

**SERMON FOR TRINITY 15/COMMISSIONING OF
EUCCHARISTIC MINISTERS 09.2018 at 10am**

I don't know if you have ever been inside St Bart's Hospital at the end of the 56 bus route. The bit that Maria works in is a vast PFI complex built around an enormous atrium with a glass ceiling and doors leading off in all directions. Her Nuclear Physics department is in a subterranean basement, behind a series of security doors. Whenever I go I have stand sheepishly, waiting for someone to come and let me in. It is 'clinical' in every sense of the word and I never feel welcome there.

Her new colleagues, though, are all lovely and are based in tiny offices at the end of yet another white corridor. By chance they are all in their mid to late 20s – just at the age when they have decided to get married. And very kindly they have made a habit of inviting all their work colleagues – and their partners – to their weddings. This year we have already been to two.

And of course it has transformed relationships – not just of the working team but of us all. Eating together at the wedding reception has very little to do with what we ate (although I remember the food was pretty good) and everything to do with the way each couple embraced family, friends - and also strangers - into their special day and into their lives.

As we celebrate today the licensing of our Eucharistic Ministers at St James', I want to focus on what I believe lies at the heart of what we are as a Christian community: the people who extend Christ's hospitality.

But let's start with the 1st reading, the story of Elijah and the widow. I know I use stories from the Elijah saga quite often but we can't fail to be moved by what is happening here. Elijah, running away from King Ahab and Queen Jezebel for the umpteenth time, is desperate for a hiding place and God has told him to go to Zaraphath where he is told he will be looked after.

Out of the corner of his eye he spots a woman collecting sticks and he rightly imagines that this is the widow God has referred to. *Will you bring me some water and a bit of bread* he asks her straightforwardly enough.

Except that the town is in the middle of a devastating drought and she is preparing a last meal for herself and her son. Supplies have all but run out; she has nothing to share. After this they will die.

What Elijah says next could just be a cynical confidence trick: *bring me some bread and I promise that you won't run out of food or fuel*. It is an appeal to trust in the words of a total stranger - in the face of events which the widow can't do anything about. But she takes the risk and does what Elijah asks.

Sharing our food: hospitality. Almost never are we so poor that we can't, if we wanted, readily share the food we have at home. But in general, we don't. Preparing a dinner party, for example, is a huge amount of work. It can take up the whole week-end and isn't cheap either. Afterwards we reflect how lovely it was to sit around the table swapping stories – but we also think of the amount of clearing up that we had to do afterwards and we know that it will be a while before we have the energy to do it again.

And yet where else can a group of relative strangers find themselves able to slow down, unwind and share – not just the food but something of themselves? Receiving an invitation to dinner is like nothing else: we open ourselves to chance, taking the risk of liking the people we are with and feeling enriched by their conversation. Sure, you can just go for a drink but somehow it isn't quite the same. Food acts as a kind of conduit for making us equal; we appreciate the effort that went into the preparation and bonds and friendships are renewed in an extraordinary way.

Which is why I am so delighted that, every Monday, we open up the Church Hall for Pack-Up, welcoming anybody and everybody to share a simple meal together. And it forces me to be equally open when people come to the Vicarage door asking for food.

Because, inevitably, I am being placed on the spot as I ask the question: *is this someone I can let into my house. And if they do come in, what will I give them. And is it safe?*

The temptation, as you imagine, is for me to think that I don't actually have anything to give them. Yet, in that split second of indecision, I hear the words of Jesus as clearly as I hear his instructions to the disciples trying to work out how to feed 5000 people on the hillside: *you give them something to eat.*

Hospitality stands as a litmus test of our spiritual lives – whether we have resisted the temptation not to get involved, not to want to bear the cost or having our routines upset. In Church terms, hospitality demands that we make a sacrifice – and if it doesn't then what we are doing is hardly hospitality. Hospitality is about the value we place on the needs of other people – especially the ones we don't know, or don't know very well.

That is why it always struck me as odd that we used to be so very demanding about sharing Holy Communion with anyone who asked for it. People had to do a PhD in Church doctrine and be confirmed before they were allowed anywhere near the communion rail. Thank goodness the rules have changed and we have returned to the much more Eastern tradition (notable among Muslims at the end of Ramadan) of positively going out and finding people to give food to. The Gospel story of feeding the 5000 only makes sense if we can see there Jesus' hospitality: *never mind who they are, they need to be fed.*

But why do they? So that they can receive not just basic food but also those extraordinary gifts the world just doesn't offer - a sense of inclusion, acceptance and respect, whoever we are.

Which takes us to the next question: what exactly are we feeding people? Is it just a fellowship meal made up of a slightly sticky flat wafer and the tiniest sip of Mr Sainsbury's best sweet Greek red wine?

Of course 'being together' is vital if we are to grow as Christians but, frankly, we could do that in any number of other ways. We could be together as we paint an old person's house or do their shopping - or when we run a crèche for children or any number of community based actions.

But what we teach and what we believe is that the bread and the wine of Holy Communion that we share together does not depend on what we think about it - or on our behavior. It is all God's gracious gift. Into your hands and into mine he puts (in the deepest sense) himself. Our God - who created the universe and everything in it - risks putting himself into our hands, without any guarantee that we will appreciate him, or know what to do with the power that he is giving us.

Put like that that, I guess Holy Communion must seem insane: why would God let himself be used and abused by people who don't fully understand what it is they are receiving?

But the answer is: that is what the generosity of God looks like. And why, for the re-licensing of Eucharistic Ministers for almost thirty years since I first found it, I have included this piece by Michael Kwatera in the Admission Mass (see below). I love this piece for a number of reasons not least because it makes this same point: that the God whom we have come to love and whom we try to serve, places himself at our disposal - in the most physical and tangible of ways - without making a heap of demands on us. It is God's choice to put himself, unconditionally, into our hands.

Just look at your own hands for a moment. [**] Look at all the lines, the rough bits, the stiffness of some of the joints, the blemishes, the irregularities. To be honest, none of us are in good enough shape to take what God is giving us.

Yet Holy Communion remains the most positive of celebrations. It is part of God's 'can do' encouragement for us to be realistic about what we have, knowing that if we share what God has given us, we will always have enough. It was true for the widow of Zaraphath, it was true for the disciples in the 'back of beyond' when people were needing their dinner - and it is true for us.

What God is inviting us to do is to offer him hospitality by opening our hands, welcoming him as our Lord, knowing that in these seemingly insignificant elements of bread and wine lie the eternal gifts of love and peace, energy and grace, that only God can bring.

As we commission our Eucharistic Ministers today, we thank God that each of them has responded to his call not just to help speed up the process of administering communion each Sunday but to model what it is to be a eucharistic community: the family who share the life of God so that all things become possible.

As Michael's piece says, *Such is the welcome Jesus gave to notorious inners and near saints, to the just and to the unjust, to joyful children and sorrowful adults; such is the welcome you can give to your brothers and sisters as you serve them in Jesus' name. Will you pray with me for our Eucharistic Ministers whom we license today?*

Being and Giving the Body of Christ
Michael Kwatera

The work of a Eucharistic Minister is only for those
who can look another person in the eye with comfort
and touch another person with ease.

The human action of sharing the Body and Blood of Christ
requires the contact of eyes, of words and hands
to express personal communion.

The person to whom you are ministering deserves your full attention.
Your meeting with the communicant is only for a brief moment;
you can't rehearse it with the person before it happens
or stage it again later.

The Lord's eucharistic gifts are infinite and can't be diminished or lost
through his minister's weakness or mistakes.
Yet the people you serve can receive only what they are prepared to receive -
and your attitude and actions are part
of their immediate preparation for Communion.

If you are able to disregard everything and everyone else
at the moment of communion,
you will be able to welcome the person before you
with undivided attention and unmistakable reverence.

Such is the welcome Jesus gave
to notorious sinners and near-saints, to the just and the unjust,
to joyful children and sorrowful adults;
such is the welcome you can give to your brothers and sisters
as you serve them in Jesus' name.

For when a communicant waits for you, there is fulfilled the saying of Jesus,
"Where two or three are gathered together in my name,
there I am in their midst".

When and where could this be more completely fulfilled?

Christ is present in his Body and Blood;

He is also present in the communicant and in the minister
who come together in his name.

Together you profess your faith
and call forth in others an increase in their faith also.

"The Body of Christ — Amen!"