

‘They spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts’

Well, there’s something to look forward to – two dimensions of church life: at home and in the temple. We’re jumping ahead because this is after Pentecost, after the outpouring of the Spirit. We haven’t got there yet; we are confined, as the disciples were, behind closed doors. We haven’t been empowered yet to get out there, to rejoin our fellow citizens, to be together, to worship together in our holy buildings and ancient houses of prayer. We are at home and maybe this is a good opportunity to think about how we celebrate our faith at home and perhaps form new habits of doing so that will outlast the lockdown and will give another dimension to our Christian practice, so that we do faith at home, not just in the temple, in church.

How did the first Christians do faith at home? It says ‘they broke bread and ate their food with glad and generous hearts’. At this stage, right at the beginning, the Christians in Jerusalem hadn’t separated out what we now call Communion or the Eucharist as a distinctive act and ceremony of worship. What emerged later in the first century was actually a union of what was going on in the home, the breaking of bread, particularly in the sabbath meal, and what they continued to do for many years still in the Temple, the offering of sacrifice, celebrated communally at the daily morning and evening sacrifices. Sacrifice incidentally is often misunderstood, particularly by Protestant Christianity. It doesn’t principally mean giving something up (‘I sacrificed my career for you’) or making an act of atonement (offering the blood of an animal so that my sins may be forgiven). Both are part of what sacrifice is about, but not all. Sacrifice means, literally, to make sacred or holy. It is bringing our ordinary stuff of life – like bread, wine or money and offering it before God so that it becomes holy; it changes significance, it has new meaning, it is special for God, and therefore becomes special for us. What we now celebrate as the Eucharist or Communion brings together what was going on in the temple and what was going in the home, the offering up no longer of the blood of sheep or goats but of bread and wine so that it can be received from God a second time, not just as bread and wine but as the body and blood of Christ that can fill not just our bodies but our souls. Physical food becomes soul food.

But let’s return to the home, for that – in this pre-Pentecost lockdown – is where we are. Breaking bread was a part of all main Jewish meals. Every shared meal was – and is – holy, not because it’s solemn or taken up with lots of prayers and bible readings, but because it is a gathering of love, a place of communion, where if you live in a household of more than one the different parts come together and unite, share in conversation, in companionship (which after all means those who share bread – panis – together).

So the first thing I’d say to those of us lucky enough to have companions under the same roof is – don’t lose the habit of eating together and try to do it without the distraction of tv and other electronic devices. As we learnt last week it wasn’t until those two disciples sat down with the invited stranger and they broke bread together that they recognised that they were in the presence of the holy – Christ himself was with them – and their hearts which has been warmed by his company along the road burst into flames as they recognised him at the breaking of the bread.

The second thing I'd say is that if you are in a household where everyone is comfortable doing so I would really commend to you the habit of saying grace at the meal table. It doesn't need to be long and it doesn't need to be clever, sophisticated or very pious. It's fine to use a little formula you've learned or to say some spontaneous words or even just one word – thanks, gratia in Latin, grace. Gratitude transforms the way we look at the world: to be grateful turns from a discipline to a way of thinking and being. It is a habit which, when it sinks into the heart, transforms us, it clarifies things – makes things clear, simple, uncluttered. With gratitude in our hearts we live the spirit of the old shaker song – 'Tis the gift to be simple'. That's the root meaning incidentally of the word translated generous in our reading: 'they ate their food with glad and generous hearts'. The word literally means – probably – without a stone in it, like pure sand or soil that has no stones lurking within to scratch your hand or blunt your plough. Instead beautiful clean earth or sand that you can run your hands through. What you see is what you get, it's pure, uncontaminated.

That's the air I breathe in the 23rd psalm: green pastures, still waters; it doesn't say it, but we might add 'clean air'. There is a freshness, a naturalness, a simplicity. That's where the good shepherd leads us; that's his gift to us. And we can find it at the table, every day, by practising his presence there, by being thankful, by saying grace either out loud or in our hearts.

I know that's idyllic; I know that often the mealtime can feel like bedlam rather than a heavenly banquet, and I know it's hard for those of you living on your own when you aren't able to have friends or family in or go to them. That means that we need to find companionship in other ways – the telephone is available to just about all of us, I think, and those who are comfortable Zooming have been discovering the delights of shared virtual meals. We did it on Maundy Thursday for our Last Supper and it was really enjoyable. I'm going to have a virtual tea party on Friday, VE Day, at 3.45pm. Do come and join me. I want you to have a cup or pot of tea at the ready and some bread – perhaps a good old fashioned jam sandwich or a piece of toast or a teacake. And we'll break bread together and share stories and enjoy being companions – those who break bread together with glad and thankful hearts for the end of war and the privilege of living in peace. Do join me.