

Sunday 7 March: Third Sunday of Lent

Blessed

Readings: Isaiah 55.1-9; Luke 13.1-9

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Blessed

'Taken, blessed, broken, given' - the shape of the Eucharist and the pattern of our Lent series of sermons. Last week, Fr Simon Holden began with a definition of the word 'Taken'. I'll own up to being less than sure about the meaning of the word 'blessed', which is odd given the role priests have in blessing people and things. I do it a lot; we all do. Bless, Bless you, God bless, Good-bye (being a contraction of God bless you), and so on. In Judaism, the Rabbis teach that every Jew should give at least 100 blessings a day. What a lovely way to live!

A Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship says that, "A blessing is an authoritative declaration of divine favour". That's where I am less than certain. The problem is authority. Bishops and priests bless with authority, the authority of the Church, the authority of God. Deacons and lay people do not. This matter of authority sometimes makes for absurdity. The former Bishop of Carlisle blessed a nuclear submarine. I have blessed homes, new toilets and a new bridge across the River Thames but I am not allowed to bless a couple who love each other and promise to live together faithfully to the end of their days if they are of the same sex.

The form of service agreed by the Church of England when people come to church after a Civil Marriage is not a Blessing but 'A Service of Prayer and Dedication'. What most people who want this service ask for is a blessing of their marriage, and I think they ask right. A few years ago we used this confusion of language to help us when Adam and Tony, much loved members of our congregation, asked for a service of Blessing after their Civil Partnership. What happened was 'A Service of Prayer and Dedication after a Civil Partnership'. I was on holiday but St Martin's supported in great number, the sky did not fall in or the ground open up, and I received no complaints. I have no doubt God blessed them but the Church of England is at best ambivalent about same sex relationships and for the time being declines to give its full authority by blessing them, and authority does matter.

The celebration of this Eucharist is properly authored and authorized. It is rooted in the practice of the Church and in Scripture.

"For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus 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." *1 Corinthians 11.23*

The Eucharist's integrity is protected by the care with which the Church maintains its sacramental life including in the identification of those called by God to this ordained ministry which is a blessing to the church and wider world.

In the Eucharist gifts of God's creation and the creative work of people, bread and wine are taken and blessed, broken and given in this liturgy. 'Liturgy' is a Greek word, often translated into

English as a service but literally meaning, 'the work of the people'. The work of the people is to worship and celebrate the Eucharist, to give thanks to God for everything. Of course this can be done in any time and place with all the glorious gifts of creation. In 1961 the Roman Catholic Jesuit Teillard de Chardin's 'Hymn of the Universe' celebrated the whole of God's creation as being infused with the sacramental presence of Christ. What we do in church is a witness to this and we come together especially on the first day of the week, the day of Christ's resurrection, with these particular gifts of bread and wine, to do this in memory of him and receive Christ into our lives. It is a particular blessing.

This year's Lent course has been based on Timothy Radcliffe's book, 'Why go to Church? The drama of the Eucharist'. The trouble with a title like that is that it might imply we are play acting, but as Richard said two weeks ago, there is something very real about this drama. We gather in church and when we are ready, the service begins with a procession, coming in from the world.

Today feels like 'dress down Sunday' with the Occasional Singers instead of our usual robed choir but church processions are usually characterized by much dressing up, the most important getting to dress up most and coming last. If the bishop were here, you would see exactly what I mean. He even wears a hat like a crown, a mitre. When the bishop is not here, the Vicar gets to go at the back, except at the Eucharist when the priest who is presiding does. And that's the clue that this drama is acting out a different social order. This procession witnesses that the last shall be first and the dressing up is to show that even the greatest sinner is clothed by God and can be used by God, can be a bishop or priest. We are not the self-righteous but the Prodigal Son being met and clothed by a loving Father eager to welcome us home.

So the most important thing to say about our being blessed is not that we come here perfect, successful, well; but that if we come honestly and open to meet God here, we are accepted, forgiven, renewed. That in the resurrection we are given the chance to start again, and that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

There's a lot of Mozart at St Martin's. I don't just mean the concerts. The young boy on his European tour spent six months living in Cecil Court, off St Martin's Lane. Certainly he knew this building, probably he played here. At the Choral Eucharist on Wednesday lunch times the Choral Scholars sometimes sing a Mozart Mass. I am often struck by the joy of the Kyries, the penitential 'Lord have mercies'. They can be so exuberant that for a while I wondered if Mozart took sin seriously. I probably had in mind his characterization in Peter Schaeffer's 'Amadeus' in which Mozart could be outrageous and lacking seriousness, but I think that's wrong. The music tells us that Mozart rejoices in the Kyries precisely because he knows the freedom that comes with God's forgiveness, not just of particular acts, the stupid and wrong things we have all thought, said and done, but the forgiveness of all humanity by his coming among us in Jesus Christ. In Christ we are unbound of sin and God's forgiveness of us is a joyful blessing.

We are not unblemished, particularly those of us who are older, and the question is whether our wounds have been healed so that instead of the life draining out of us through them, they become a source of energy and creativity. Jesus teaches us to forgive others as we have been forgiven and the person who has been forgiven much is the person who loves much. This is the reality of our being blessed.

The Eucharist is the place in which we find ourselves in relation to God and one another. Always it is 'real' because it is the place where we hold our lives before God and sift our experience. Sometimes this is beautiful and consoling. Sometimes it is disturbing and challenging. I love the story in the Book of Genesis of wrestling Jacob, in which he struggles through the night with a stranger and in the morning limps away realizing that he has been blessed because he has been contending with God.

In the Week of Accompanied Prayer that began Lent for some of us I discovered once again that the key to prayer is my desire to pray. In coming to the Eucharist that desire is renewed and strengthened.

Our reading from Isaiah this morning is wonderful on this.

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. *Isaiah 55.1,2*

Isaiah lived seven hundred or so years before Jesus but it's that same longing for God which is met here, today, in simple bread and wine, through which we find God in all things, all people, even ourselves.

This service begins with a procession and it ends with one, too, going back out into the world in the peace of Christ to love and serve the Lord. We are dismissed from this Eucharist to do the work of God in the world, as people who have met with God, been blessed by God, and sent on our way again, and again, and again.

Looking at the readings for today I was very grateful for that wonderful passage from Isaiah and completely perplexed about what to say about the Gospel reading. In the parable of the fig tree what we hear is an encounter with a gardener, reminiscent of Mary Magdalene on Easter morning in John's Gospel. In the parable the gardener replied, "Sir, let [the fig tree] alone for one more year, until I dig around and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good." *Luke 13.9a*

In this Eucharist we are nurtured and fed like the fig tree, blessed so that we go out and bear fruit doing the work of God in the world.