

“Not Sedatives But Steroids”

By Laurence Whitley

(synopsis of a talk by Laurence Whitley to ecumenical conference on “The year of the Eucharist” in Durham, September 2005)

With the eucharist, there is always an interesting duality:- the sacrament itself, thankfully irreducible at its core, and the cultural/attitudinal way in which we all approach it. Thus, [to caricature] the Church of Scotland approach is one of solemnity – the path to the communion is where you face up to your sinfulness. With the Church of England, where you quietly line up and then return individually to your seat - it can be an emphasis on ‘me and Jesus’. With RC practice, Prof Eamon Duffy talks of the danger of “repetitive strain syndrome”, whereby any occasion automatically includes a mass.

So, culture/attitude is where I’m going to centre today, except the area I am going to claim needs reassessment, is not the *approach*, but the *retreat* we make from every celebration.

Starting with [Apostolic Letter: *Mane Nobiscum Domine*]: “We are constantly tempted to reduce the Eucharist to our own dimensions, while in reality it is we who must open ourselves up to the dimensions of the Mystery.”

- The neglected dimension in my view, is that we constantly talk about being spiritually nourished [‘source and summit of the church’s life’], in the sense of struggling on in our pilgrimage, and not enough about the eucharist’s pro-active role, whereby it is a vehicle for *changing* the mindset of Christians. – cf: “our way of thinking is attuned to the Eucharist and the eucharist in turn confirms our [that] way of thinking” [RC Catechism]

SO WHY SHOULD THAT BE IMPORTANT?

The fact is, there is a real danger of Christians stumbling over their response to the 3 issues that are going to dominate UK religion and society in next 10 years:

- **jealousy**
- **a forced lifestyle revolution**
- **global instability**

1. JEALOUSY

There is increasing Christian agitation, stemming from the twin phenomena of Islamic assertiveness and a political correctness which no longer gives Christianity a central place, lest non-Christians. take offence. An increasingly frequent response from incensed believers that christianity should start standing up for itself.- An inclination that will be encouraged by recent proposed legislation re inciting religious hatred, because in it, the law’s *measure* of the hatred will be the intensity of the offence taken by the target. Thus the more fuss the religious body makes, the more protection the law will offer it.

Of course the church should devote energy to guarding its status and power, but the point is, that status is the status of humility and that power is the power of suffering example. To go such a way is to go against natural instinct and is unappealing, but if the eucharist is the source of our spiritual nourishment and strength, then to there we must look.

And what do we find? It is the place where the umbilical cord to the world’s ways and values is severed. At the core of the eucharist is not assertiveness, but an appeal and an example – the opposite of Christian bullshiness. We are invited to hold our nerve and stand firm, not by embarking on new Christian crusades, but by trusting in the strength of vulnerable graciousness [*chesed*]. Thus as well as nourishing the faithful, the eucharist becomes the demonstration of the Church’s determination to cling to this alternative path of non-assertion. [cf: ML King: “we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer”]. [*excursus*: this of course raises issues about the atonement: did Jesus go to Calvary to appease an angry God, or to say “Look, this is God’s way of tackling evil”? If it is the latter, then that is where our entire weaponry resides.]

SO: the power of jealousy, broken at the eucharist by the power of humility.

2. THE LIFESTYLE-REVOLUTION THAT WILL BE FORCED UPON US

Possibly the prophets of global doom are unduly pessimistic, but it is quite certain that uncomfortable lifestyle changes will soon be forced upon us. [acidification of the seas, rising water levels, reversal of Gulf stream, melted Siberian peat-bog release of methane, probable ice-age conditions, leading to fuel and food shortages]. This will come as an unwelcome shock, especially as the 1980s sought to teach us the values of self-reliance, rugged individualism etc. (ex-Nottingham lecturer Dr David Hay's book traces how individualism makes both communal religious belief and morality very difficult.)

Can such a society suddenly become community-minded and, without coercion, practice responsible self-denial? I'm not sure a waterlogged UK town would be a shining example to New Orleans. [panic buying, despite appeals, as recently over petrol, is rather the true example of what is to come].

Christians can provide a stable core round which an unstable populace can steady itself. But will we be ready? To that end, the eucharist's role as comfort/refreshment would have to become much smaller, and instead be seen more as a teacher disciplining us into a distinctive lifestyle recognized by its restraint and cohesion.

SO: the temptation to lose community responsibility is defeated at the altar, where we are all consecrated as a holy priesthood [acc. To Herbert McCabe] for the whole of humankind (quote p155).

3. THE ISSUE OF GLOBAL INSTABILITY

The repercussions of climate change will be world-wide – clearly other, especially poor, nations will get angrier and more loose-canonish. This will be aggravated as the continuation of violence sabotages fragile economies.

Clearly, now is the time for big visions. By adopting more of the de Chardin big-vision view of the eucharist, [offering up the world on the altar of the universe] Christians can surely trail-blaze (eg: UK Christians twinning with a bankrupt nation). That is, instead of sitting back and saying the Eucharist is too vast to understand, we should use that very immensity to fuel huge, visionary, absurd thoughts. [cf: Alastair Davidson raising money for Mary Slessor Fdn.: "Will you fund-raise £100,000 for us?" "Certainly not. Ask me to raise £1m and I'll come."]

And since all thoughts require language to express them, what we need - to paraphrase Dominic Milroy - is a *Eucharistic* language "inspired by a vision of Christ's blood streaming in everyone's firmament".

And that returns us to where we began, for here is what I mean by the importance of our retreat from the eucharist: we each, in our different churches, can approach it differently, but retire conversing in the same unique language – and not departing from that language. That means ceasing to speak [or act] in a way that is assertive. No more lectures to society on what it should or shouldn't do; no more complaints to society for lack of respect for the church's rights. As sacramentalists, our only concern is example...demonstration.

In every interview and challenge we simply point to the sacrament and say this is what we do, this is what we are. We live the appeal and trust that, as of old, people will see and ask themselves, "Is it nothing to me, I who pass by?" because the only key to a better society, is that people have to see for themselves and respond.

The eucharist was given for dangerous, momentous times – times like these, when fear and upheaval threaten to tempt us up blind paths. But whatever flood, famine or panic lacerates society in the coming decades, we will have an answer already articulated in the language of bread and wine. All that is required is a commitment to that language – starting from the moment we rise to walk away from the table/altar rail. For I am convinced that if we train ourselves to talk that talk, we need not be afraid to walk that walk.