

SERMON FOR TRINITY 12 | 19.08.2018

Last week, in the second in this series of sermons on Jesus' words about being the 'Bread of Life' (St John Chapter 6), we thought about the intervention of Boris Johnson on the issue of burqas. Our question was 'how can we be part of Jesus' body?' and we thought about the effect of the divisive attitudes we hold as much as about distinctive clothes. How can we feel part of the Body of Christ unless we do all we can to include people of every race and language? Today want to focus on the fact that, at every Mass, the bread which we eat is blessed so that it can become the Body of Christ - and then is ceremoniously broken.

So my starter for ten today is: what do you remember breaking – and feeling most upset about? [??] For some it will be dropping their mobile phone or a very valuable plate or cup; others will remember breaking bones or the embarrassment of breaking something that they had borrowed from someone else...

For other people it won't be anything material but will be something to do with people, a broken relationship, a break-down of trust, the end of a business partnership – perhaps strained connections with parents or children or other loved ones.

Or again the brokenness can be within ourselves, when we feel not good enough, that we have done something silly or even really bad – the times we have let people down – or times when we haven't met people's expectations, when we haven't 'delivered'.

At today's 8am, the psalm set for today, Psalm 34, says: *I sought the Lord and he answered me, and delivered me out of all my fear. I called in my despair and the Lord heard me, and saved me from all my troubles.* And it is also true that every single one of the major characters in the Bible have had times when they felt completely broken. You can reel them off as easily as I can: King David, Samson, Elijah, Jonah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Job, Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalen - every single one of them has a crisis of faith before they come to realise that however clever and successful they have been – or the opposite – what God is looking for, to quote another psalm (Psalm 51), is not for them to take part in some religious ceremony but to offer him a truly *broken spirit*.

So does that mean God is only interested in caring for the messed up and the weak, the ones whose lives are falling apart around their ears?

Put like that, the answer has to be ‘it all depends’. As we know God is the defender of the poor and the marginalized and he is there to build up those who have nothing and no-one else.

But the real message is that what God can’t cope with is nothing to do our personal strengths and weaknesses but our willingness, however capable or not capable, to give our lives over to him and to let him do the leading. To be most fulfilled and happiest, we *need to let go – and let God.*

And if we have the courage to do that, there are two possible outcomes. The first is that instead of fighting for our own position and arguing always for what seems right to us, the hallmark of the Christian life is our willingness to look carefully at what is going on, learning to accept the situation as best we can and then abandoning ourselves to whatever God has in mind for us.

Take the life of St Francis of Assisi. A spoilt brat if ever there was one - wealthy, arrogant and intelligent – Francis underwent what can only be called a kind of religious melt-down. One day he just had had enough of getting his own way, of being rich. He had forgotten how to relate to other people in ordinary ways.

So, at the age of 15, he made a real spectacle of himself. While the house was full of his father’s most wealthy guests he stood in the hallway, decried the emptiness of all that he saw around him, stripped off his expensive clothes and walked out of the house.

From then on, he had absolutely nothing of his own. And yet within a year or two he had rebuilt the Church of San Damiano in Assisi and taken that as a metaphor for the work he now felt called to, to get the Church to listen again to the voice of God rather than exploiting the poor in favour of the rich which was how things were in those days.

And in answer to those who said to him, *how could you leave everything behind and start again*, Francis talked about the freedom that flowed from that adolescent revolt in his Father’s house.

The freedom that came from leaving his old life behind. What he discovered was that if God was finally in control than he, Francis – having done the very best he could, - was able to leave all his efforts in the hands of God. The final responsibility was not his anymore; God would take things on from that point. *Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my Spirit.* God can do what we can't.

And that is the positive result of brokenness: something the Japanese have turned into an art form. When a pot is broken, those who can afford it employ the ancient art of Kintsugi, literally *golden joinery*. Not only does the gold mend the break, it also increases the beauty and the value of the broken pot.

What the gold does not do is hide the breaks in the pot; in fact the Kintsugi artist actually spends his time highlighting the fracture lines. And what was painful and spoilt becomes beautiful.

And so it is with us. What our faith does is not to try to cover up are the failures and the problems, the mistakes and the lack of material success. Nor does it encourage us to give up - as in much of our commercial world where even quite valuable things are thrown away because we are told they are not worth repairing.

Brokenness in Christianity is actually what God is looking for in us. If you want to use flowery language: it is what makes it possible for God to bring his gold to transform you and me from plain, ordinary pots into a living work of art.

And so at the heart of this Mass - transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary: *we break this bread to become the Body of Christ.*

As we would expect, the whole theme of brokenness starts with Jesus and his tortured body broken on the Cross. Absolutely not guilty of any crime at all, Jesus allowed himself to be broken. Why? To release the love of God which, truly mends all the fractures, mistakes – the pride, envy and hopelessness which comes when we try to go it alone.

And only those who share in the broken bread, in the process of brokenness, are fully able to know what it is to have the shattered pieces restored by the gold of Jesus' love. St Francis got it; I hope we can too. "When we are weak, then are we strong..."