



# The Eucharist and World Hunger

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**W**HEN CHRISTIANS GATHER TO CELEBRATE THE LORD'S SUPPER, THEY ENACT A ritual rich and far-reaching in symbolism. Most obviously it is an action of hospitality—God's hospitality personified in Jesus and extended through the followers of Jesus. In establishing the supper as the central gathering and place of encounter with his followers for all time, Jesus did not invent a ritual that was entirely new, but drew on the religious practice and piety of his Hebrew heritage. Hence the depth of meaning already in the symbolism.

## I. COMMUNION AND THE FAMILY MEAL

At its deepest and oldest level there is the universal symbolism of the family meal and the table grace. People living at a simpler level of technology were and are more consciously aware that in eating, in being nourished, we are being created. It is a moment of inescapable dependence, giftedness, indebtedness. But it

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*Eucharistic communion is not merely church ritual. As a meal fellowship, as the Lord's own supper, it is an act of divine hospitality that calls those who participate to share hospitably with all people—not only at the altar but also at their own tables and at the larger table of the global economy.*

is also a moment of fellowship, of realizing our likeness and interdependence with other people. Ancient Israel expressed this in the development of the table grace. In the form in which it has long been practiced, it is a praise and thanksgiving to God accompanying the breaking and sharing of bread. There are three dimensions in this table grace: acknowledgment of the hospitality of God in creation; acknowledgment of the hospitality of all those who have worked to produce bread; and an establishment of fellowship in the sharing of the bread.

This symbolism is enhanced in the Friday evening blessing of the wine at the beginning of the sabbath. Wine also represents in a single expression both the hospitality of God in creation and the hospitality of the manual laborers who with their back-breaking work and inadequate wages sustain our high standard of living. It was so in ancient times and it continues to be so today; the relative bargaining power of those who have possession of the means of production and of those others who must work for them in order to survive is always very unequal. In the Hebrew, a pun suggested itself readily in the similar sound of *'anabim* (עֲנָבִים) meaning grapes, and *'anawim* (עֲנָוִים) meaning simple, humble, poor working people—often, the afflicted. The blessing over the wine could not but suggest the need to link in our understanding the hospitable fruitfulness of God's world, the hardship and suffering symbolized by the crushing of the grapes, and the enjoyment of life by those at table.

## II. COMMUNION AND THE PASSOVER SEDER

However, this symbolism drawn from more or less universal human experiences was greatly intensified and sharpened again in the passover seder supper. Here the symbolism interprets the particular foundation history of the Hebrew people in the light of God's self-revealing. The breaking of the unleavened bread of passover has three meanings: it is the bread of the poorest, the desert nomads, the marginalized; it is also the bread of affliction and terror from the panic and haste of the flight; and finally, it is on these accounts the bread of the radically new, uncontaminated by the sourdough leaven of the past. It is out of utter poverty and abandonment, out of final tragedy and disaster, that the call of God's promise can be heard. The God of Israel hears the poor and liberates the captives. God creates a new people, God's own people, from the marginalized and excluded, and leads them through a desert training in which they are to learn to share God's hospitality in gratitude, not to hoard and not to enrich themselves at the expense of the less fortunate.

Among the many other symbolic elements of the passover seder, the wine relates both to the liberation of the past and the promised future fulfillment. Here also the pun on the "grapes" and "afflicted" comes into play. The grapes were crushed and fermented so that out of their destruction something new and splendid might come to be. Just so the suffering and death of the enslaved tribes in Egypt gave birth to a new people, God's own people. That new people must always remember the ancestors who suffered to give birth to the new nation. The remembrance of their own liberation must ever keep them aware of those who

suffer now and await liberation. The great escape and the desert sojourn must keep them aware in all their generations that true peoplehood is founded on subordination of everything to God and generous solidarity with all human neighbors whose needs are just like their own. Indeed, the spilling of a little wine into the saucer is the reminder that God mourns even over the firstborn of the Egyptians, and that God's people are called even to compassion for enemies.

### III. COMMUNION AS JESUS' FAREWELL SUPPER

When Jesus gives new depths of meaning to the old ritual at his farewell supper, the new focus is on his forthcoming arrest, trial, torture, and death. Out of the depth of suffering and abandonment God can and will create the radically new beginning, the new people, God's own people. Jesus identifies the breaking of the bread with his death and the pouring of the wine with his pouring out of his life, his ultimate act of hospitality. He invites his followers to enter into this action, to become sharers in what he is doing. But the same Jesus who invites his followers to become sharers in the mystery of his suffering and death is also the one who said that whatever his followers would do for the least of the human family would be done for him. A contemporary theologian, J. B. Metz, has said that Jesus crucified, identified with the most marginalized and abandoned, forever challenges us to look at our history from the bottom up, from the perspective of the losers, the excluded, crushed, and vanquished, the conveniently forgotten. The image of Jesus crucified is at the heart of the eucharist; it challenges the ways in which we, the people of God, have failed in our stewardship of God's hospitality in creation and redemption.

The image of the crucified and risen Jesus put before us in our celebration of the Lord's supper is no timeless, uncontextualized symbol. The crucifixion was the outcome of Jesus' public ministry and is intimately connected with it. Jesus had gone to the poorest; he had identified with those whom society had singled out as sinners, unworthy, despicable, to be excluded from social life. Jesus had become a threat to those with power and privilege and wealth by arousing in the oppressed a consciousness of their own dignity and worth in God's eyes, by reminding them of their calling to be God's people in solidarity with one another. He had preached directly to the rich and powerful, to those who claimed superiority on account of their learning and piety, reversing their evaluation and undermining their self-assurance. The path that led Jesus to his arrest and death was the way of the prophet and the road of the compassionate. Jesus stood for the inclusion of the excluded, and the final sign that he left to us of his presence and his word was the sign of indiscriminating, inclusive hospitality. It was a hospitality going to the ultimate limit of the total gift of self.

### IV. COMMUNION IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The letters of Paul instruct us as to how the earliest Christian communities viewed the eucharist. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul is angry and distressed to learn that

there are people in the Corinthian Christian community who still have not understood that in the cross of Christ all hostilities and discriminatory exclusions of various categories of people have been dissolved into an inclusive fellowship. The gathering for the Lord's supper is the very action in which this is expressed. Those who discriminate against the poor or against slaves or gentiles have missed the point and dishonored the body of Christ which is the church, the community gathered.

Sometimes scripture scholars and theologians have argued that the sharing and fellowship expressed and mandated in the eucharistic action refer simply to this eucharistic gathering and should not be given extended or global dimensions. Certainly the local meal is the immediate context of the Paul's criticism, but his argument seems to be that the eucharistic assembly should become a model for civic life, whereas instead the class structures of pagan Corinth seem to have been assimilated into the Christian assembly. That process is the reverse of what is intended. When Luke in Acts 2 and 4 sketches the ideal of the Christian community that gathers for the breaking of bread, he is at pains to emphasize the radical commitment to share material as well as spiritual goods with those in need of them. Again, this happens within the community of believers, but these communities were poor and powerless. They could scarcely have been confronted with responsibility for the larger population of their times.

When the eucharistic action is seen not only in the context of the farewell supper but in the light of the whole ministry of Jesus, the exigence becomes sharper. Jesus invited his followers into his own redemptive action—a ministry that includes all that led up to his final immolation, a ministry that was constantly among the poor and outcast, concerned with their spiritual and material needs. To accept his eucharistic hospitality entails solidarity with these concerns, responding to the needs of our own time and situation. The very existence of hunger and want in our world coupled with our own ability to respond would be call enough to practice in the world what we symbolize in the eucharist. When we realize that at least in the west the church-going Christians are often the rich and powerful of the world, the matter becomes more urgent. And when we find that some of the poorest, most oppressed, and most wretched of the earth are also our fellow Christians, the call to share becomes unavoidable. When we go one step further and discover that the wretchedness of two thirds of the world's people is due in part to economic and political colonialism having drained their lands, to harsh bargains between rich and poor nations that have burdened them with debt and one-crop export economies, to collusion between political, economic, and military power in our countries with oppressive and money-hungry regimes in their countries, this becomes a matter of repentance. Without repentance our eucharistic action is a sham. There is a balance to be put right so that, as Paul puts it, we are not eating and drinking judgment to ourselves when we gather in Jesus' name.

## V. OUR STEWARDSHIP OF GOD'S HOSPITALITY

The eucharistic action with its many layers of symbolism celebrates God's hospitality and our stewardship of it. It celebrates the hospitality of God in creation, where the fruitfulness of the earth is given to all peoples of the earth for their common nourishment and benefit. We know that the unequal distribution of access to the world's wealth is not the result of divine decree. It has been aided by violence, by force of arms, by the enslavement of peoples and the occupation of their land by invaders, by the expropriation of their means of livelihood. The standard of living that many of us enjoy has been built upon such violence in the past, and we are its beneficiaries. Moreover it is maintained in our own times by the hard drive for higher profit on investment and cheaper labor in the global market. It is maintained by patterns of migration and the prevention of migration. It is maintained by tariffs and trade agreements whose terms are largely dictated by the powerful. It is maintained by the continuing armaments race by which great resources are expended on killing-power while masses of the world's population go in want of food and clean water. It is maintained by the profitable sale of weapons to countries that cannot control their use by increasingly desperate thugs and terrorists.

In the midst of all this we celebrate the hospitality of God in creation and redemption, entrusted also to us rich and powerful Christians who live in God's world among the destitute masses who are also God's children. We celebrate the Lord's supper, expressing our solidarity with Jesus who extends God's hospitality in his own person, in the giving of his life, symbolized in the breaking and sharing of bread around the table of God's hospitality. If this is an authentic action, it must bring about what it signifies—the sharing of God's hospitality in the world of human affairs where the stake for many is their very survival and their basic human dignity. If it is to be authentic it cannot remain an isolated worship ritual, one leaving the worshipers only with a serene sense of acceptance by God and spiritual peace. If it remains there, the ritual action is a lie because what it expresses is separated from the realm of everyday reality. God's table is spread for the hungry and the poor, but the stewardship of it has been placed in our hands. This stewardship comes to us, not as though fresh and unspoiled in paradise, but with the need to redress the terrible injustices, deprivations, and imbalances that have been bequeathed to us. The stewardship is now in our hands with an urgent calling to collective repentance through a practical preferential option for the poor.

The many dimensions of this vocation are staggering, and one need mention only a few of the more obvious. Our cities are full of homeless people, our country full of desperate immigrants, legal and illegal, often fleeing in desperation from greater horrors. Our world is full of refugees. Surely the Creator has provided the earth as a home for all people. We cannot well celebrate the divine hospitality while calmly accepting the fact that large numbers of God's people are constantly hounded from spot to spot, never able to bed down in a place where they will be

able to stay and call home. The need for a home, a place to put down roots, is an urgent human hunger.

Our cities, our country, and our world are also full of people who simply cannot eat because they are not allowed access to food, even where it exists in abundance and is being thrown away as excess production. Large numbers of those denied adequate or appropriate nutrition are small children whose mental and physical development is stunted or distorted. Many are grossly underpaid workers whose bargaining power has been curtailed legally or illegally by preventing them from collective bargaining, keeping them under threat of dismissal and replacement, or employing them under substandard conditions because they are known to be illegal immigrants. In many ways our own standard of living is boosted by cheap food produced by those who themselves cannot afford adequate nutrition for their own needs and those of their families, although they work inhuman hours under inhuman conditions.

Besides these groups there are the unemployed, both in this country and in many poorer countries of the world. Many are unemployed because industries have moved, automated, closed down, or "downsized." Others are unemployed because the shape of the economy has changed, or in poor countries because the single export product has suddenly lost its value. Many are unemployed because generations of racial discrimination or poverty have had a cumulative effect on them: stunted development, lethargy, and discouragement. These, combined with a lack of basic education and orderly habits, make them unemployable in a fast-paced, technically advanced society. Yet for them the Creator made the earth and its riches and put the stewardship of it into our hands to make sure that they too would be amply provided with all they need.

When we gather at the eucharist we express our communion with Jesus. The communion mediates, restores, and refocuses the hospitality of God in creation and redemption for all the world. ⊕