

Maundy Thursday 2017

The Eucharist

What I like about McDonalds are the gherkins. For me that is the defining taste of a Big Mac. What I do not like about McDonalds is that little catch phrase,

Enjoy your meals.

I want to interrupt the young woman behind the counter and shout

It's a meal! Singular! Not meals! Meal!

I am far too polite to do so. And if I did I am sure that the server would look at me with fear and amazement as if to say,

What is this grumpy old man on about?!

AS you will have gathered I think the difference is very important. A meal is not about me eating a burger in front of the television. A meal is about eating with family, my friends. When I sit down to eat with my wife and two sons and their girlfriends there are not six meals taking place: there is only one.

Jesus and his disciples clearly had a great sense that a meal was a social event. And the last supper had an important religious meaning also, for it commemorated the event that had given freedom to the Jewish people two thousand years earlier. It is also, other than the death and resurrection, one of the more widely attested events of Jesus' life. The Last Supper with the words "This is my Body" is recorded, as you might expect, in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. More significantly it is recorded by Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians. This is significant for two reasons. First, Paul's letters are the oldest part of the New

Testament - perhaps being written down as early as AD 51 - just eighteen years after the event.

The second significance is that Paul generally shows very little interest in the events of Jesus life or what he said. The passage from 1 Corinthians, quoted at every mass, is the longest Paul ever wrote containing the words of Jesus or referring to his life. This suggests that Paul must have been confident that the event really did take place and that it was of great significance.

And the evidence from the Acts of the Apostles is that the early Christians thought so to. Two things are associated with the early church. First they baptized people and then they shared the Eucharist. So, after Peter proclaims the gospel on the day of Pentecost, it is recorded:

Those who received the word were baptized and there were added that day three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.

Act 2:42

No mention of wine. That is, no doubt, because wine was for feast days only and most of the time the early Christians were not wealthy enough to afford it.

But what exactly are we doing in the mass? I want to put it to you that there are two elements: that of looking back and that of looking forward. The looking back is obvious. We are remembering an historical event that took place two thousand years ago. But we are doing something else. We are looking forward to the time when the world will come to an end and Christ will return. A few years ago I listened to a discussion on Radio 4 between a scientist and a religious leader about the end of the world. What was

interesting was how provocative was the scientist and how non committal was the religious leader. The latter said that the Christian church believed that the world would end but no-one would know when and he was not going to speculate. The scientist, on the other hand, pointed out that the geological stability we had enjoyed the last few thousand years was quite remarkable and could end any moment. In our lifetime we could be plunged into earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, ice ages or global warming and the whole of human life could be changed beyond existence.

The biblical accounts of the institution of the Eucharist make it clear that Jesus regarded it as a celebration that looks forward to the end of the world. According to St Paul Jesus said

When you eat this bread and drink this cup
you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

1 Corinthians 11:26

According to St Mark, Jesus says

I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day
when drink it new in the kingdom of God

Mark 14:25

and St Matthew and St Luke record similar words.

The Eucharist is, if you like, a foretaste of a heavenly banquet. Heaven, in other words, will be a party, a meal, with good food and good company. How appropriate it is that Jesus was criticized for going to too many parties and dining out too often!

There are no masses in heaven. For in heaven we are fed by Jesus himself. His words recorded in John's Gospel sum it up, 'I am the bread of life.' (John 6:35)

As hymn, *O thou who at thy Eucharist did pray* reminds us, the end of the world will be the time 'when sacraments shall cease.' But until that time we have the Eucharist, as a reminder of what Christ has done for us and as a foretaste of what will be.

N Clews
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