

Blessed, Broken and Shared

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Everywhere Jesus went, he was followed by large crowds. Five thousand people, not counting women and children, listened to him all day long, even forgetting that they were hungry. Every town he went into, the whole town, we are told, turned out to hear him. The poor man who was paralysed and wanted Jesus to cure him couldn't get near Jesus because of the crowds. "Large crowds followed him, coming from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judaea and Transjordan." the Gospel writers tell us.

Who were these people that followed Jesus to hear what he had to say? Few of them were rich; the rich lived in the cities and there is no record of Jesus ever going into the cities to preach, except once, he went to Jerusalem and we know what happened to him there! No, Jesus preached in the towns, villages and countryside of Galilee, which is where the poor, ordinary people lived, people who struggled to feed their families, to pay their taxes. Some of them were destitute, surviving by begging, and despised by the righteous in society. No, the people who followed Jesus, the people he preached to, were ordinary, poor people.

After all he stated very clearly at the beginning of his ministry that he had come "to bring the Good News to the Poor." Who were these 'Poor' that Jesus referred to? Were they, as we sometimes hear, the materially rich but 'spiritually poor'? The rich and the powerful, amongst whom were to be found the Pharisees, the scribes, the lawyers and the priests, also listened to what Jesus was saying.

But their response was to "go away and plot how to get rid of him." Clearly, what Jesus was saying was not irrelevant to the ordinary, poor, sick, and outcast people who came to listen to him; they were enthused by what he was saying and couldn't get enough of him. Clearly, also, what Jesus was saying was not irrelevant to the rich and powerful because they were infuriated by what he was saying and quickly had quite enough of him.

So what was Jesus saying that generated such different reactions from different social classes?

Who is God?

The fundamental revelation which Jesus came to bring, and which caused such conflict, then as now, was the question of God, "Who is God?"

A God of the Law

For the religious authorities, God is a God of the Law. God desires, above all else, that the people of God should obey the Law. And they had good theological justification for this understanding of God. God had heard the cries of the peoples enslaved in Egypt, they had called on God to rescue them from oppression by the Pharaoh. And God heard their cries and sent Moses to lead them out of Egypt. And God made a covenant with the people by which God promised to protect them always, to lead them into the promised land; but they, on their part, must obey the laws which God was giving them through Moses.

These laws instructed them how to live in right relationship with God and with each other: God would be their God and they were to live in justice and peace with each other. When Israel was invaded by foreign armies, and the people led off again in slavery and scattered to the far corners of the world, the people of God understood that this had happened because they had been unfaithful to the laws of the Covenant. Failure to keep the laws, as given by God, meant that the people of God had torn up the Covenant and God would therefore abandon them.

So the focus of all religious instruction was the Law, the meaning of the Law, the details of the Law. God's passion was the observance of the Law. If the people failed to keep the Law of God, then dire consequences could be expected to follow.

A God of the Law is a God who is a Judge, a God who rewards and welcomes those who keep the law and punishes and rejects those who do not keep the law. A God of the Law is a God who excludes the sinner.

A God of compassion

Then along came Jesus. Now Jesus' problem was that he had never studied theology. He hadn't been to any of the rabbinical schools, or studied under any recognised teacher. He was just "the carpenter's son?" So he didn't understand the complexities of all that the religious authorities were teaching. Jesus saw things in black and white, a bit like the prophets of old. He saw the poverty, the suffering and the rejection of the people by the religious authorities, who justified this state of affairs by reference to their God, the God of the Law, the God who judges according to the law and who rejects those who fail to keep it.

And Jesus proclaimed a different God, a God of compassion.

There is a very important story in Mark's Gospel. Jesus is preaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath day. He notices a man with a withered hand.

Interestingly, the man with the withered hand does not ask Jesus to cure him; in fact, he does not try to attract Jesus' attention in any way. It is Jesus who takes the initiative. He says to the man: "Stand up out here in the middle." Now Jesus is going to cure the man, but the Law forbids him from curing the man for that is to do work, and you are forbidden to work on the Sabbath.

Why does Jesus say: "Stand up out here in the middle" and ask for trouble. And he gets trouble. We are told at the end of the story that the Pharisees met at once and made plans to kill Jesus. So why does Jesus say: "Stand up out here in the middle." If I had been Jesus, I would have been smarter: I would have said to the man: "Around the back afterwards, we won't cause any fuss." And why not? The end result would have been the same – the man goes away cured. No, Jesus cures the man in full view of everyone, and breaks the Law, because what he is doing is at the heart of the revelation which Jesus came to bring, namely, that God is a God of compassion, and not a God of the Law.

The God of compassion and the God of the Law are incompatible. Jesus had no time for legalisms. He was telling the people that in certain circumstances, God actually wanted them to break the Law. This was heresy.

Jesus was seen as a threat to the faith of the people of God, and therefore a threat to those whose lifestyle and status in society depended on the faith of the people. Even worse, what Jesus was preaching was a threat to the very existence of the people of God, whose existence was conditional on the keeping of the Law.

Caiphas, the High Priest, understood this when he declared: "*It is better that one man should die than the nation perish.*" How do you preach a God of the Law? Why, you get scholars to study the Law, and examine all the different occasions to which the Law might apply, and then you tell people what they are supposed to do. Any resemblance to the Catholic Church today is purely intentional! This conflict between the God of the Law and the God of compassion is a fundamental conflict in our Church and spirituality even today.

You can preach the God of the Law from an ivory tower, surrounded by your learned books. But you cannot preach the God of compassion in that way. To reveal the God of compassion, you have to *be* the compassion of God. You cannot just preach the God of compassion from a pulpit. You can only preach the God of compassion if you are immersed in the poverty and suffering, the homelessness and hopelessness of people around you. It is that real poverty and suffering, homelessness and hopelessness that the God of compassion addresses.

And so to understand the revelation of Jesus, that God is compassion, we cannot disconnect Jesus from the society into which Jesus was born, and in which he lived and died. We have to look at the suffering of the people of that time, and the economic, social and political conditions which caused that suffering, just as we have to do today, if we are to preach a God of compassion. Perhaps we have disconnected Jesus from the real, concrete suffering of the people of his time, because it challenges us, even threatens us.

The Kingdom of Herod

So what was that society like? Jesus was born into the Kingdom of Caesar, that part of the Kingdom of Caesar where Herod had been appointed King to keep control of the territory on behalf of Caesar, which Herod did with utter ruthlessness. The Gospels tell the story of the massacre of the innocents, all male children under the age of two, one of whom, Herod had been told, would become King of Israel and was therefore a threat both to him and to Caesar. Child protection policies were not a priority in Herod's kingdom. A few years before Jesus was born, Herod had burnt forty Jews to death for trying to lead a protest against Caesar. When Jesus was three or four years old, still learning to walk, Herod crucified two thousand Jews in the city of Sepphoris, only about five miles from Nazareth where Jesus was living, as a reprisal for an attempted revolt against Caesar.

Jesus came to a people who were cruelly oppressed by Caesar and those Caesar had appointed to rule on his behalf.

He also came to a people where the vast majority lived at a subsistence level, many of them on the edge of destitution. Others were rejected and unwanted and marginalised: those with infirmities, the blind, the lame, the deaf, the dumb, the lepers and sinners. They had no life, they simply survived from day to day, forced to beggar just to stay alive.

A small minority, perhaps 7-8%, lived lives of ostentatious wealth, living in mansions, with no concern for the poor and the hungry around them. These were Herod and the royal court who served him, the priests and religious aristocracy who became wealthy through the buying and selling of sacrificial offerings in the Temple, the rich landowners, many of them Herod's friends, who had accumulated large tracts of land by the simply policy of confiscating land from the small landowners, often on the pretext that they were unable to pay the exorbitant tax that Herod demanded of them. But Herod didn't need much pretext, he had absolute power to do whatever he wanted, and there was no appeal.

This was God's chosen people, oppressed both from outside and from within, struggling to survive and struggling to maintain any sense of their own dignity: rejected by their fellow human beings and told that they had also been rejected by God. This was not what God had in mind when God liberated them from Egypt and led them into the promised land. This was not a people over whom God could possibly want to reign.

The Kingdom of God

And Jesus came proclaiming a new Kingdom, the Kingdom of God, over whom God would reign. And Jesus told stories about this new Kingdom of God that was coming.

Jesus talked about the rich man "who feasted sumptuously every day and was dressed in the finest linen" and who couldn't even be bothered to gather up the crumbs that fell from his table to give them to the poor man at his gate. The people Jesus was talking to knew exactly, from their own experience, what he was talking about. And when Jesus went on to say that the rich man would be cast down to Hades and Lazarus would be welcomed into the Kingdom of God, you can imagine them looking at one another and nodding their heads in approval. Their own religious leaders were telling them that there would be no place for them in God's kingdom because they had been rejected by the God of the Law, and here was Jesus telling them about a God, a God of compassion, who would welcome them into God's Kingdom. When Jesus declared that in the Kingdom of God that was on its way: "The first shall be last and the last shall be first," they thought of the rich and respectable who considered themselves better than the poor and the infirm, and they were overjoyed. No wonder they could listen to him all day. This was indeed good news to the poor.

And when Jesus talked about the rich landowner who had a massive harvest and said to himself: "What I am to do? I know, I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones" without any consideration for those who were hungry, the people Jesus was talking to knew exactly what part of town these guys lived in. And when Jesus said that God is going to require his soul tonight, you can imagine them smiling with approval. This was indeed a God they would want to believe in.

And when Jesus talked about the large landowner who sent his servants to collect his share of the produce, and the tenants beat the servants and sent them off, they must have applauded loudly. (Now the Gospel writers have made this story into an allegory, where the large landowner is God, the servants are the prophets and the son, whom they put to death, is Jesus, but almost certainly the original story that Jesus must have told many times was the story of the exploitation of the tenants).

These were not “made-up” stories; Jesus was telling it as it was. And he was telling them that, in the Kingdom of God that was coming, their lives were going to be very different.

And when Jesus talked about the labourers who waiting in the market square all day, hoping to get a few hours work, they knew exactly what Jesus was talking about: some of them, no doubt, had “been there, done that”. And when Jesus said that even those who were given work at the eleventh hour also received the same wage, one denarius, enough to feed their family for the day, they were astounded; they never heard of any rich vineyard owner doing such a thing. A rich landowner actually caring whether his workers had enough food or not! And when Jesus tells them that the rich vineyard owner is like God, they are filled with wonder; could God really be a God that cares, that cares about them and whether their families will get fed? They want to hear more about this wonderful God.

And when Jesus cured the blind and the lame and the lepers, who were told by their own religious leaders that they were cursed by God, they actually experienced, in the very act of being healed, the God of compassion that Jesus revealed. This was a God beyond all their expectations. No wonder those who were cured went off and told everyone what Jesus had done, even when Jesus had instructed them to tell no-one. How could you not go and tell everyone about this God of compassion and love? And when Jesus ate with sinners, who were told by their own religious leaders that they were forsaken by the God of the Law, they experienced, in their table fellowship with Jesus, the unconditional forgiveness of the God of compassion. This was not just “Good News,” this was extraordinary news, beyond all their expectations.

And when Jesus reached out, in friendship, to the unwanted and marginalised, who were told by their own religious leaders that God had rejected them, they experienced God’s acceptance of them. This is what they had not even dared to hope for, and now it was becoming a reality for them.

And Jesus tells them the story of the Pharisee, who reminded God of all his merits and good works, and the Publican, who had no good deeds to present to God, and Jesus announces that the Publican, not the Pharisee, went home justified before God, they were given a hope and encouragement which they had never experienced before.

And when the rich young man wants to follow Jesus, he is told that he must first share his wealth with the poor. When he is unable to do so, he has to go away, sad. You can hear some heckler in the audience shouting up: “Good for you, Jesus. That guy doesn’t care about us. He cannot be part of our Kingdom.” To understand the revelation of Jesus, perhaps you have to be angry. Love and anger are two sides of the same coin: you cannot love someone who is suffering unnecessarily without being angry at their suffering.

Jesus was angry, not by the people’s failure to keep the Law, but by the poverty and marginalisation of people which was imposed on them by the Law.

Jesus was angry by what he saw and experienced as he walked the roads of Galilee and entered the towns and villages there.

Jesus was angry when he cast the sellers out of the Temple courtyard; Jesus was angry when he called the Pharisees “hypocrites, who lay heavy burdens on peoples’ shoulders, (burdens of guilt as required by the God of the Law) but will not lift a finger to help them carry them.” Jesus was angry when he called the Pharisees “imposters, who take advantage of widows and rob them of their homes.” Jesus was angry when he called the Teachers of the Law “whitewashed tombs, which look fine on the outside, but are full of dead men’s bones and rotten stuff on the inside.” Jesus is telling those who came to listen about a Kingdom where those on the margins of society will be welcomed, respected, and valued instead of being rejected, and unwanted; where people will reach out to the poor, and share what they have, so that their needs will be met, instead of being ignored and despised by those who had the resources to meet their needs. In this new Kingdom, people will live in a totally

different way to the way they were now living, people will live by totally different values to the values of the society in which they were now living. In this new Kingdom, their King will be, not the brutal Herod or the warring Caesar, but God, a God of compassion, a God who cares.

So they wanted to know: where was this Kingdom to be found? And what did they have to do to get into this Kingdom?

The early Christian community

The early Church, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, understood that they were to be the Kingdom of God that Jesus had promised was close at hand. They were to continue to preach the message of Jesus, to reveal the God of compassion by *being* the compassion of God. Their leader, their King, the one they followed, the model for their life together was the risen Jesus, Son of God, present amongst them. To be the Kingdom of God, then, the Christian community understood that it was to live by totally different values to the values of the society around them.

They understood that, to enter the Christian community, the Kingdom of God, a person took on the responsibility of being the compassion of God to one other. Hence, they were to live together in radical solidarity with each other, loving each other with a love that was willing to share everything for the sake of those in need. Just as Jesus had given up everything, including what was most precious to him, his own life, for our sake, so we, as followers of Jesus were to be prepared to give up everything, even what may be most precious to us, for the sake of our brothers and sisters. They understood that all they had were gifts, given to them by God, not so that they could have a good life and enjoy themselves, but so that they could use them for the benefit of others. They were, therefore, to share their resources, their time, their talents, their skills for the sake of those who needed them. And so the rich young man, a good young man, a young man who had kept all the commandments from his youth, whom, we are told, “Jesus looked on him and loved him,” nevertheless, he could not become a follower of Jesus, could not be admitted to the early Christian community, because his unwillingness to share what he had for the sake of those in need was a contradiction to being the compassion of God.

I read the Gospels now, not as instructions to me as to how I should live my life according to the moral laws of God which Jesus revealed, but as instructions to the early Christian community – and therefore to us, as the Christian community in our time - as to how we are to live together in order to be the Kingdom of God.

And so I read the story of the feeding of the five thousand people. Five thousand people spent the whole day listening to him. In the evening, the disciples had to go up to Jesus and say: “Jesus, would you ever shut up. The people are hungry. Send them off to the towns and villages around, so that they can get something to eat.” The whole point of the story lies in Jesus’ answer to the disciples: “*No, you give them something to eat yourselves.*” The Christian community understood that this was an instruction from Jesus to them. They were to ensure that they reached out to those in need and did not leave their needs unmet.

The Kingdom of God is where God lives, where God is to be found. In that Last Judgement scene then: “*I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, I was naked and you clothed me, I was in hospital and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to see me. Welcome into the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*” Perhaps Matthew is not talking about judgement at all. Perhaps Matthew is describing a community where God is present. A community which reaches out to feed the hungry, to give water to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, in other words, to meet the needs of all, a community which is the compassion of God, is a community where you will find the God of compassion. “Welcome into the Kingdom.” But a community which fails to reach out to meet the needs of all is a community where God, the God of compassion, is absent.

“*I was hungry and you did not give me to eat, I was thirsty and you did not give me to drink, I was naked and you did not clothe me, I was in hospital and in prison and you did not visit me...Depart from me.*” One of the characteristics of Jesus’ life that was remembered and passed down from

generation to generation of Christians in those early communities was the fact that Jesus shared table fellowship with sinners.

“Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners.” This caused Jesus endless difficulties. “How could this man be from God, when he associates with the enemies of God, those who do not keep the Law?” righteous people, good living people, asked. The God of the Law cannot tolerate the actions of the God of compassion.

The early community understood that this radical inclusiveness, revealed by the actions of Jesus, was normative for their community and life together.

In their community, no-one was to be unwanted, rejected or marginalised. Everyone has the same dignity of being a child of God and that dignity was to be recognised and affirmed by the way in which the Christian community accepted them.

Today the message of the Church, which is supposed to be the continuation of the message of Jesus, is seen by so many ordinary people to be irrelevant to their lives. Unlike the thousands of people who followed Jesus, enthused by what he was saying, today thousands of people, especially the young, are walking away. What has happened? Has the message changed? Are we still trying to preach a God of the Law? Perhaps it’s all St. Matthew’s fault. He kept called it “The Kingdom of Heaven”. He was referring, of course, to the Kingdom of God, but in deference to the Jewish culture, within which many of the Christians to whom he was writing had grown up, a culture which was reluctant to use the word “God” out of respect for the awesomeness and holiness of God, Matthew uses the term “Kingdom of Heaven.” Most Christians now, if you talk about the Kingdom of God, presume you are referring to Heaven, a Kingdom in another place and another time.

Traditional spirituality referred to our time on earth as a pilgrimage, we are on a journey to our true home in Heaven and urged us to “use wisely the things of earth, and love the things of Heaven,” as one prayer of the Mass says.

Jesus came “that we may have life, and have it to its fullness” is understood, then, to refer to eternal life and entering eternal life in Heaven becomes the focus and objective of our relationship with Jesus.

The message of Jesus, then, becomes a set of laws or moral instructions which, if we obey them, will make us pleasing to God and we will be rewarded with a place in Heaven. Of course, the downside is that if we don’t obey those moral laws, we will be displeasing to God and we may be excluded from the Kingdom of Heaven.

God becomes a God of the Law, a God who excludes those who do not, or cannot, keep the Law. If Jesus was preaching a set of moral laws that God wanted us to obey, he would not have had thousands of people listening to him all day. No, they had had their fill of the Law. They were not going to listen to someone who was merely offering a new or different set of laws.

Such a spirituality is inward-looking; our eyes are on Heaven and how *we* can get there. But the spirituality of the Gospels is outward looking, our eyes are on others and how we can love them.

The Eucharist

The Eucharist is at the centre of our spirituality. So how we understand the Eucharist will be shaped primarily by our spirituality. If our spirituality is focused on getting to Heaven, then we may understand the Eucharist as primarily a source of the grace which is necessary for our salvation. What is happening at the Eucharist is something other-worldly. When you go into the Church, you leave this world and all its cares and problems behind. The Eucharist, then, has very little, if any, relevance to the rest of our lives; it is a time of prayer, of worship. It is about the affirmation of Jesus as Lord and God, an affirmation which leads us into the presence of God. What is happening outside the walls of the church became irrelevant for this one hour of the week.

There could be a revolution going on in the country, but for this hour, the revolution has to wait. In the Eucharist, then, where we acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God, the grace of the sacrament is given to us to guide us on our path to Heaven.

This understanding of the Eucharist derives from the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, when Jesus said “This is my body, this is my blood...do this in memory of me.” And so the priest takes the bread and the wine, they become the Body and Blood of Jesus, and the priest raises the host and the chalice so that the congregation can worship God, now present under the appearance of bread and wine.

However, at the Last Supper, Jesus did not say: “This is my Body, this is my Blood” and invite the disciples to *worship* him. Jesus actually said: “This is my Body, *which will be given up for you*” and “This is my Blood, *which will be poured out for you*,” and he invited the disciples to *follow* him.

In a spirituality which is focused on others and their needs, the Eucharist becomes first of all a time to remember: to remember, in thanksgiving, how this community, to which we have committed ourselves, began, namely through the total self-sacrifice of its founder and leader, the Risen Jesus, and to recall, once again, the core value of self-sacrificing love by which the community is to live.

And, secondly, in communion, in receiving the Body and Blood of Jesus, we unite ourselves with Jesus. Receiving communion then becomes an act of radical commitment: we commit ourselves to following Jesus, to be united with him, in his total self-sacrificing love.

The Eucharist, then, is at the centre of the life of this community to which we belong. But if we, and this Christian community, are not living this life of selfsacrificing love, by which we reveal the God of compassion, then going to Eucharist becomes meaningless. Perhaps our young people today find no meaning in the Eucharist we celebrate, because it has lost its meaning.

If the Eucharist is a sacrament through which I, as an individual, receive grace which will assist me in reaching my goal, which is Heaven, then isn’t it wonderful that the millionaire and the pauper can sit side by side at Mass, week after week, worship the same God and receive the same grace, regardless of their different circumstances and status. The God of the Law makes no distinction between rich and poor, both are offered the same law and the same reward.

But if the Eucharist is a commitment to living a life of self-sacrificing love for the sake of my neighbour, then there is a total contradiction in the millionaire and the pauper sitting side by side at Mass, week after week.

We go to Mass then, not to do our duty, but to commit ourselves to leaving Mass to do our duty, to reveal the God of compassion by being the compassion of God.

If this Eucharistic Congress in June does not commit us as Christians to building a more just society in Ireland and in our world, if it does not commit us to eliminating poverty, homelessness and hopelessness at home, to eliminating hunger, disease and infant mortality in our world, then it will be a holy waste of time.

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