

NOURISHING THE INNER VISION: PAUL, SACRAMENTALS AND THE LION KING

The topic given as a theme for this study day has sent me back to Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 11:17-30, to reflect on how Paul advises the Corinthians to nurture their faith through their ritual meal. It prompts two questions encapsulated in the title I have given. The first relates to "inner vision". What, for Paul is the vision which drives his view of the ritual meal? The How? follows: how exactly does participation in the rituals recommended by Paul nurture or nourish believers holding on to the vision?

1. What Was Paul's Inner Vision?

Paul's experience somewhere on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18, cf. 1 Cor.15:8; Gal 2:16) suggests that his vision might well have had a literal dimension, but visions and Paul are about more than dreams and miraculous meetings. In 1 Cor 11:26, he makes it clear that the ritual meals of the Corinthians should "proclaim the death of Christ until he comes again". It does not seem unreasonable to identify this with a broader understanding of vision. The substance of his vision, what later generations might call his mission statement, is summed up in that phrase. But what exactly does it mean? We need to define not only the content of the vision ("the death of Christ"), but also the manner of its proclamation ("proclaim"), and, for want of a long digression, its timing ("until he comes").

1.1 "The death of Christ"

One rarely turns to Rudolf Bultmann for the literalist understanding, and he is hardly ever lumped into fundamentalist company, but his demythologized and ahistorical reading of the NT sails pretty close to that approach here. For Bultmann, the one certainty that was left was the Cross; everything else was up for grabs. However, NT scholarship is nothing if not seasonal, and the skepticism of the previous generation has been tested and found wanting. Part of the weakness of form criticism was that it confused historical and theological questions. Birger Gerhardsson has pointed out that the two are different:

...it is...important to keep the purely historical question of the origin and transmission apart from theological questions of the content and meaning of the Early Christian message, even if the two questions are inter-related. In the first case one must go back to the concrete realm of history; and one cannot without further ado extend such an approach to questions of theology. In the second case, one may reasonably take as one's starting point "the faith vision" on which the message of Jesus and of Early Christianity was founded.

(Gerhardsson 1998, xxii)

It is not possible to identify the theological content of the Early Christian message simply by claiming to have recovered its source materials, or its earliest form. In any case, such quests increasingly show how diversified the 'whole truth' of the faith message was within early Christianity, even if:

The different voices in the early church's mixed choir wanted to sing a common song: the song about the incomparable One, who has been elevated by God to the heavenly realm but only after a mysterious ministry on earth

(Gerhardsson 1979, 91)

Further dissatisfaction with the premises of form criticism has moved the "new" quest for the historical Jesus in fresh directions. It marks a recovery of interest in historical details: it began with Käsemann, was highly critical of ahistorical approaches (e.g., Bultmann), and worked with a modified set of criteria (Theissen and Merz 1998, 6-7). Further, this "third" quest examines extensively the Jewish milieu of Jesus (10-11). It becomes possible once again to build a fuller Christology. Thus when we talk of the death of Jesus Christ, it is again permissible to reflect on why he died, and his exemplum. The church is again able to shape itself in his image in a way it could not when little description of Christ was considered authentic.

Within this new programme, which is really more of a rediscovery than a novelty, two concepts are paramount: mission and the Kingdom of God. This mission is both God's "yes" to the world, which stems from the continuity between God's reign (the Kingdom), the mission of the Church and justice and peace within society as a whole. Yet it is also God's "no" to the world because it reveals that there is more to God's reign than horizontal progress towards justice and peace (Bosch 1991, 10-11). To sum up, this mission impinges on both the elements of salvation and liberation. As David Bosch concludes:

God's "no" to the world does not, however, signify any dualism, just as God's "yes" does not imply any unbroken continuity between this world and God's reign (Cf Knapp 1977: 166-168). Therefore, neither a secularized church (that is, a church which concerns itself only with this-worldly activities and interests) nor a separatist church (that is, a church which involves itself only in soul-saving and preparation of converts for the hereafter) can faithfully articulate the *missio Dei*.

(11).

The Jesuit theologian, Joseph Neuner, writing on Ignatian spirituality, reaches similar conclusions:

...it would be wrong, it would lead to illusion if all our hopes for a better world were pinned on only political or social changes. The Christian message is rather that first our heart must be changed. Jesus calls people to repentance because God's kingdom is coming.

(Neuner 1989, 79)

1.2. "Proclaiming"

How is the "death of Christ" made known? *Katangellō* is commonly associated with proclamation and preaching, often in terms of public speaking or verbal proclamation of something which has taken place (TDNT, I, 71-2). Here the act of proclamation is not just linked to an act of

speaking, but to a ritual. Thiselton sees parallels to the Passover *Haggadah*, inasmuch as it allows participants access to the events symbolised (in this case, the death of Jesus) for the benefits with which they are associated (2003, 887).

1.3. "Until he comes"

This final phrase imports an eschatological dimension. *Achri tou elthê* is open to interpretation in two ways. Much has been made of the phrase on the assumption that it anticipates the Aramaic *Maranatha* (1 Cor 16:22). It may be taken as having either a temporal or purposeful force. Jeremias argues for the latter (1987, 252-5). This would suggest that the primary focus of the phrase was the coming presence of Christ in the eucharist rather than at the Parousia. Wider analysis of *Maranatha* does not support this. Indeed, such sentiments are not found elsewhere in eucharistic and eschatological thinking (Thiselton 2003, 887). Praying for the future consummation of the Kingdom is the priority. God is reminded that the promised events have yet to be fulfilled. Thus, the temporal force is more in keeping with eschatological thought. The coming of the Lord is anticipated, and the eucharist is to be performed until that time. The people of God have yet to reach the final consummation of the God's plan and purpose. Until that time comes, the eucharist prefigures the ultimate promised reality of the heavenly feast.

1.4. Summary

Paul's inner vision is essentially Christological. Within his focus on Christ, Paul can identify a programme for both liberation and salvation. This vision

is not just to be preached. It must be proclaimed in action, and, for Paul, that includes ritual and worship. Ritual, often seen as an irrelevance or a distraction from the real work of preaching (if the struggles of the Reformation are still being fought) or social activism (ditto, the secularised agenda), has become for him a primary means of nurturing the vision. We now look at how and why this happened. The key is found in his sacramental theology.

2. Paul and Sacraments

When we think of sacraments, we often return to the mantra learned at Confirmation: an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. We can thank St. Augustine of Hippo for this, but should not read it back into the Bible, whose writers knew nothing of it (Kilpatrick 1983, 57). It is more useful to look at sacraments as understood in the time of Paul, since they appear to have been known to both Graeco-Roman religion and Second Temple Judaism.

2.1. Graeco-Roman Understandings of Sacraments

Sacraments were found in a number of Graeco-Roman cults. Participation in their rituals was the means to salvation, or the receipt of benefits. Some remarks of Diogenes illustrate that the ethical dimension was debated:

When the Athenians entreated him to be initiated in the Eleusinian mysteries, and said that in the shades below the initiated had the best seats; "It will," he replied, " be an absurd thing if Aegesilaus and Epaminondas are to live in the mud,

and some miserable wretches, who have been initiated, are to be in the islands of the blest." ¹

What is of further significance is that Diogenes' remarks take place in the context of the Eleusinian Mysteries, one of the few which had an explicitly stated ethical dimension.

Metzger 1968, 14 notes that the Mysteries work *ex opere operato* (that is, the correct performance of ritual guarantees efficacy, without a moral element). This pattern which links blessings, rituals and ethics should be noted: we will see later how it differs from Paul's thinking. Even where ethics appeared within a Mystery tradition, the actual relationship between morality and soteriology was open to question.

2.2. Judaic Understandings of Sacraments

Within the diverse groups of Second Temple Judaism, it is possible to find signs of Jewish sacramental theology. Such talk of *sacramentals* implies the use of ordinary items to a "heavenly" purpose, without resort to an anachronism, the imparting of grace. Sacramental meals demand that ordinary elements gain a supernatural saving effect because of the way in which a ritual shapes them. This saving effect is linked somehow to the presence of the deity which can take place in three forms: social presence (e.g., the community is identified with the deity), causal presence (the deity gives them their power) and real presence (the deity is present in the elements, cf. Theissen & Merz 1998, 406). Note that, in this Jewish understanding, sacramentals have both an ethical (linked to behaviour) and exclusivist flavour (the participant should not be involved with other religious

systems). Metzger identifies this system as *dono data* : dependant on the gift [of God]) expecting a moral change in the life of the participant (1968, 14). This is markedly different from what are identified as sacramentals in more syncretistic Graeco-Roman religious thought.

2.3. Paul's Understanding of the Eucharist

Paul's understanding of the eucharist should be considered from this oft neglected perspective. Much analysis of the Corinthian church has focussed on its economic identity, suggesting that the central issue of the dispute is the marginalising of the poor: they appear to be excluded from the meal. It is essentially symptomatic of a division driven by economics (Henderson 2002, 200). The rich could afford to arrive and begin eating early (Frör 1995, 59). This left the poor (*tous mê echontas* - 11:22), who needed to work, unable to share in the full meal. Both groups, in this scenario, shared just bread and cup (Burchard:1987, 127).

However, there are objections to this theory (cf. Thiselton:2000, 863; Schrage:1991, 57)². Das:1998, 188-9 notes that the terms used to support this thesis are ambiguous. *Prolambanō* (11:21) and *ekdechomai* (11:33) may or may not involve a temporal component. Whilst not conclusive these prompt us to look at the topic more widely: there may be more at stake than just an issue of timing, or of poverty.

This wider examination points to a different practice, that of serving different food and drink, varying in quantity and quality, to different guests. This was a common practice, part of the Roman system of client and patron, highly

criticised in literature of the time. It is expressed most sharply in a near contemporary account by the Roman satirist Martial:

Since I am asked to dinner, no longer, as before, as a purchased guest [i.e., a client], why is not the same dinner served to me as to you? You take oysters fattened in the Lucrine lake, I suck a mussel through a hole in a shell; you get mushrooms, I take hog funguses; you tackle turbot, but I brill. Golden with fat, a turtledove gorges you with its bloated rump; there is set before me a magpie that has died in its cage. Why do I dine without you, although, Ponticus, I am dining with you? The dole has gone: let us have the benefit of that; let us eat the same fare.

(Martial, *Epigrammata*, 3.60, quoted in Smith:2003, 45)

This practice may indeed involve a temporal component: the best food and drink may well be served first. Whilst contemporary evidence for this is scant, such shrewd practice is common to human nature (Brown 1988, 100). Yet it need not be based solely on economic factors.

The centrality of economics as a rule for society and behaviour is in many respects a modern phenomenon. It is attractive to a modern, industrial society, especially in the period after Marx, but need not indicate how other societies work³. Ancient Roman society was not stratified using economic indicators. It appears better to use status as a measure and take into account a number of dimensions by which identity can be measured (Meeks 1983, 53-5)⁴. Divisions arose between Christians of different social rankings, rather than between rich and poor, although the two were often inter-related. Whether the issue is timing or the quality of food eaten, the central issue is the same: a group loses face.

Paul's description of the effects of bad practice supports this: it brings shame on those who are badly treated (*kataischunete tous mê echontas* - 11:22 [emphasis mine]). Paul has previously used the word in 1 Cor 11:4-5 where it indicates the stratification of society by the criteria of honour/shame (Thiselton 2000, 826-7; 865)⁵.

This preference for honour/shame over economics is further supported by what Paul says, or rather does not say, about sharing. Henderson 2002 has recently explored this as the dominant motif in Paul's discourse. Henderson's claim that Paul wishes to correct the Corinthians' apparent inability to share depends on *oikia/oikos* being identified as the community, rather than a private house, and that the second instance of *peina* (11:34) refers to the hunger of the poor, as in 11:21 (Henderson 2002, 206). The second point does not hold up: different groups would appear to have different experiences of hunger. It is difficult to equate those who go hungry at the gathering (11:21) with those who are advised to eat at home before the community meets (11:34). If so, the hungry of 11:21 are the poor, and it is they who are advised to eat at home, not the wealthy. To work, Henderson has to identify *oikia/oikos* with the community gathering. Henderson 2002, 204 may also have read too much into the description of the Kingdom of God as an *oikia/oikos*: sometimes an *oikia* is just a house or family (TDNT, V, 132). It is also worth noting that Henderson's argument, which depends on identifying *oikia/oikos* with the Christian community offers no parallels in the Pauline literature. Indeed, TDNT, V, 130 notes a distinction of *oikia/oikos* from the community as a whole: it indicates rather the smallest

group within a congregation. Further, the use of *oikia/oikos* in the plural (1 Cor 11:22), with the implication of a multiplicity of groups would undermine one of Paul's main concerns in the letter: the establishment of unity. This becomes more striking when it is contrasted with his identification of the community as a singular body, *tês ekklêsias tou theou* (1 Cor 11:22). It is difficult to see how any formal encouragement of separation into house churches would have built up the unity which is intended (cf. Bond 2003, 191). Thiselton 2000, 859 goes further: the Lord's Supper which Paul wishes to take place is not to be confused with a meal in a private house.

Whilst Henderson's interpretation has the merits of highlighting the ethical demands which Paul would demand of the Corinthians, it does not seem to do justice to the elements on which judgement is focussed. The "Body" appears to lose all significance beyond being the community as an agent for an act of "sharing".

There is also a practical criticism: could the "bread" and "cup" to which Paul draws specific attention (11:25) ever form the basis of a full meal which ever would dispel the hunger of those who are in need⁶? Significant gestures focussed on shared bread and cup would not seem the best place to initiate such a reform. However, what Paul proposes does give honour and respect to all. Paul wishes all to receive *artos* (bread). The significance of this is often overlooked: *artos* indicates a high status food stuff, wheat bread, rather than the more common barley bread (*maza*- Garnsey 1999, 121; Schnackenburg 1980, 442, fn. 25). Whilst critics may object that *maza* is not used in

either the Septuagint or Early Christian literature, it must be stressed that the Corinthians' use of language was not bounded by those limits. And there is evidence not only for wheat and barley bread being used in Corinth, but for the increased preference for wheat bread as a foodstuff in meals at the temple of Demeter and Kore (Bookidis 1993 55-6). This practice might have been known to Christians in Corinth and been a part of their vocabulary even if they are unlikely to have consumed idol-meats from there (Fotopoulos 2003, 92).

What is at issue here is the sharing of a food which accords high status, not the alleviation of hunger. The elements used themselves suggest this. The initial contention that sacramental language may be more appropriate than "sharing" comes from further exploring the vertical dimension of the "Body of Christ".

2.3. Paul's Sacramental "Body of Christ"

Thus far the "body" would appear to be identified with the community. Yet it is identified as the Body of Christ, and, as Schweitzer 1911, 156 notes, this implies a reference to the glorified Christ. How communion with Christ occurs is not clear⁷. How can this "genuine communion" be described? The body and blood of Christ cannot be identified with those of the historical Jesus.

Burchard has suggested Paul's thinking comes from Judaic sacramentals in which ordinary items, by means of a blessing, effect a holy purpose. There are two stages in the proposed evolution of Paul's thinking.

The first is Paul's personal journey in which the sacramentals of Paul's pre-conversion belief-system would be replaced by the elements of bread and cup after the example of Jesus (Burchard 1987, 123). It is a classic example of re-accentuation, and appears to be supported by the interpretation of the *Exodus* narrative given in 1 Cor 10. In what is really a piece of *Midrash*, Jesus is identified with the manna and the water from the rock (Thiselton 2000, 723). Finally, the contrast of the Lord's cup and table with those of demons further confirms this pattern (Burchard 1987, 123). The link of such thinking to Jewish ideas would appear to be supported by the arguments used by Paul in which he opposes Jewish food with idol-meats (125). Burchard's analysis allows the construction of a Pauline argument based on ideas and concepts current in contemporary Judaism which would allow a sacramental understanding of the Christian ritual. In this pattern, the cup and bread effect contact with the body and blood of Christ.

The second stage is Paul's use of such sacramental beliefs to engage with, and correct, the Corinthian meal pattern. He is engaging with a Graeco-Roman *ex opere operato* sacramentology, and replacing it with a Judaic *dono data* system which includes an ethical response from the participants.

This view of the Body of Christ has ethical implications. Kasemann 1964, 125 has suggested that "salvation despised becomes judgment". How an individual partakes of the meal ultimately determines whether he or she is saved or not. To test the truth of this claim, the terminology used to describe judgement and its consequences needs to be spelled out. That the action of eating has a moral or ethical dimension is suggested by the use of *anaxiōs*

(11:27). Whilst used in 1 Cor 6:2 in adjectival form to suggest "incompetent", the wider sense of "fitting", with its ethical overtones, appears more appropriate here (Thiselton 2000, 889). How Christians deal with others has an effect on the benefit they get from their rituals and sacraments.

2.4. Discerning the Body

Paul also reminds the Corinthians of the need for each participant to be one who is *diakrinōn* (11:29) the Body. What exactly does this mean? "Discern" has been used thus far, but it includes ideas connected to right judgement, or of recognition (Thiselton 2000, 892).

Some suggest the primary failure here is not recognising the true nature of the congregation, and this might include its mystical identification with the "Body of Christ". Parallels with 1 Cor 10:16-7 and the absence of qualifying phrases relating to "blood" and the "Lord" bolster such interpretations. However, they fail to do justice to the much more complex symbolism of the Body which has already been recognised. For this to happen, there must be some way in which Christ is recognised in participation in the meal. Wolff identifies the key:

Sharing as participants in the death of Jesus 'for you'.

(trans. in Thiselton 2000, 893)

Thus right judgement (*diakrinōn*) is about identifying Christ, becoming involved in his death, and following his example. The honour/shame setting now becomes important: it suggests respect, care and honour define the behaviour of those who would follow Jesus' example. Those who are not ready

to act thus align themselves with those who kill Jesus rather than those who proclaim his death (Kasemann 1964, 123).

Given our earlier remarks, *diakrinōn* thus has a sacramental dimension, inasmuch as Christ's presence must be recognised: event and symbol are not distinct. Failure to discern the symbol is equally a failure to discern the event, the death of Christ, which is being conveyed with its entire efficacy to the believer⁸.

3. Putting Paul's Theory into Practice

How, then, drawing from Paul's understanding, are we to nurture our inner vision?

First, it must be Christological. Its content includes not just the Cross, but, by extension, the ministry and teaching of Jesus. The message of Jesus directs us to hold an inner vision in which both issues of salvation and justice are addressed.

Second, this is a message which is not just to be preached or repackaged in new words for a new time and place. The Scottish poet Edwin Muir was scathing of such projects within Calvinism, saying that, in them, "The word made flesh is here made word again". Paul would direct us to a relationship with Christ in which there is a sacramental bond between the disciple and Jesus. For him, the inner vision is fed by ritual. Ritual and worship matter: they are not irrelevant or secondary. They demand the highest care.

This leads to the third point. Ritual and worship reveal the ethical state of the believer or the congregation. Bad ritual practice which dishonours or excludes is symptomatic of a deeper malaise. Paul deduced that all was not well in the congregation at Corinth because of their conduct of worship—admittedly amongst other things. It is fashionable just now to talk about such things as a work-life balance. For Paul, there was an ethics-worship balance. We might paraphrase the fitness fanatic's "no pain, no gain". For Paul, "no change, no gain". Sacraments were not "get-out-of-jail-cards" for the complacent at Corinth, nor are they for us. We need to check whether our faith is manifested in our treating others with honour, love and respect. If it is not, we are dangerously close to the Corinthian error, and stand in the same hard place as them, eating and drinking not the cup of salvation and justice, but of judgement and condemnation. We nourish our inner vision not only by worshiping properly, but by living properly.

But where, you might ask, does the *Lion King* fit in? Well, it neatly sums up the different view of sacraments in 1 Cor. Those of you with children or grandchildren of a certain age will be familiar with the story. Mufasa's evil brother, Scar, becomes the leader of the pack after enlisting the help of the hyenas. "Stick with me," he tells them, "and you'll never go hungry again". They take him at his word, and disaster comes. The pride lands become a barren desert: judgement and condemnation. So, too, sacraments without ethics. This is the Corinthians' take on sacraments.

Simba, the exiled heir, takes a different path. After running away, is tempted by the *laissez-faire* philosophy of *Hakuna Matata*, but comes to admit his

duties and responsibilities, his need to change, and returns to restore the pride lands. This is closer to Paul. There is change and gain: the positive transformation of the individual, of society and creation, liberation and salvation.

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Notes

¹ The relevant chreia is found in Diogenes Laertius V:

[On-line at <http://classicpersuasion.org/pw/diogenes/dldiogenes.htm>]

² Some suggest that the use of *βουλιμία* implies a further twist, implying a rush by some to eat because there are food shortages (Thiselton: 2000, 863, on shortages, *Ibid.*, 852-3).

³ Nor indeed is it suitable for all societies in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries. Julius Nyerere criticised the assumption that Western socialism provided a universal paradigm (Nkemnkia:1999, 50-6). Elsewhere, Nyerere stressed the need for reform which is not just economic, but also social and political: society should not be reduced to economics (Nyerere:1997, 113-4).

⁴ Rawson:1966 gives an insight onto the complexities of status depending on the circumstances of birth as either slave or free.

⁵ Paul's other description of the results of bad practice, contempt for the church (1 Cor. 12:23) suggests not disdain for a particular group or faction, but for the community as a whole. It is difficult to see how this would work if based on economics alone.

For an exploration of shame as a cultural force in Roman culture, see Kaster:1997, 3-9. Shame was not perceived as a universal feeling, and was itself stratified: adult elite males were thought to have the highest sense of shame, and people were marginalised on the basis of status and gender (*Ibid.*, 10).

⁶ Shogren:2000, an exegesis of *Rom.* 14:17, also addresses the question of "right eating". However, whilst Henderson's focus is on "right eating", Shogren's analysis suggests that Paul wishes the Romans to see that wrangling over eating is symptomatic of a wider malaise which should rather be addressed.

⁷ Hering makes a similar point working from an ecclesiological perspective (Hering:1962, 116).

⁸ Such thinking may have been held in common with the Corinthians. Paul's criticism of the Corinthians' failure to "discern the body" need not imply that he is criticising a lack of sacramental understanding on their part. Failure to discern the body could equally indicate a shared sacramental understanding. Paul would be reminding the Corinthians that their practice was logically incompatible with their understanding of the meal rather than correcting a non-sacramental understanding.