In other words, if he is really setting himself up as some kind of authority, what is he doing eating with people who collaborate with the Romans and make themselves rich at the expense of decent, serious, religious citizens? What is he doing eating with people who disregard strict observance of the law? The fact that, as Jesus put it, 'The Son of Man has come eating and drinking' led to the jibe that Jesus was nothing but 'a glutton and a drunkard' (Luke 7.34; Matthew 11.19).

We have many stories in all our sources, but especially in Luke, of Jesus 'at table'. Luke puts the criticism of the scribes in the context of a meal at the house of Levi (Luke 5.29f.). He tells of a meal with a Pharisee where the proper rites of welcome were omitted by the host and performed by 'a woman ... who was a sinner' (Luke 7.36f.). Jesus tells many parables about wedding feasts, great banquets and celebration meals which were sacraments of reconciliation, and the damnation incurred by the meals of the rich whilst the poor starve (Luke 14.7f., 12f., 15f.; 15.22f.; 16.19f.). Jesus is

not interested in food for its own sake: 'Don't be anxious about what you are going to eat and drink', he tells those who come to hear him; the kingdom is more important than that. But he never neglects material needs either: 'Give her something to eat', he tells the ruler of the synagogue and his wife, after healing their daughter (Mark 5.43). Table fellowship is for him, as it is for the society of his day in general, a sign of acceptance and close friendship. Precisely for this reason his opponents are shocked by the bad company he keeps at table. In Jesus' hands table fellowship is not about having a nice evening with those you like, having a dinner party. It becomes an instrument in his purpose of making people whole. The story which illustrates this in a paradigmatic way is that of Zacchaeus (Luke 19.1-10).

The story comes, in Luke, after we have heard about the rich man and Lazarus, and after Jesus' warning of the difficulty the rich will have in entering the kingdom of God. Camels could get through eyes of needles more easily, says Jesus, in a typical jest. Zacchaeus is a man who has camelized himself for years – making a fortune by extorting taxes. He is not just an outcast but a rich outcast. Jesus restores his humanity, 'de-camelizes' him, redeems him by – inviting himself to dinner! It is the fact that Jesus shares table fellowship with him which leads Zacchaeus to change his lifestyle, to live no longer for Mammon, to restore what he has extorted, with interest. This restoration of a person's humanity, this drawing out of human potential, is what Jesus has come for, and table fellowship is one of the chosen ways of accomplishing it. The New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias spoke of Jesus' parables as 'weapons of war', and similarly the exorcisms and healing stories depict Jesus at war with 'the powers'. But table fellowship is also part of Jesus' armoury, part of the whole structure of redemption.

Why should we think that these stories of table fellowship have anything to do with the eucharist? I think we have a clue in Luke's great story of the walk to Emmaus, where Jesus is known to the disciples 'in the breaking of bread'. The significance of this is that it is a characteristic action, a habit or custom, which reveals Jesus' identity. What Jesus did at the 'last' supper was to repeat something he did all the time, namely, invest table fellowship with tremendous significance. My suggestion is, then, that Jesus acted as he did at his last meal with his disciples because from the beginning he had used table fellowship redemptively. No one doubts this. The problem is that the connection with the eucharist has not been made because a reading of the Last Supper in terms of vicarious sacrifice has stood in the way. I do not wish to deny that this may be part of the truth, but I cannot believe it is the whole of it.

To take this a little further I turn to John's Gospel. This Gospel, it seems to me, is our earliest commentary on Mark. I am not claiming that John had a text of Mark in front of him, but John's text seems to originate in a long and rich exposition, probably over many years, of the material of the Synoptic Gospels, especially in their starkest form, in Mark. In his great Prologue, John speaks of Jesus as being 'full of grace and truth'. What he means by 'grace' here is exemplified by Jesus' practice of table fellowship. Jesus is 'full of grace' in that he does not hedge the possibility of friendship with moral

ifs and buts. He does not say to Zacchaeus: 'If you will guarantee to return to the poor all you took I will come to eat with you.' He invites himself to dinner, restores Zacchaeus' self-worth and self-esteem, and *thus enables* repentance. Grace is, in the technical term, prevenient – it does not follow after, but anticipates. Like the shepherd in Jesus' parables it seeks out the lost, and does not wait for them first of all to come back to the fold. An immense amount has been lost by not understanding the 'grace' of the eucharistic table in these terms; that is, of an open, accepting, forgiving fellowship. 'Grace is forgiveness', Luther used to say. That was exemplified by Jesus' eating with bad company, which was not connivance with evil, but a way of shaming, humbling and converting it, by love and not by force. At issue is what we understand to be the reality of grace. Cardinal Newman sought a 'higher gift than grace' to refine flesh and blood. This was

God's presence and his very self  
and essence all divine.

The grace which was 'channelled' by the sacraments was thought of as a kind of divine energy which enabled us to live the Christian life. In an attempt to understand how it was that not all baptized Christians led lives worthy of their calling all sorts of distinctions between 'sufficient' and 'efficient', habitual and actual, created and uncreated grace were introduced. Though these distinctions often arose out of wrestling with real problems, many theologians have recognized that we need to go back to our origins and learn afresh why the word *charis*, translated as 'grace', was so important to Paul.

In both Old and New Testament studies, scholars have countered the apologetic insistence on the difference of both Israel and Jesus from their contemporary cultures by showing how much they shared. The word *charis*, however, seems to be one of those irreducibly angular features which cannot be explained out of its environment. Paul takes a word which means beauty, thankfulness, delight, kindness, and uses it as a pen portrait of Jesus. Why? Because, surely, these attributes capture Jesus' encounter with others, and especially with 'sinners' and the poor. Grace is God's love reaching out to us absolutely irrespective of our worthiness, restoring us, making us more human, by acceptance and forgiveness and not by acting as a High Court judge. This is the essence of the doctrine of justification which was so important to Luther. Grace is not 'a' power, nor could we possibly want a 'higher gift than grace'. The word 'grace' is a way of talking about how God approaches us, specifically about how God approaches us in Christ. Grace is mediated to us in and through encounter, both in the Church and outside it. It is an exact description of the quality of the meeting between Jesus and Zacchaeus, a meeting imaged in the encounter between the Risen Lord and the Church in the eucharist.

If the eucharist is, then, rooted in Jesus' table fellowship with sinners, not exclusively, but as importantly as it is rooted in the Last Supper, what an irony it is that receiving communion was hedged about in the way it was with dire warnings to 'the wicked'. If we eat and drink unworthily, according to the homilies in the Book of Common Prayer, 'We eat and drink our own damnation ... we kindle God's wrath against us; we

provoke him to plague us with divers diseases and sundry kinds of death.' This is a far cry from the meal with Zacchaeus indeed! Such warnings rested on a misreading of a passage in Paul's first letter to Corinth (1 Corinthians 11.27–32) where he drew attention to the dire consequences of the failure of the members to respect one another as equals in Christ. Later generations unfortunately fetishized the bread and wine and thought the problem was not unjust relationships but 'unworthy receiving'. As we shall see in a moment, such a view runs counter to the deepest meaning of the eucharist.

Joy, gratitude and welcome characterize the description of the eucharist in the writings of the second-century apologists. The passing of another century finds a very different mood, and the character of the sign changes from a joyous meal which signifies God's making all things new to an awesome sacrifice which atones for our sin. Perhaps by analogy with the rites of the mystery religions, great emphasis was laid on the 'holy mysteries' which only initiates might take part in. This theology received architectural expression in the erection of the iconostasis or rood screen, which separated 'the sanctuary' from 'the people'. Whereas using the eucharist has been the normal form of Christian worship for the assembly on Sunday, the celebration of 'the holy mysteries' becomes less and less frequent. John Chrysostom, an outspoken bishop of Constantinople in the fourth century, speaks about 'the terrible sacrifice', the 'shuddering hour' and 'the terrible and awful table' of the eucharist. One of the chapters of his contemporary Basil the Great's *Shorter Rule* is captioned: 'With what fear ... we ought to receive the Body and Blood of Christ.' This feeling of awe led to a rapid decline in the frequency with which people 'took communion', the very idea of which marks a shift away from the community which gathered for the Lord's Supper to a spiritualized and privatized 'communing with the Lord'. This led a church council in the sixth century to insist on communion four times a year. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 ratified a long-standing practice when it made communion once a year sufficient.

Where the grace of Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus was a forgiving and welcoming fellowship, by this time emphasis fell increasingly on the 'miracle' of 'the change' – transubstantiation – and grace was thought to be channelled through that. If my argument is correct, however, a move was made here which was fundamentally untrue to Jesus' practice. The Reformers saw something of this, and sought to get away from an 'altar' to 'the Lord's table', to reverse the signification back to primitive practice. In one way or another, however, it proved exceptionally difficult to make this move. Anglicanism restored altar rails within one or two generations. Presbyterianism surrounded the sacrament with as much awe as even the fourth-century Fathers could have wished. The motive was exemplary: to maintain the sense of holiness and reverence in worship. What we have to query is first, the understanding of holiness, and second, how it is best expressed or signified. Grace is forgiving, accepting love. This was manifest in Jesus' table fellowship. It becomes a reality in the changed lives of outcasts who find themselves accepted and enabled to make a new start. Any parish priest knows of people who have excluded themselves from the eucharist for years

because of feelings of 'unworthiness'. Quite apart from homilies like those in the Book of Common Prayer, this attitude was inculcated by the architecture and symbolism of the sanctuary.

'The beauty of holiness', however, is not that of the distant and mysterious God who 'comes down' to us in ritual practice but the beauty of forgiving love of which the eucharist ought to be the sacramental sign. In Catholic churches this was symbolized by the relation of the confessionals to the altar, but these dark boxes with their grilles precisely signified an intense privatization of religion. We know that in the Early Church 'confession' was an open avowal of failure and weakness, 'absolved' by the help and acceptance of the body of faithful people. In some quarters tentative steps have been taken to restore this practice, which runs so deeply counter to the prevalent individualism of our culture, and almost all churches have made far-reaching changes in their liturgies. Here at last the re-signification intended by the Reformers has been realized, and with the priest facing the congregation the meal aspect is once more emphasized over the sacrifice.

The habits of sixteen hundred years die hard, however, and we are perhaps still not clear enough that the eucharistic table is not for the worthy, as the Book of Common Prayer thought, but for the unworthy. When we line up to 'receive communion' we take our place behind Zacchaeus and the 'tax-collectors and sinners'. They are first in the queue, and we are not different from them. A beautiful Scottish story tells of a professor of Old Testament, and an elder of the kirk, who saw a girl bowing her head, unwilling to receive the sacrament. He pushed it into her hands saying, 'Tak it, lassie, tak it! It's fer sinners only!'

In my view it follows from this that we have to consider a possible reversal in the ancient church practice of insisting on baptism before receiving communion. This seemed to be called for by the structure of the gospel narrative, where the baptism comes at the beginning and the Last Supper at the end. We know that by at least the middle of the second century it was normal to proceed to the eucharist from baptism, and there is a certain logic in this. Baptism, according to Paul, is a sign of our dying and rising with Christ. It is a once-for-all step, a moment of commitment, our response to conversion, and also a mark that we have sought membership of the Church and been accepted. For this reason medieval churches have their fonts near the door of the nave, whilst a long, usually stepped, aisle leads up to the altar. However, if we allow the table fellowship of Jesus its proper place as part of the origin of our eucharistic practice we can see that baptism might well follow being received at table.

I was led to this view of the relation of baptism and eucharist by involvement in jail ministry in India. Across the road from the seminary where I worked in Madurai was a jail with more than a thousand prisoners. Week by week, students and staff from the seminary went over in the heat of a Sunday afternoon, sang hymns, preached, and celebrated the eucharist. About seventy prisoners attended, the vast majority Hindus. No bar was put on who could or who could not receive communion. Receiving communion, being accepted, was a sign of the gospel of forgiveness which had been preached. This activity was not part of any effort to 'convert' Hindus but nevertheless

from it came a steady trickle of baptisms. What had happened was that Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus had been relived: first table fellowship, then repentance and membership of the new community. This seems to me a far more beautiful and gracious practice than setting preconditions on coming to 'the Lord's table' – something the Lord never did.

If this is right then I believe it also bears on the vexed question of intercommunion. Many churches have a rule which allows communion to 'full members of any other church'. Others, however, and in particular the Roman Catholic Church, do not allow this. The original grounds for this refusal, as spelled out by the First Vatican Council more than a century ago, were that the Orders of other churches were 'invalid', and that the Roman Church was the only true Church, all others being in heresy and schism. Amongst members of that Church who are genuinely ecumenically inclined the reasons now given for continuing to refuse communion are that it is important not to fudge real doctrinal differences, and that it is necessary to 'bear the pain' of division until organic unity can once again be achieved. 'Truth' is sought in the most ungracious way possible – by refusing fellowship.

One respects the argument that both doctrine and the issue of truth are important. Liberation theologians have insistently asked what it means that the oppressor and the oppressed should come to the same table. Is this not papering over differences, sanctifying racism, class oppression and other inhuman ideologies in the name of religious unity? As one of them puts it, it seems to say that issues of suffering, violence, injustice, famine, and death are less critical and decisive than religious formulas and rites<sup>1</sup>. The question is how one deals with this problem (which is not just encountered in South America!) and the related issue of doctrinal difference. Do we proceed by exclusion – excommunication – a procedure the Church adopted very early on? If the eucharist stems from the table fellowship of Jesus, the redeeming of Zacchaeus and of goodness only knows how many ne'er-do-wells with connections with the local police chief, it seems unlikely.

This is not to say we bury differences in a sentimental, profoundly untruthful religious cosiness. It means that love of those with whom we differ, and who may even be our enemies, goes on *through* the table fellowship, not apart from it. How can we address sin by repeating it, by underscoring division, by introducing it into the table fellowship of Christ? To follow Christ, to be disciples, is to learn to deal with very real differences in the context of shared and forgiving table fellowship. I speak here especially of denominational differences. Those of us who live comfortable middle-class lives cannot speak for those for whom torture and death is a daily reality. Even there, I suspect, the question of apostasy or idolatry (which is what it comes down to, the claim that we are worshipping different gods) cannot be dealt with by exclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> J. L. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (New York, Orbis, 1976), page 43.

To recall practices of exclusion is to be led to the current maelstrom of changing forms of relationship only too often met with, in the past, by exclusionary practices. The eucharist has both 'body' and relationship at its heart. How does it bear on these issues? When the Church of England produced its report on sexuality in 1995 the tabloid press led with the headline: 'Living in sin no longer sinful!' Many Christians feel that, above all in the area of sexual morality, the Church has simply trimmed with the wind. In his insistence that contraception cannot be used, and that abortion is impermissible except *in extremis*, Pope John Paul II, some feel, has preserved Christianity's role as a counter-culture more faithfully.

There is no doubt both that we are living through an unparalleled renegotiation of the sexual contract between men and women, and a profound reorientation in our understanding of sexuality in general which affects our understanding of all human relationships. How does our eucharistic practice bear on all this? What are we to learn from the holiness of Jesus' praxis, which seemed so odd and unholy to many of his contemporaries ('a glutton and a drunkard!')?

Christians have always sought to derive the 'counsels of perfection' from their reflection on Jesus' life and death. Deep in the tradition is the notion that we can only attain holiness – and this is something to which all human beings, not just Christians, are called – by a war against the 'flesh' and the body. Paul wrote:

Athletes exercise self-control in all things ... So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified (1 Corinthians 9.25, 27).

What we have to ask ourselves is whether this idea of punishing and enslaving the body, which was taken to be the way in which we are to be 'crucified' to self, is the way to the holiness we see in Jesus' encounter with sinners. What emerges from that picture is that holiness is love irradiated by integrity. The radiance is not metaphorical but real, which is why medieval artists, more clear-sighted than we are perhaps, painted haloes on saints and their figures of Christ. That integrity led Jesus to his death, but he did not go to death because he sought the punishment and enslaving of his body. There are some big negatives in Jesus' life: no to Mammon, no to relations of hierarchy and domination, for instance.

There is much more of affirmation, including, if we are to trust the hostile jibes which are recorded about table fellowship, affirmation of the body. This affirmation of the body, the other, and the self, as the way to holiness, is what is being explored in the new ways of relating. True, it seems a far cry from the bloody act of self-giving on the cross to the self-giving in erotic love, but as many of the martyrs and writers of Latin America have reminded us in the past forty years, these two frequently go together. Loving in integrity embraces the political, the erotic, and the depths of friendship, and we should not prise these modes of loving apart. If the eucharist stems, in part, from the table fellowship of Jesus, which is to say from part of his education of his disciples into the meaning of love, then I believe it has something to say to this maelstrom of

renegotiated relationships in which we find ourselves. It is given us as sustenance and schooling in our apprenticeship in loving.

Our understanding of what might be entailed in such loving differs in some important respects from that of those who were disciples before us. For most Christian generations, for example, it has seemed that same-sex erotic relationships could not be blessed by God. For increasing numbers of contemporary Christians, on the other hand, there is the discovery that integrity and holiness can very decidedly be part of such relationships. All have followed their apprenticeship in the one 'body' of the eucharistic fellowship, nourished by the broken body given for us. What should not be an issue is the wholeheartedness, let us say the passion, with which both they and we have sought and seek to follow our apprenticeship. It is not that earlier generations knew about discipline whilst we do not. What has changed, as it changed for Bonhoeffer in his prison cell, is our understanding of discipline.

It is unfortunately true of apprentices that they bodge things and make countless mistakes, a fact we know theologically as 'sin'. No one knew this better than Jesus himself, and he addressed the fact sternly enough, but without identifying sin primarily with sexuality. On the contrary, 'sin' in his discourse is that whole network of practices which hinder our humanity by preventing us loving our neighbour. Certainly we can sin with and against our bodies and the bodies of others, and because we are disciples of the Word which takes flesh we are right to take such sin utterly seriously, but we have to ask what it is we do in the flesh which eclipses our humanness, which fails to respect the image of God in ourselves and our neighbour.

Could this be physical relations (what our society calls simply 'sex') between people of the same gender? It seems implausible, especially when we recognize that much Church teaching on sexuality springs from Aristotle's view of nature. He believed that every act and object had its own proper *telos* (end or purpose). When his philosophy was embraced by Aquinas it seemed clear that using things outside their proper *telos* was sin. The *telos* of sexual relations was procreation, so any form of sexual expression beyond that was sin. What has happened this century, after the invention of safe forms of contraception, is that our whole understanding of the *telos* of sexual relations has changed. For the whole of human history up to this century, sexual relations between men and women were bound up with conception, birth, the possibility of death in childbirth, high infant-mortality rates, and so forth. We now understand sexuality much more in terms of mutual exploration, affirmation and celebration, and this applies equally to same-sex relationships. It is also true, of course, that the Church always recognized that the key barriers to integral loving which Jesus sought to throw down were 'pride' or self-righteousness, rather than sins of the flesh.

Jesus leaves us no rule book to guide us in discovering the reality of love for our neighbour. Those who construe Scripture in this way fall into the same trap as some of those with whom Jesus found himself locked in most perplexed and difficult debate, whom he had to warn about the 'sin against the Holy Spirit'. It is when we are certain we have the right answers that we are most unteachable. What we are shown



in the gospel story is that love involves *concrete* practice, that it demands humility of spirit, and that it is quite incompatible with an attitude of wealth and security which throws a few crumbs to the poor. Apart from that we are left to an open, rigorous exploration of the patience and creativity of God's love in our own apprenticeship in loving. One of the set contexts for this happening is the eucharist.

The eucharist has been at the centre of Christian practice from the beginning because, in so many ways, it captures the heart of the Christian project. Paul summarized his understanding of that project in his contrast between two human situations, and in doing so was trying to spell out the significance of Jesus' word to his disciples that 'It shall not be so among you' (Mark 10.43 RSV). The situation of being 'in Adam', which did not end in AD 35 or thereabouts, but describes an ongoing human situation, is that of relationships of domination, hierarchy, division and the attempt to solve problems through law or violence. The situation of being 'in Christ' is that situation where there is 'no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female' – where, in other words, our status as friends under God is recognized. There is the old society, still very much with us, and very much part of the Church, in which power is exercised as 'the lords of the Gentiles' exercise it. The divisions and practices of exclusion which have defaced eucharistic practice, as so much of what the Church has done, only too painfully represent the old Adamic order. We need to find ways of representing and setting in our midst as a community a sign of our being 'in Christ', in the new order.

The problem is not new, for Paul already faced it in Corinth. The problem in Corinth was that the congregation was at loggerheads both between rich and poor and between men and women. From what we can gather, the congregation met in the house of one of the wealthier members, Erastus or Stephanas. Erastus may well be the person described by an inscription archaeologists have discovered as wealthy enough to pave one of the main streets in Corinth. Such rich people sauntered up from their offices and had some wine before the Christian gathering. 'Chloe's people', on the other hand, did not finish work till late and rushed up to the eucharist smelling of fish and bringing only a piece of pitta bread to eat. So the complaints Paul heard were that 'one goes hungry and another becomes drunk' (1 Corinthians 11.21). 'Do you show contempt for the church of God', asked Paul, 'and humiliate those who have nothing?' (11.22). To behave like this, said Paul, was to invite judgement on oneself, because it represented a fundamental disregard for the body. But have we not, for centuries, been guilty of precisely such disregard?

If this is the case, as I believe it is, it stems in part from the fact that we have narrowed the base for our understanding of the eucharist unduly. From a joyful and forgiving table fellowship we have turned it into either a mystery cult or something so solemn that sinners are not welcome there. Surely it is clear that Jesus blew this trammelled religious world sky high! The Word he made flesh was that of God's love for sinners. It is this fresh, vibrant and creative word we have to rediscover in our eucharistic practice as a sign of hope for a world still racked by division.

