

The Real Presence in the Eucharist

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“My flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I in him or her.”

Afrikaans is a lovely language for poetry There is a poem by DJ Opperman which begins

My nooi is in 'n naartjie,
My ouma in kaneel.
Daar's iemand....iemand in anys,
Daars 'n vrou in elke geur.

Did you understand it? How's your Afrikaans? My love is in a naartjie, my granny's in cinammon, there's someone in aniseed and a girl in every flavour. It doesn't sound the same in English, does it?

But the sentiment is still true. Don't you find that a smell, a scent, can suddenly take you back over the years to another place, another time, another person. I'm told that it's a particularly poignant part of packing up the clothes of a departed loved one. The scent recreates that old experience, that person from the past, as if the person was still there. I peel a naartjie, and I remember the picnic with my first girl friend. I put a pinch of cinnamon on the pancake, and suddenly my heart is wrenched as I remember when I was a child and grandma was baking. Smells take us back to an absent love.

I want to talk for a moment about the Eucharist. It has become the central thing, in fact almost the only thing, in Anglican worship. Of course the Eucharist should lie at the heart of our Christian journey. And I know you know all about it; but the gospel for today requires me to talk about it. It's not a naartjie which reminds us of our absent love, but a meal. The bread, the wine, the service of remembrance. This is my body. This is my blood. Do this in remembrance of me.

I had a young parishioner, all of 5 years old, albeit a precocious 5 year old, who refused to come to church if there was going to be a Communion service. He knew it involved eating the body, drinking the blood, of Jesus. Like all 5 year olds his thoughts were still in the concrete cognition phase. He took words literally. And the idea was revolting to him. Jesus in his mind belonged in the cradle in Bethlehem. How could we eat him? And although our adult minds are dulled to it, it is a startling thought, is it not.

And the language of the gospel of John today lays it out in all its starkness. “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you will not have life in you.” Flesh. Blood. Of course we don't take it quite as literally as my precocious young parishioner. We Anglicans like to use words like the Real Presence of Jesus in the bread and wine. Actually, to lay my AngloCatholic cards on the table I still prefer the term transubstantiation. The substance of the ordinary bread and wine becomes the substance of the body and blood of Jesus. When Thomas Aquinas the great Christian philosopher used the term he meant it in a special technical way. The substance of a thing for

Thomas had nothing to do with its physical properties. Substance didn't mean what we might mean by substance. For Aquinas the substance of a thing had nothing to do with its physical properties, its look, its weight. Physically, scientifically if you like, the bread was still bread. Substance meant the significance of a thing, its inner nature. In the Eucharist the bread and wine cease to be just food and drink. That is no longer their significance. They signify the presence of Christ, the sacrifice of Christ. That is their new substance.

Have I lost you, I wonder, with all these technicalities. Let me try it this way. Your body is not the real you. The real you is not plump and saggy, though that may be - I say may be - what we see. The real you is not bald and skinny with age spots and moles. That's not your substance. The real you is your inner nature, your lovely self, that ever youthful ever beautiful person hidden underneath. Only, because we are mortal, I cannot see your inner nature. I can't see your substance. I have to take that for granted. What I see is your body. Your body is the assurance that the real you is alongside me. Your body is the outward and visible sign. You may wish that it was a more beautiful, a slimmer, a younger sign. But the real inward you with all its subtlety and richness and beauty, the substance of you, that we don't see except with the eyes of faith.

So in the Eucharist, when Jesus said "This is my Body", he meant, this is the outward sign. The bread we offer, break and eat, is our assurance that Jesus is here alongside me. The bread is the sign. The hidden reality beneath is the presence of Jesus.

And the blood? When we talk of blood, we can't help but think of wounds and hurts and danger. "Look, Mum, it's bleeding", says the four year old when he wants you to know that his sore knee really hurts.. And the eternal life which Jesus offers us was won at the cost of hurt, and wounds, and mortal death. As we drink the wine we think of his death and sacrifice. "This is my blood shed for you." It is our assurance of his costly love. The wine is the sign. The hidden reality is the costly love of Jesus made present for us.

But, my precocious friend might have asked, and I'm glad he didn't because he's a hard arguer, he might have asked "Surely Jesus is present all the time, wherever we are, whatever we do. Why talk of his presence in Communion. He's there, he's here, he's everywhere."

And of course he is. And sometimes we are very conscious of that. When we see the wonders of nature and the things God has made. When we experience the love of family and friends.

But sometimes, in fact quite often, we are not so conscious of his presence.

Sometimes we're too busy. We've got jobs to do, families to raise, and despite Brother Lawrence telling us that we should practice being aware of the presence of Jesus in every moment it's hard to do that when we're sorting out screaming and squabbling children, it's hard to do that when we're rushing for late appointments at work, it's hard to do when we're worrying about the firm's profits taking a down-turn with the economy.

Sometimes we're too tired. Or too ill. It's hard to be aware of the presence of God when we're down at heart ourselves. I met someone in the supermarket a few days ago who has not been well and who said to me "I've been in real spiritual desert for weeks now. I can't pray. There's no feel that God listens." Of course we might say that it is in those times of feeling down and ill that we most

need God. But often it is in those times that God seems furthest away.

We were privileged today to hear the poem about the last words of King David. Looking back on his successful reign he says, or the poet says for him (I use the Jerusalem Bible translation).

He who rules with justice
who rules in the fear of God
is like the morning light at sunrise on a cloudless morning
making the grass of the earth sparkle after rain.

A happy nation. A wise and godly ruler. And life seems lie a beautiful spring morning. God's in his heaven and all's well with the world. That's what we want.

And we had the words of Paul about marriage. Now I know that sometimes we battle with Paul about marriage. Wives should regard their husband as they regard the Lord. Wives should submit to their husbands. I know these are painful words, words that have in fact done very much harm in the past and still do when they are used to justify the abuse of women. But Paul was writing to a world which took the submissive role of women for granted. And to be fair to Paul, he did push the envelope, so to speak. To that world of male domination, where women were regarded as children or chattels, he said husbands must love their wives like Christ loves the Church, like Christ sacrificed his life for the Church. That was a new thought for his time. The love of a husband for his wife must not be domineering but sacrificial and caring. The love between husband and wife is an earthly reflection of the relationship between Christ and his people. A happy marriage, a happy family, is like heaven. That's what we want.

But we don't always get them, do we? A happy nation. A happy family. The tragedy and agony of Baghdad. Of Kabul. Of Myanmar. Of North Korea. The tragedy and agony of a bad marriage, marriages where love has died, where there is infidelity, or worse, where there is abuse, and assault, and even murder.

Of course these are extremes. Some of you may have experienced them. All of us will have lived through them to some extent. Thank God we're not in Baghdad. But even here we may be permitted to be a bit cynical about our national and local government. Thank God, perhaps, your marriage is or has been a peaceful and joyful one, but for most of us there have been times when our family life is stressful and unloving. And in those times we need God. And in those times, quite often, he feels furthest away.

And that's the point of the Real Presence in the Eucharist. We come Sunday by Sunday to make it a habit, to associate the offering and receiving of bread and wine with the presence of Jesus whether we always feel his presence or not. We come, sometimes, with warm faith, and some times with dry, hurting and empty hearts and souls. But, like the naartjie and the kaneel in DJ Opperman's poem, as we receive them the reality of Jesus presence is brought home to us. The bread and wine are signs. The inner reality, the substance of the matter, is that Jesus is really and substantively and objectively here even at the times when he seems furthest away. Draw near and receive the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which is given for you and for me.