

Sermon - I Cor 11:17-26

I am sure that most of you know that before I started down the path to ordination I worked for many years in catering and hospitality. I have worked in places that make Wetherspoons look good, as well as small intimate local neighbourhood restaurants. I have cooked on trains for busy commuters, in tents for major events such as Henley Royal Regatta, and in hotels with fine dining restaurants.

It is no accident that people refer to catering as being part of the hospitality industry. Just like churches around the world, pubs, hotels and restaurants offer hospitality to those who walk through their doors. However, unlike churches, these establishments are part of an industry. Their hospitality is not offered out of altruism, but for a need and a desire to make profit in order to pay staff costs, as well as their suppliers and bills.

Hospitality therefore becomes conditional, based on your ability to pay - keep putting money in the till and the hospitality of the establishment will continue. If you are rich you can afford not only a better quality of food, but also a greater degree of hospitality complete with someone just to make sure that your wine glass is never empty.

This split between the rich and the poor is one that not only evident in our society, but one that St. Paul denounces in our passage from his first letter to the Church in Corinth. The New Testament scholar Marcus Borg points out that the Corinthian Church was an anomaly amongst the communities that St Paul founded on his missionary journeys around the Mediterranean. In none of the other letters of the New Testament do we read of there being both rich and poor alike as part of the Church.

Why this happened is perhaps due to the architecture of ancient Corinth. The rich and powerful would live in villas on the major streets of the city, but would often rent out their ground floors which faced the streets to traders as shops. This would have led to contact and contract between owner and worker, perhaps leading to conversation and conversion. I can't think of any place, other than Church, where a Doctor could sit next to a drug addict who is sitting next to a plumber and a parent and child where they all sit as equals.

That the church shatters social norms is something that Paul is having to remind the Corinthians about. It would appear that the Church has split along social lines, with the richer members having plenty to eat and drink, some even getting drunk when they came together as a community, whilst those who are poorer are left with

little or nothing. This was normal for Corinthian society, however St Paul is having none of it.

When the Church divides along lines of class and wealth it is no longer THE Church. When some eat their fill leaving others hungry, the meal that was supposed to be shared in community no longer becomes communion. We dress it up with people in strange clothes performing rituals in oh so wordy language, but at the heart of it, Holy Communion, The Eucharist, The Lord's Supper, The Mass, call it what you will is a shared meal. But not just any shared meal one where we explicitly remember the death of Jesus.

Just as when we DISmember, we take something apart, when we REMember, we put it back together. As the American Priest Barbara Brown Taylor notes Jesus didn't leave his disciples a set of beliefs with which to remember him, but a set of actions. At the Last supper his words were not 'believe this' but 'do this to remember me.' And as the late Rachel Held Evans wrote in her book 'Searching for Sunday' when talking about remembrance and the Eucharist

"Remember how God became one of us? Remember how God ate with us and drank with us, laughed with us and cried with us? Remember how God suffered for us, and died for us, and gave his life for the life of the world? Remember? Remember?"

This Communion of remembrance is not something that we do alone, it is a communal activity. 'We break this bread to share in the body of Christ. Though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread.' These words from our Communion service are echoes of 1 Corinthians 10:17, as part of a section where St Paul lays out what Communion means. –

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? (1Cor 10:16)

This sharing of Communion is not a passive thing, it is something that should transform us. The body of Christ broken on the cross, with his blood shed for the sins of the world should not leave us the same as we were. We should be transformed, energised to live lives ablaze with the love and light of God. A love and a light which cuts across the barriers thrown up by society.

It doesn't matter if you are male, female, gender fluid, or transitioning; young, old or middle aged; married, single, divorced, or widowed; straight or somewhere on the LGBTQI+ spectrum; a paragon of virtue or guilty of the most horrendous crimes known to humanity; black, white or Asian; we all do the same thing. We all put out the same empty hands and we all receive exactly the same wafer. We all put out the same empty hands and they become filled to

overflowing with the very essence of God. We all put of the same empty hands and they become filled with the love of God. As God shares this love with us here today, let us go out transformed to share that same love in our daily lives.