

Sunday 21 March: Fifth Sunday of Lent

Reflections on the Eucharist

Readings: Psalm 139.1-12; John 15.1-11

When I first came to London as a student sixteen years ago, I hadn't grasped that this was a place I could put down roots. It took me a long time to realise that I had left my home in Nottingham: physically I was in a different city, but emotionally and spiritually I still felt like the shy teenager I had been whilst attending the Methodist church in my local village. It took me six years of sometimes eye-opening searching to find another home, and I think I found one here.

I've been coming to the Sunday morning Eucharist at St Martin's for about 10 years now. Like Susannah, who spoke at this service a few weeks ago, being brought up in the Methodist tradition meant that I wasn't accustomed to receiving communion very often. Because of that I suspect I was more sensitive than to the drama and symbol of the act, and how that made me feel. I used to think of this as the culmination of some sort of tidal relationship. Coming to the communion rail felt like the flowing in of the tide, of coming together, prepared by God to be made holy, to receive fully from him. Then came the ebbing away, the sending out. I used to find this aspect of the service difficult. Going to church felt like the part in the tidal cycle where I lapped up against the shores of God; going out into the world after that felt to me as though the waves were being dispersed. In fact being sent out as one of the people of God felt more like being sent away.

But as I've grown in confidence and hopefully in understanding, my perception of where the Eucharist happens has altered, broadened, and expanded. And this has crept up on me, coming from very unexpected quarters.

On Christmas Day six years ago, my grandmother died in a hospital in Birmingham. My father (her son), my brother and I went to visit her that morning. Although we clearly didn't know how the day was going to turn out, I remember having a vague sense of foreboding. I didn't really want to go. I remember trying to find reasons to delay, arguments against facing it. Because of timings, we needed to leave my parents' home in Nottingham relatively early. I remember going to an early Christmas Eucharist that morning; I felt cross that we had to make the journey, and angry with God that he hadn't stopped this happening. A completely childish reaction, I realise now, but a real one. I think I thought that if we didn't visit – if we didn't say goodbye – then she wouldn't really go.

But we went, and I was very glad we did. The garish tinsel (it never looks good with neon strip lighting), and the brisk jollity of the nurses, jarred horribly with the fragile 92-year-old lady lying in the hospital bed. She was lying in sight of the window, which had a view of some wintry bare treetops. She was conscious and surprisingly lucid, but had her eyes closed. It didn't take long to realise that my grandmother was clearly in a great degree of discomfort, so my Dad went to find the nurses to help. My brother and I stayed with her, keeping watch.

I'd never been in that situation before, and neither my brother nor I really knew what to do. But having seen how my Dad was with her, and the tenderness with which he had touched her, my brother and I set about trying to make ourselves present to her. We weren't at all sure how best to do that, and our grandmother was in no state to organise us, so we had to draw on how we would be feeling. My brother tried very gently to rub warmth into my grandmother's chilly legs through the hospital blanket, and I held her hand. I rubbed my fingers over her

ancient skin. It was an action I realise now designed more to comfort me than her. At one point she pulled her hand away slightly as if asking me to stop. I later learned that older skin is so delicate that, rather than being a consoling presence (which was what I'd intended), my rubbing action would have added to her discomfort. I felt bereft when she held my hand still. No more distractions. I think my grandmother must have tried to say something as I remember my brother going in search of my Dad, leaving us alone.

Interesting word to use, 'alone'. Because of course we weren't alone: we were together, though in a very broken form. Possibly more present to each other in this brokenness than we had ever managed ourselves, with the distractions of childhood, and the worries of adulthood, getting in the way. Now with all that stripped back, there was only the 'now' of an ill old lady at the end of her life, and her granddaughter, holding hands in stillness, sitting quietly on a rainy Christmas Day. To be honest, I felt as though we were at right angles to the rest of the world: the jolly Christmas songs on the radio, the decorations and everything else, seemed completely irrelevant, distinctly inappropriate. I remember feeling as though God was absent, that we were abandoned – I couldn't connect the experience of the Christmas Eucharist early that morning with the experience of sitting in the hospital later the same day. We stayed and did what we could, before returning home.

That evening, my parents were called back by the hospital. My brother and I heard them prepare, but we didn't hear them go. They just slipped out into the darkness and my brother and I spent the evening together. 'Together' – another interesting word to choose. On any other Christmas night before we would have felt 'alone' in some way, being without our parents. My brother and I kept watch with each other in our own way, while my parents kept vigil at our grandmother's bedside, until she died.

A few months later, I was asked by a friend if I could go back in prayer to that Christmas Day, to visualise where God, where Christ, had been. It took me a long time to summon the courage: I didn't realise it at the time, but I was stubbornly intent on seeing only the darkness of the situation. I thought God had hidden from us that day, and if I didn't look for him, I could continue to accuse him of absence and abandonment.

But something made me persevere. I went back in prayer to start the day again. I remembered the grey weather outside, the busy kindness of the nurses, and my sitting on the chair next to my grandmother's bed. I remembered the close smell of the hospital, the ghastly lighting; the uncertain but total care my brother had shown, the tenderness of my Dad, and the feelings of anger and self-pity that had built up in me. In my prayer I eventually asked the question, part in desperation, but also in challenge: 'So, Lord, where were you?' And an answer came.

'You held my hand.'

'You held my hand.' I hadn't been expecting that. It came under my radar and completely disarmed me. But what a gift! The word was not 'I held *your* hand'. It was not implying that I had been carried like a child, or like the victim of some terrible situation. 'You held my hand'. It had a transforming effect on me. The mistake I had made was in thinking that God was somehow only outside the relationship between us. But these words showed me that, through Christ, God *is* the relationship. God was present on that rainy Christmas Day, not as some benign and passive invisible friend, but so much more intimately connected with us, closer to us than we were to ourselves.

My understanding of where the Eucharist happens has changed. It is still usually most obvious for me at Church, among those who support and challenge my perception of God.

But it's also out there, in the challenges of working life, in the tender intimacies of domestic life. It's helped to alter my attitude to the sending out at the end of our liturgy, the aspect of the service I used to dislike. Instead of wanting to run away from the world, I'm far more inclined now to run out into it. Having been renewed at the Eucharist, having had my brokenness reconfigured, being sent out to live and work for God feels like the only proper response. When we allow ourselves to be taken, blessed, broken and given, we live in God, and he in us. Amen.