

Sunday 28 February: Second Sunday of Lent

Taken

Readings: Genesis 15.1-12, 17-18; Luke 13.31-end

During Lent, here at St. Martin's, we are reflecting on the actions that make up the Eucharist. The parts are 'Taken, blessed, broken and given'. This morning we consider the meaning of 'Taken'.

You may have seen notices in English when you are in another country, that do not seem to make sense. Some time ago, a hospital in France wanted to display a notice that said, in English, that this hospital was run by nuns, and was a General Hospital, accepting patients of any faith or none at all. What the notice *actually* said was 'The nuns in this Hospital have no respect for religion, and harbour all diseases'.

Even individual words in English can have different meanings according to the circumstances. The other day, when I was doing a crossword, I came upon a clue which said 'seize possession of', and the answer was 'Take'. To me this sounded more like 'grab' or 'snatch'. Then I realised how many different meanings the word 'take' can have.

For example, at a wedding, the groom *takes* the bride to be his wife. This, I hope, does not mean 'grab' or 'snatch'. Even less would it explain what 'Take a pair of sparkling eyes' might mean.

Thinking further, we know that the word 'take' in some contexts has a very deep and profound meaning. It involves a significant change in the identity of a person. We talk about 'taking responsibility' and 'taking Holy Orders'. In these instances it means someone *becomes* responsible, or *becomes* a priest.

In our Christian beliefs, we speak of God, in Jesus, '*Taking* our humanity', (taking the form of a servant). In saying this we mean that God *took*, assumed, became, the stuff of which we are made, our flesh and blood, and completely transformed it.

We believe that Jesus became a human being, and lived *every last drop* of human experience: all the serenity and sadness, all the pains and pleasures, all the fears and hopes. He lived fully every bit of life that came to him, not ducking anything. By doing this he changed it *forever* – and set it *free*!

Because of this, we know that God is not a distant deity, but a God who lives next door, and walks down our street. This *taking* of human nature is an *action* – God *in action*. As someone has remarked, 'God is not a *noun* but a *verb*!' So – this action of love changes who we are as human beings – it is for *everyone, everywhere*.

All of this promises transformation to you and to me, to everyone in this church, now, and to all those who, at this moment, are in Trafalgar Square or Charing Cross Station.

In living our life, Jesus gave us all hope that love is stronger than any pain, stronger than any disaster or despair, stronger even than death itself. If we remember 9/11 the strongest power was not the violence – but it was the way people with a few minutes to live – just telephoned to say "I love you". Because of Jesus, we can find hope at those times when we feel defeated.

It is the same *pattern* in the Eucharist. Jesus *takes* bread and wine, the food for physical life, and transforms it into his presence here among us.

We find it difficult to get our heads round this. How is it possible? – possible that the very life of Jesus comes to us in Holy Communion, whatever we feel like, whatever our attitude to God?

There have been centuries of controversy, over how this can be so, and it *might* help us to remember the words of Queen Elizabeth the First:

It was the word who spoke it,
When he took bread and broke it,
And what his word doth make it
That I believe and take it.

Well, all this may be so – we are offered the transformation of our lives. The question is ‘Do we accept this offer?’ When we come to receive Communion or a blessing – do we really *take* what God offers us? We stretch out our hands and our hearts – but do we hold out our *lives* for God to transform?

We are offered so much, and yet we can often take so little. Will we allow Jesus to *take us*, each of us, and enable us to live a life transformed by him: a life that will radiate his presence wherever we are? Will we let him set us *free*?

There is one person, who in her life, experienced such a gift – in the most extraordinary circumstances.

Etty Hillesum was a young Jewish woman living in Amsterdam when the Germans invaded Holland. By an amazing process her life had been completely changed through the gift of joy and *wonder* at the presence of God in her life.

While unspeakable horrors were unfolding all around her, she radiated joy and wonder to all who her life touched.

She spent her life comforting and consoling people who were traumatised by the fear of being transported to death. Her joy, compassion, and above all her *freedom*, spread as light to all who sat in darkness around her in the transit camp at Westerbork.

She wrote in her diary:

All night I lay, in the camp, on my plank, surrounded by women and girls dreaming alone, sobbing, women and girls who during the day told me “We do not want to think, we do not want to feel, otherwise we are sure to go out of our minds.” I was sometimes filled with infinite tenderness, and lay awake for hours, and I prayed “Let me be the thinking heart of this barracks”.

In the end, transformed by God, utterly taken by love, she went to her death in Auschwitz. Her last message to a friend, written on a postcard and dropped through the grille of the cattle truck, fell into a farmer’s field, who posted it. It read ‘Mother and father, my brother and I walked to the train *singing*.’

This is a dramatic example, but *all* of us are offered the chance to transform other people's lives, through our love and our freedom. We can release others from the prison of their fears.

An old hymn says all this quite simply:

Take my life and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to thee;
Take my moments and my days,
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my love, my Lord, I pour
At Thy feet, its treasure store;
Take myself and I will be
Ever, only, all for thee.