

5 Fashioning Community

SINCE THE TIME of Homer's *Odyssey*, at least, (probably c.1000 BC) absence from home, and the return home, has been a metaphor for the human condition. Odysseus, who is 'Everyman', journeying through all the difficulties and dangers life can throw at him, facing temptation and death, returns to Penelope, who is keeping the hearth for him. He is so changed that only his old nurse can recognize him. After the suitors are killed, and Penelope has at last recognized him, the two are left together, but he has to tell her that Tiresias forecast that he will soon have to leave again: 'I must pass through many cities, holding in my hands a balanced oar till I come to men who know nothing of the sea, who eat food unseasoned with salt and are unacquainted with ships and their crimson cheeks.'¹ Homer seems to be saying that 'home' is more of a longing and a goal than a stable condition.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the narrative of the 'promised land' fulfils the same function. From Genesis to the last of the prophets, Israel's story turns on arrival, exile, dispossession, longing:

How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy (Psalm 137.4-6).

Rootedness – the vision of every family 'under its vine and under its fig tree' – is the human dream, but the experience of exile is the reality. For some, like the author of *Ecclesiastes*, it is exile which has become a metaphor for the whole human condition, and 'home' is the long sleep of death: 'all must go to their eternal home, and the mourners will go about the streets' (*Ecclesiastes* 11 .9f.).

A different experience of exile is signalled by the industrial revolution. In Britain at the start of the eighteenth century, five million people lived for the most part in tiny rooted communities where families intermarried over generations and local knowledge was profound, as it is in all peasant communities. The growth of the great cities, still continuing apace in Asia and Latin America, marked the beginning of a social dislocation with which we are still living. In this context the domestic hearth was extolled as the most sacred site of the human drama, most famously in this piece of doggerel from 1823:

Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,
Be it ever so humble there's no place like home;

¹ *Odyssey*, 23 (tr. W. Shewring, Worlds Classics, 1980)

A charm from the skies seems to hallow us there
Which, seek through this world, is ne'er met with elsewhere.

The growing sense of alienation in Western society was vividly imaged in all forms of art: in the paintings of Eduard Munch from 1894 onwards, in 'the moment of cubism' in 1907, and in Schoenberg's abandonment of triadic harmony and tonality in 1908. These movements in music and painting, echoed later in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, vividly express the sense that north European human beings are no longer at home in their world. The much discussed sense of crisis in family life is but a reflection of this larger sense of alienation.

The loss of community is one of the key themes of contemporary complaint, and it generates a search for, or nostalgia for, community. People hark back to a supposedly more friendly and intimate earlier age, before technology and before the big city. Before we allow ourselves to be carried away on a tide of heritage industry sentiment, we need to ask ourselves whether there ever was any such community. In the first place, though rooted communities undoubtedly existed for many centuries it is not so clear that they formed a more humane environment than our own. If we think of the way old women could be persecuted as 'witches', and those who refused to conform could be marginalized or victimized, not to mention the class oppression implicit in gentry-peasant relations, we can see that there was a great deal wrong with that world too.

In the second place, we have to be cautious about the idea that rootedness is the norm for human beings. English communities were very stable from the eleventh century to the eighteenth, but prior to that there were centuries marked by successive waves of invasions, and a wider view of human history evidences plenty of mass migrations, not to mention the existence of nomadic cultures. In his famous study *Attachment and Loss* John Bowlby even surmised that the reason crying babies fall asleep when we walk with them is to do with our nomadic past.² Perhaps settled communities are more the exception than the rule, more the substance of dreams than of reality.

What seems to have replaced the settled community for those of us in the industrialized world is the community of the network, so that we all exist within webs or networks of relationships based on work, leisure, or political interest groups. For many people, 'church' is just another such group, and it has to be said that it probably is one of the organizations which works hardest to build community wherever it finds itself and as such it is profoundly life-enhancing. We have already seen, however, that community as such is not necessarily good. Whilst it is certainly 'not good that man should be alone', communities can also be deeply destructive when their common energy is turned against an enemy – Serb against Muslim, for example, or Protestant against Catholic. Exploring the community issue further, we come up against the political.

² J. Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss* (Penguin, 1969), page 353

Aristotle suggested that the peculiar dignity of humans was that they could choose the kind of community they wished to live in, and this is what he meant by 'politics'. Of course, in his world neither women nor slaves had any part in this choice. For some time now 'choice' has been a key political watchword, theoretically available for every adult citizen, but we know that our choices are constricted and directed in all sorts of fundamental ways, by education, environment, poverty, the power of the media and of advertising to name but a few. That we are 'free to choose' means that, in the Western liberal democracies at least, we will not have the secret police call for us so long as we play the game. This is not true, of course, for thousands of people in Ecuador or Guatemala today, and in many other countries in South America and the Third World in general.³ Our freedom to choose, then, is a complex and threatened freedom but nevertheless Aristotle is right. In the non-trivial sense, politics is about our common human struggle to fashion more life-giving forms of community. But this, too, is the concern of the eucharist.

The contrast between the spiritual and the material, the religious and the political, in our culture, might still leave some people nervous about the claim that the eucharist has a political dimension, even when politics is described in terms of the fashioning of community. It is often said that Jesus, and the New Testament, are 'non-political'. There is truth in this. Jesus was not a signed-up party member. He did not have a brief either for the Romans (like the Sadducees) or against them (like the Zealots). This is, however, very different from saying that, if politics is about the kind of community we want, he was indifferent to that question. On the contrary, his talk about the kingdom is precisely about a new type of community, run according to quite different principles from both those of the 'lords of the Gentiles' and those exclusivists who believed God's promises stopped with Israel.

There are other reasons, too, for saying that the eucharist is inescapably political. We have seen that the Last Supper was, if not a Passover meal, then celebrated in a Passover context. The Passover celebrated the liberation of Israel from Egypt and the 'words of consecration' represent Jesus' reflections on that story. It was at Passover that nationalist feeling reached fever pitch and at this season the Romans always expected, and often got, trouble. This helps to explain why Pilate acted as he did in crucifying Jesus. When Jesus was arrested, his co-religionists handed him over to the Romans for a political trial. The inscription on the cross announced the cause of his punishment: Jesus was crucified as a messianic pretender, as a king other than Caesar.

As John above all realizes, there is a profoundly ironic truth in this accusation. The gospel reader knows that Jesus has done everything he could to avoid being confused with the kind of messianic pretender who wanted to mount an armed revolt against the Romans. On the other hand, the history of the Church in the first three centuries

³ It was not true for Karen Silkwood in the United States, or Hilda Murrell in Britain, either, and we do not know how representative their deaths are. See J. Cook, *Red Alert* (New English Library, 1986), pages 237f.

made clear that the refusal of legitimacy to Roman imperialism was a profoundly subversive act, and played its part in the fall of the Roman empire. All the self-serving imperial myths about the *pax Romana* and Rome's divine calling were simply undermined. The irony of Pliny's examination of Christian slaves, then, is that they were much more dangerous than he realized. Even today confession of Christ's Lordship constitutes a permanent question to all political power systems, challenging their tendency to overstep the limits of their power, a truth which was the foundation of the German Confessing Church's Barmen Declaration in 1934.

The eucharist is also inescapably political because, in the framework of liberal democracies, every person who comes to the Lord's table does so as one who makes a political option. Many people like to say they are 'apolitical' but in general what this means is that they are satisfied with the way things are. Usually people are interested in the kind of medical attention available to them, the kind of education available to their children, the kind of job opportunities there are, and whether they are able to live without threats of violence either from thugs, hooligans, the army, or the police. All these are political concerns. Every person who comes to the eucharist has therefore a political option, and the option not to make an option is itself an option.

Protestant Christians are especially prone to the idea that life can be compartmentalized. Luther taught that there were two kingdoms, that of God and that of this world, and they both had their own autonomy. This was important in relation to the medieval Church's attempt to control everything: it effected a very necessary desacralization of politics, obstructing the notion that our human political order is identical with God's. Later on, during the Enlightenment, came the idea that, whilst politics was the affair of the community, religion was the affair of the individual. This too represented an important insight, coming as it did after a century of religious persecutions, but it fostered a schizophrenic attitude to life, the idea that life was a series of watertight compartments, and this is clearly both untrue and potentially damaging.

If we compartmentalize our lives, we run the risk of persuading ourselves that there might be things we can do in the political sphere which we would not do in the private. This was one of the issues under scrutiny at Nuremberg. We tend to think of ourselves as workers in one part, parents or children in another, hobbyists in another, and lovers in another, but we are not lots of different people but one worker-lover-parent.

So it is all of us that comes to the eucharistic table, not just the religious part. I do not have, among other identities, a political identity and a religious identity. God encounters me as the one person I am. I do not come to the eucharist to escape from sordid political reality and get in touch with some quite different spiritual reality, but to find the one reality which frames my whole life interpreted, refracted and made more hopeful. The eucharist itself teaches me that I can only come to Truth, ultimate reality, through material – political, social, economic – means. Of this the bread and wine are a sign.

In a sense this is signified by the description of the eucharist as 'the mass'. This name comes from the last words of the Latin service: '*Ite, missa est*', 'Go, it is the dismissal'. It reflects the point that the eucharist is not introverted, a wallow in religious sentiment, but extroverted: that Christians only gather in order better to perform their task in 'the world'. The whole eucharist leads up to the dismissal – that is its point. 'What would be the meaning of fifty-two masses celebrated in a year', asks the Sri Lankan theologian Tissa Balasuriya, 'if there was no improvement for the poor in their shanties?'⁴ 'Mass' means the eucharist exists for a more human world, but such a world does not come by daydreaming. 'Wishers were ever fools', says Shakespeare's Cleopatra. It comes only through the rough and tumble of politics, tiresome, boring and arduous though these be (Oscar Wilde remarked aptly that the trouble with socialism was that it cost too many evenings).

If politics, then, is about fashioning a more human community, how does the eucharist contribute to that? Our faith shapes us, I believe, by educating our desire. It is our political compass, if not our map. To say that the eucharist is inescapably political does not mean that it is a political meeting. It does mean that in the eucharist Word and sign are brought to bear on real issues, on issues that affect the life and quality of life of others and myself. I come to the gathering round the Lord's table as a political-religious-familial, body-mind-spirit whole person, in search of a deeper wholeness, to hear a Word which vitally concerns the very marrow of the world in which I live, and necessarily, therefore, a word about fashioning community. In the eucharist we are not pointed to any old community but to one characterized by sharing, by the overcoming of boundaries, by friendship.

Our very word 'community' has roots in the key New Testament word *koinonia*, usually translated 'fellowship' or 'communion', which gives us one of the most familiar descriptions of the eucharist in English. 'Holy communion' – both the communion of the 'saints', as Paul called the very imperfect members of Corinth or Galatia or Philippi, and their sharing in 'holy things'. *Koinonia* is one of the central characteristics of the young community. In a passage which has had immense significance for radical social groups through the centuries we read: 'Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common' (Acts 4.32).

From the start, fellowship with Christ (1 Corinthians 1.9), sharing (the same word) in the blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 10.16) works itself out practically in the sharing of resources with other communities (2 Corinthians 8.4; 9.13). It is a paradox which must give peculiar satisfaction to the devil that a word which has its origin as a description of the common life has become privatized in the idea of 'receiving' or 'taking' communion, where 'communion' seems to refer just to the elements. The gift of the Holy Spirit, according to Paul, was not given for our private satisfaction, or to enable us to experience the delights of religious ecstasy, but is 'for the common good' (1

⁴ T. Balasuriya, *The Eucharist and Human Liberation* (SCM, 1979), page 21

Corinthians 12.7). In the most famous of his metaphors, which was actually a political commonplace of the time, Paul speaks of the *ecclesia* as a body, all the parts of which work together for the good of the whole.

It is not only resources which must be shared, but common wisdom. In this respect it really is about time we asked whether the sermon is the best way for our day-to-day (political) lives to be illuminated by the word of Scripture within the eucharist. The sermon goes back to a time when most 'hearers' were illiterate and the priest very likely the most educated member of the community. This has long since ceased to be the case. Of course, there is a place for the sermon on some occasions – at rites of passage, or on great festivals. When they are the norm, however, they represent a very unbiblical refusal of the richness and variety of the gifts of wisdom available in the community. We urgently need to find ways of sharing that wisdom within our liturgy.

Earlier [in the twentieth] century, the sociologist Ernst Troeltsch characterized the experience of the Early Church as 'love patriarchalism'. As such, he thought that it offered people an alternative within their religious groupings, but posed no challenge to society as a whole. This, it seems to me, misses the point of Paul's language about the *ecclesia* – which we must not too readily translate 'Church' because of all the historical baggage that term carries with it. A much better translation would be 'the new society'. The Church was not intended, in Paul's thought, to constitute a little group of saved in the midst of a wicked world. On the contrary, as the universal dimension of his Adam–Christ language shows, Paul had nothing less in mind than the regeneration of the whole human story.

Concretely this worked itself out in the breaking down of the most intractable barriers of the first-century world, between Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, and even women and men. In the context of our earlier discussion this made the whole world 'home' to those who believed. Ordinary Christians still understand this and are taught it by the eucharist. Attending mass once at Freiburg Cathedral in southern Germany, coffee was served afterwards at the back of the church. One Japanese girl was left out of the general conversation and I discovered that she was in Germany on a two-year study course. I asked her if she was homesick. 'No', she replied, 'the eucharist is my homeland.'

This community which demolishes boundaries is also, naturally, a community of friends, as we learn in John's Gospel:

You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father (John 15.14–15).

The early Quakers quite rightly described the Christian community as 'a society of friends'. Friends are free and equal, not divided by authority structures, by class or caste. Paul's letter to Philemon shows how becoming a Christian cuts across deep-

rooted social boundaries. 'I am sending Onesimus back to you ... no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother', he writes.

Our meeting at the eucharist to share fellowship as a society of friends challenges us to find political structures to do justice to that reality. The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth used to say that whilst Christianity did not endorse any one political order there was a *nisus* within it, a drive or tendency, towards democracy, that is a society where power is vested in all members of the community. The mistake would be to confuse any of the politics we today call 'democracies' with the 'democracy' of the kingdom, of the society of friends. On the contrary the eucharist should teach us deep dissatisfaction with these democracies. Of course, they give us much for which we have to be thankful, but by the standards of the kingdom they are rudimentary indeed.

As we 'learn Christ' in the education of the eucharistic table are we not called to seek an adequate and nuanced education for all, recognizing and respecting the variety of human ability, and not honouring one type above others? Is what we learn there really compatible with a system which privileges some above others simply because their parents are wealthy? Again, when we take the sharing in our common life seriously, is it not clear that responsibility for 'the commons' – what we now call in an indecent phrase 'the utilities' – should be vested in all? Land, water, energy – these are God's gift to the human race, not given so that a tiny class of managers and politicians can enrich themselves by exploiting them. Managing these resources is a political task for the whole body. From this perspective the abandonment of ideas of common ownership, rooted as these were in the picture of Acts 4, is a sad retreat.

Ideas of common ownership have been abandoned because they seem Utopian, unrealizable in the 'real world'. It is in this context that we turn to the last rooting of our eucharistic practice in the gospel narrative. The fixation with the 'Last' Supper is surely quite extraordinary when we recall that the Gospels tell us it was not the last supper at all, but that Jesus broke bread with the disciples in the resurrection meals. Emmaus is as much a forerunner of the eucharist as the meal in the upper room, if not more so. It is as if the Church found the Risen Lord too much to handle, and was happier contemplating a dead Saviour and singing mournful songs about him instead. But as well as a society of friends we are an Easter people!

In one of the great theological manifestos of [the twentieth] century, written in response to the Jewish Marxist Ernst Bloch, Jürgen Moltmann insisted that hope is the overriding Christian political virtue, and that it is rooted in the resurrection.⁵ For the Greeks, hope was an evil from Pandora's box, because it was always likely to leave you disillusioned. This is precisely the standpoint of our political 'realists', who tell us daily that things cannot be different. The resurrection, however, establishes a different law in history: it says that the impossible can become possible, that there is the possibility for what is radically new and radically other. Christians are not bound by Gramsci's motto: 'Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'. According to Paul it was

⁵ J. Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope* (SCM, 1966)

rather, bearing, believing and hoping all things, not to maintain the status quo, but in the process of being carried along by God's long revolution. The meal with the Risen Lord, then, ought to be the seedbed of political imagination and creativity.

The Gospels, said an eighteenth-century biblical scholar, 'breathe resurrection', and they do so because the figure of Jesus does so. In James Joyce's beautiful coinage Jesus is the 'gracehoper' who dreams of a quite different future, which he calls God's kingdom, which he teaches his disciples both to pray and work for. It is the truth of his hoping which is manifest in the resurrection.

On the one side the meal with the Risen Lord is a protest, a critique. It protests against unequal structures in society. It protests against the abuse of the material. It protests against injustice and inhumanity. Its function is then to disturb our complacency, to prevent our accepting injustice and oppression as 'normal', to challenge the view of political 'realism'. It says that the 'realism' of the 'hard facts' is in fact cynicism, a denial of the human. It is then, in the second place, not only a protest but a movement by which we opt out of the class-competitive society, of cynical assumptions about the inevitability of class division or of nuclear weapons. As such it is a deep act of subversion. 'Jesus is the answer' say the slogans, but of course he is not an answer but an insistent question. This is why he did not found a new religion endowed with infallible dogmas, but a movement towards the kingdom of the God he called 'Father'.

How deep the paradox, then, that from the days of the church in Corinth onwards the unity which the eucharist adumbrates through its sharing of one loaf and one cup has been denied. Wine has been withheld from the laity and the eucharist clericalized. Women have usually been refused permission to preside, and in many churches still are. Rich have gone up to receive before the poor. Black have been forbidden to drink from the same cup as white, and high caste from low caste. In every conceivable way human unity has been denied. But the bread of the eucharist is bread which is broken with the dream of a new humanity based on a 'new covenant' in mind. Its sharing looks forward to an equal sharing overcoming all class, caste, racial and sexual divisions: 'We who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread' (1 Corinthians 10.17).

The meal with the Risen Lord is a sacramental anticipation of a community in which people live for others; of a society in which each gives according to their abilities to each according to their needs. It does not create a model community, a little group of saved which others may envy. It begins the movement towards the creation of a counter-culture, a culture which will incarnate the values of Christ, the holy jester and divine fool. At the last Passover meal he speaks of his blood poured out for many, for the inclusion of all in God's promises. He dreams therefore of 'one world' under those promises, a dream which Luke translates into story form in his account of the day of Pentecost. The 'Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia ... and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs' (Acts 2.9-11) signify for Luke the whole inhabited earth, which now hears of God's promises each in its own tongue. The meal with the Risen Lord is an anticipation of this one human community living at peace.