

Reflection for Pentecost 10 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

The final verse of our gospel reading today are these words of Jesus: *"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."* In each of our lives there are moments that stand out and cut right through the normality of daily life, reaching to our very core, touching our hearts in the most profound way. Such moments leave deep and lasting impression that can change things forever.

For me, one such moment came a number of years ago, well before I was ordained. I was attending Sunday Eucharist; the priest who was presiding at the service had come, only a matter minutes before, from the bedside of a girl in her early twenties as she lay dying, having been fatally injured in a car crash. The daughter of committed family within the congregational, her life, her future, her potential, ripped away. As that service proceeded, I became acutely aware of how that priest was becoming the focus through which the pain and the grief of that congregation was being offered to God.

It's an image of priesthood that has stuck with me ever since. The image of a priest representing Christ and acting as channel through which the pain and concerns of the people are channelled towards God.

This image of priesthood perhaps finds its greatest resonance each time we meet to celebrate the Eucharist. We recall Jesus with his disciples at the Last Supper as he prepares for his passion and, becoming the ultimate focal point, taking on himself the burden of our sin, the sin of the whole world, of humanity's rebellion and turning away from God.

He gives us the sacrament of Holy Communion – bread and wine.

"Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

How often, though, does the routine of our eucharistic worship and the mental baggage that we bring to worship dull our minds to the enormous reality of what Christ did for us and his love for us?

Recall the image of Gethsemane, which we find in Matthew's gospel 26:39 *"And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want."*

Jesus's obedience to the will of the Father despite the huge cost is complete and total. Jesus is becoming the Pascal Lamb. He is at the point of giving everything including his life. The mental struggle involved begins to overwhelm him, yet his obedience to the Father's will is not shaken or broken.

It is here that knowing something of the Holy Land and its geography emphasises this still further. If you stand in the olive groves at the foot of the Mount of Olives, around the area of Gethsemane, and look across the Kidron valley towards the Old City, you become very aware of time and distance. Jesus could have seen the temple soldiers coming down into the valley and up again - a route that would have taken some time on foot. Then turn in the other direction up the hill. On the other side of the Mount of Olives lies the Judean Wilderness with many places to hide and escape.

Jesus really did have a choice!

As you ponder his prayer, it becomes more than something spiritual and

academic; Jesus had a really had chance to escape. "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want."

He deliberately gives up his life to bring us salvation!

Hold that in your mind and come back to the Eucharist - the broken bread and the wine; an image that finds its roots in the context that of Jewish Passover. We find these words being used around the Passover table

"This is the bread of affliction which our fathers did eat in the land of Egypt. Let all who hunger come and eat. Let all who are in need come and partake of the paschal lamb. This year we are here; next year - in the land of Yisrael! This year we are slaves; Next year - free men."

This is the meal that Jesus takes on the night of his betrayal and radically reinterprets. It is no longer about freedom from slavery in Egypt, but salvation for the whole of creation; salvation that is open to all who accept God's grace, freely given.

This is a reinterpretation that turns the focus away from a sacrificed animal, a lamb, and the blood smeared on the door post, to a new Pascal lamb - Christ himself. God's own son - sacrificed on the cross.

As one worship song puts it :-

*Led like a lamb to the slaughter in silence and shame,
there on your back you carried a world of violence and pain.
Bleeding, dying.*

Or as Paul puts it in Corinthians

*"On the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you.
Do this in remembrance of me."*

The word "remembrance" is key to our understanding. It is not solely about recalling, rather it picks up echoes for the Passover Meal: echoes that the idea of remembering has a past, present and future – and does so simultaneously.

By remembering the past, by bringing it to mind, it does not remain in the past but becomes a present reality. It becomes part of what we are and who we are. And because of the hopes that we hold in Christ - hope of God's Kingdom fully established in its glory, hope of the resurrection - it is also future at the same time.

Jesus says *"I am the living bread"*

That living bread lies at the very heart of our worship each time we celebrate the Eucharist, every time we remember Jesus and his disciples gathered at the last supper. In a spiritual sense the elements at Communion become for us the bread of life and nourish us on our journey of faith.

The early Christians understood the reality of Christ's self-giving as the living bread. It is recorded in an early hymn found in Philippians 2 and used as a canticle at some Evening Prayer Services. Let me encourage you to read the words from Philippians 2 and take a moment of quiet reflection. The words are in the Pew Sheet.