

Bread of Life: Bishops' teaching series

8: Mission and Justice - Bishop Sarah Bullock

The 8th theme in 'Bread of Life', our series on the Eucharist, is that of 'Mission and Justice.'

We all live 'in context'. That context is different for each and every person, even those living in the same family and in the same house. We all see, experience, interpret and understand the world in different ways, influenced by our personal circumstances and acquired knowledge, the behaviour of others, and the community, country and time in which we are living, among many other factors. But also because our individual understanding and insight is a part of the beauty of our created being, created and loved by God.

Inevitably, as individuals, our experiences and subsequent reflection on them is continually creating and recreating a 'lens' through which our further experiences are viewed and which informs our reflections on all matters of life and faith.

It is with all of this in mind that I invite you to engage with this theme of 'Mission and Justice.' Bringing your own context, lived experience, journey of faith and subsequent constantly developing understanding, to all that we will reflect on in this session.

Sharing a meal is something which we will all have done at some point in our life, even if, for the past year or so, as we have lived through the restrictions of the pandemic, our social lives have been considerably restricted. Sharing a meal is something we understand and, most often, it is something that embodies welcome, hospitality, inclusion, and friendship. Sharing food together is a deeply intimate act which requires engagement and at least an element of vulnerability. Through this act we open ourselves to one another.

The Eucharist is the ultimate expression of the meal, a meal to which, in the words of Rowan Williams, 'we have been welcomed and we are wanted' and to which we have the freedom to invite others:

'We have experienced the hospitality of God in Christ, our lives are therefore set free to be hospitable.'

(Rowan Williams, Being Christian. SPCK, 2014.)

At the Eucharist we are 'a community in which all are equal because everyone is equally an undeserving and surprising guest.'

(Rowan Williams, Tokens of Trust. Canterbury Press, 2007)

The Eucharist sets the celebration of the meal firmly within the total action of God in creation, reconciliation and consummation. Throughout scripture we see hospitality, welcome, friendship and inclusion demonstrated in the sharing of meals but we also hear the need to lift up the poor and support those who are in need and to be reconciled, to be in right relationship with one another.

It is in the Eucharist that the community of God's people is fully shown. It is when we gather as God's people, at God's table, that the Church becomes what it is meant to be. Eucharistic celebrations, however large or small are always an expression of the involvement of the whole Church. The sharing in one bread and one cup in any given place demonstrating the oneness of all those who share the Eucharist in every time and place. The sacrament binds us together as a Eucharistic community.

'The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.'

(I Corinthians 10: 16-17. NRSV)

And the Eucharist embraces all aspects of life. It is a representative act of thanksgiving and offering on behalf of the whole world and demands reconciliation and sharing. The Church cannot have communion with the Father, through the Son, if it is not in communion with others and itself.

Injustice of any sort, separation and lack of freedom are radically challenged when we share in the body and blood of Christ. The Eucharist is a place where God's reign of justice and peace is lived out.

As we hear in the words of Jesus in Matthew, chapter 5:

'So, when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go, first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.'

(Matthew 5: 23-24. NRSV)

And, as we hear in Galatians:

'As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.'

(Galatians 3:27-28. NRSV)

Words can be poetic and powerful, bringing comfort, but also challenge and a call to participate. As Dr. Liz Shercliff points out:

'The text can speak justice by making visible the vulnerable among us'

(Liz Shercliff, *Preaching Women: Gender, Power and the Pulpit*, SCM Press, 2019.)

This one brief sentence caught my attention when reading Liz's powerful book, 'Preaching Women: Gender, Power and the Pulpit' and stayed with me and it is a sentence to which I have returned over and over again. I know that it is not just because, as an English Literature graduate, I appreciate the sheer poetry of the wording and the beautifully formulated sentence construction, but because the power of the words speak to my heart and confirm a truth which, in my own faith journey and understanding is so important - the biblical text speaks of love and justice and one way in which that happens is by 'making visible the vulnerable among us.'

Daniel Migliore reflects in his work 'Faith Seeking Understanding':

'The Eucharist is the sacrament of human participation in the divine life. It is a public, open, joyful, hopeful meal, a foretaste of a new humanity. Christians cannot eat and drink at this table - where all are welcome and none goes hungry or thirsty - and continue to condone any form of discrimination or any social or economic policy that results in hunger or other forms of deprivation.'

(Daniel L Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, Eerdmans Publishing Company. Grand Rapids, Michigan. 1991.)

Eucharistic communion is radical, inclusive and utterly relational. When we come together at the Eucharist, in parish churches, Fresh Expressions, schools and colleges, hospitals, hospices and nursing homes, cathedrals and homes or on screen - wherever we are, we glimpse heaven itself. As Jarel Robinson- Brown reflects:

'In bread and wine, Christ is both the face of the Eucharist and the window into eternity... We see, as participants in the Eucharist, what we shall come to behold in eternity.'

(Jarel Robinson-Brown, *Whiteness and the Aesthetics of the Eucharist*. <https://changedfromgloryintoglory.wordpress.com>, October 22nd, 2020)

Eucharistic Prayer 'E' in Common Worship, the Eucharistic prayer I used most regularly in parish ministry, serving in communities which needed to hear the message of inclusion, justice and peace, gives voice to this truth in these words:

'Lord of all life,
help us to work for that day
when your kingdom comes
and justice and mercy will be seen in all the earth.'

Look with favour on your people,
gather us in your loving arms
and bring us with all the saints
to feast at your table in heaven.'

To approach the Eucharist, the partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, however much our understanding of that action is 'through a glass darkly', calls for preparation of heart and mind. Participation in the Eucharist confronts us and our behaviour and calls us to be active in living out the values of the Kingdom of God before, during and after we are sent out from the celebration. St John Chrysostom referred to the call of every Christian to go out and 'Celebrate the Liturgy after the Liturgy', serving Christ in one another. Reconciled in the Eucharist we are called to be people of reconciliation and witnesses of the joy of the resurrection.

We hear this challenge in words from 'A eucharistic prayer' written by the theologian and activist, Monica Furlong:

'We ask you, God creator, to enter this action so that our hearts are moved to loving, and our fear and spite fade away. Fill out our intention to fulfil your divine purpose, that all who partake of the Easter feast may be completed in grace.'

(Monica Furlong. *A eucharistic prayer, Prayers and Poems, SPCK, 2004*)

And those from 'Eucharistic prayer for ordinary use' by Janet Morley, author, poet and Christian Feminist:

'Therefore, as we eat this bread and drink this cup,
we are proclaiming Christ's death until he comes.
In the body broken and the blood poured out,
we restore to memory and hope
the broken and unremembered victims
of tyranny and sin;
and we long for the bread of tomorrow
and the wine of the age to come.'

(Janet Morley, *Eucharistic prayer for ordinary use, All Desires Known, Movement for the Ordination of Women / Women in Theology, 1988.*)

Every time we participate in the Eucharist we are fed by the Body of Christ, the presence of Jesus and the Holy Spirit at work in us, shaping our hearts and calling us to be in solidarity with the outcast and to be generous and courageous in our sharing of the good news of God's love in word and action, giving hope to the disheartened and welcome to the excluded. The celebration of the Eucharist is participation in the mission of God to the world.

I find Pope Francis's words of reflection helpful here:

The love of God shown to us in Christ '...welcomed with an open heart, changes us, transforms us, renders us capable of loving not according to human measure, always limited, but according to the measure of God, which is without measure....and our life, with the love of Jesus, received in the Eucharist, is made a gift. As was the life of Jesus.'

(Pope Francis. *Angelus, St. Peter's Square, 22nd June, 2014*)

The Eucharist brings us out of individualism so that we may follow Christ together, living out our faith in him. The Eucharist, as Pope Francis has said, is '...the beating heart of the Church.... It is the bread of heaven, the bread of things to come, a foretaste of a future infinitely greater than we can hope for or imagine...our 'reservation' for the heavenly banquet, Jesus himself, a food for our journey towards eternal life.'

The Eucharist gathers us together, feeds us, challenges us, gives us strength and calls us onwards - it is the very bread of heaven.