

The Grain and the Grape

Isaiah 63:1-7
Psalm 80: 8-15
1 Cor 15:35-38
John 15; 1-5

The image of the Body of Christ exists on two levels in the Christian tradition. The one that is most obvious on this particular feast day is that of the bread of the Eucharist. For centuries Christians have believed that this becomes, in some mysterious way, the Body of Christ. Luke tells us that at the Last Supper,

Jesus took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Luke 22:19

John tells us that Jesus said to his disciples

I am the bread of life.
Whoever comes to me will never be hungry,
and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

John 6:35

This Body of Christ is then eaten by Christians and we, by an equally mysterious process become the Body of Christ. This is the second way in which the image exists. Paul writes to the Church in Corinth

you are the body of Christ and individually members of it

1 Cor 12:26

Jesus does not use the image explicitly but he is clearly thinking along the same lines when he compares himself to a vine:

I am the vine, you are the branches.

Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit,
because apart from me you can do nothing.

John 15:5

This is all the more convincing when we recall that the first disciples would have known very well that The Vine was a common image for the whole nation of Israel. We heard this a few minutes ago in Psalm 80.

So we might say that we become what we eat. And if we pursue this a little further then we might say that ultimately we are made of wheat and grapes.

But of course there is a long process in getting from a vineyard to a fine bottle of wine. Or from a field of wheat to a loaf. It is in fact quite a destructive process. The grapes are trodden, they are burst, destroyed, to extract the juice which is then fermented over a long period. And this process of treading the grapes is used many times as an image in both Old and New testaments. It is an image of God's judgment. It is an image of the end of time. It is an image of consummation, for grapes have a purpose – and it is not to hang endlessly on the vine. It is to be harvested, it is to be trodden.

And something similar is true of grain – not trodden, but ground in the mill, pulverized and then, as flour, transformed into bread. Paul uses the very beginning of this process as an image of resurrection:

What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.

1 Corinthians 15:35

And so the Eucharist takes on a new significance. Not only does it look back to the death and resurrection of Jesus, but it also looks forward to our own death, to the end of the world, to resurrection and judgment. It looks forward not in a negative way but with a sense of fulfillment, a sense of consummation, a sense of looking forward to the time when we will be what we have always been meant to be.

The second century Bishop, Ignatius of Antioch, took this image very literally:

Allow me to become food for the wild beasts, through whose instrumentality it will be granted me to attain to God. I am the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ.

Epistle to the Romans chapter 4

He was on his way, under guard, to Rome where he was to be executed for his Christians faith. He took the opportunity to send off a number of letters to Christians churches to offer them encouragement. His faith reminds us that God is in charge both at the end of time but also in the journey towards the end. He is both the goal and the journey –or as Jesus himself put the Way, the Truth and the Life.

The violence of what happens to both the grain and the grape is a sign to us that resurrection must be preceded by death. It is dangerous to try to explain suffering. It is dangerous because it can seem to trivialize it. It is dangerous because it can compartmentalize it and give the impression that all suffering leads directly to some kind of gain. That is not always our experience. But it is our experience that suffering can lead to new levels of wisdom and knowledge of God. Perhaps we can also say that wisdom and knowledge of God cannot be attained without some kind of suffering. The grapes must be trod and the grain must be ground.

And knowledge of God cannot be attained without judgment. Mediaeval paintings often present judgment as being about being consigned either to heaven or to hell. In the fashionable language of our day it is a 'binary' event! But perhaps judgment is more nuanced than that. Perhaps judgment is about me seeing myself as I truly am, stripped of all illusions. It is about seeing myself as God sees me. And in some ways that may be painful. When I am judged I may see that I was never in a million years going to be Prime Minister or even the Archbishop of Canterbury. Never Miss World; never a billionaire; never even the life and soul of the party.

But judgment can also be freeing. When I am judged I will know that my faults are shared by the whole of humanity for we are all children of Adam and Eve. And perhaps best of all I will know that Jesus Christ who sees me in my nakedness is also the one who loves me most. I am loved exactly as I am.

And when that happens we have reached the end of the journey. I am no longer a bunch of grapes but a bottle of vintage wine. I am no longer an ear of wheat but a perfectly formed loaf of bread. The journey has been violent and painful but I am now the person God called me to be. I am ready meet him face to face.

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15th June 2017