

I was reminded during the week of a project I worked with in the mid nineties. At the time I was working for the Uniting Church in Australia in their Social Justice Unit on gender issues. When I came into the role my predecessor had completed a project called 'A place at the table'<sup>1</sup> – and I had the privilege of following on with her hard work. A place at the table was a collaborative project involving artists, theologians and many others who had each been invited to create an image which showed women at the last supper. It was based on the fact that most religious art portrays white men talking to Jesus. Some really interesting pieces came out of this project included reworks of the classic Leonardo DaVinci last supper painting to include people from many cultural backgrounds, genders and ages. They were quite confronting pictures.

My favourite however was a painting of a young women in jeans and a jumper, sitting at a simple kitchen table with a pot of tea, and Jesus sitting with her and other women from the past– all in conversation. The reason I was reminded of this was that when I arrived at my retreat last Sunday evening, waiting for me in my room was a small kitchen table and on it was a tea pot and two cups and a slice of homemade sponge cake.

This lovely gesture of welcome felt like coming home. But the second cup intrigued me – and I was reminded of the painting. Maybe this retreat was time to sit and have a cup of tea with Jesus!

That sense of sitting with another over a cuppa for me is an image of conversation and catch up. A symbol of intimacy and sharing – and time of honest dialogue. When I was growing up most conversations, I observed that adults had took place around a table with cups of tea. In fact, when we visited my grandmothers house each Friday it would seem that her table was a constant revolving door of conversations, people and tea!

The places that we feel welcome and included, the places that we feel we can truly be ourselves are often the strongest images and memories we carry. Often the strongest hurts are those times when this has not been the case.

The point of A place at the table project was to highlight that Jesus table of welcome, the table of the Eucharist, the meal of communion we share each Sunday, had become for many a sign and symbol not of inclusion and welcome – but rather of exclusion and hurt. Its aim was to reclaim in images and creative arts the theology of welcome that we hear in our readings today.

Jesus in our gospel describes himself as living bread. Bread that sustains us – that allows the gift of eternal life. Jesus image of is one of a people who flourish. There are no pronouns in this passage. It is clearly address to all humanity regardless of

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<sup>1</sup> A place at the table – women at the last supper edited Judi Fisher and Janet Wood, JBCE, National Commission on Women and Men, UCA 1993.

gender or race. Jesus has come that all might have life to its fullest. It was this passion for flourishing which was at the heart of the project I was part of, for a people who had felt they had been excluded for a long time.

The reason the image of the Eucharist is so often used when we talk about inclusion is because it is a meal of hospitality which welcomes all to one table in all time and space. It is a symbolic table and as such it encompasses us all, like a good cup of tea with good conversation.

Today we celebrate the Feast of Corpus Christi. It fell actually last Thursday, but it is such an important celebration it is important to remember it today. It celebrates the tradition of sharing communion and the Eucharist and its centrality to our faith.

The sharing in the Eucharist together is not about our immediate needs, or the satisfaction of our immediate hunger – it is about the fulfilment of eternity – the promise of the fullness of God in all our lives – forever. In the Eucharist God welcome all of us - just as we are – into the one body and into one faith.

Earlier we heard read to us the words of the institution of the last supper as recorded in the letter to the Corinthians. This is the earliest description of the blessing of bread and wine we have. Paul wrote this in about 53AD and it is thought to be one of the oldest Christian writings. He gives a simple account of what he had been told Jesus had done at the Last Supper. Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and says 'this is my body, do this in remembrance of me', he then does the same with wine adding the words 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood'.

This tradition of sharing in the bread and wine continues throughout the whole history of the church. The Acts of the Apostles, written in AD 70 talks of how the disciples met regularly for the 'breaking of bread' ( Acts 2:42). Then in 150 AD, one of the early church teachers, Justin Martyr in one of his many transcripts - *The First Apology, Chapter 65. Administration of the sacraments* there is a description of the Mass that is exactly the same in all its essentials as the service we celebrate today nearly two thousand years later.

All the descriptions of the Eucharist from the earliest sources, including the Bible, make it clear that this was not simply just a meal of food. Paul warns his readers to make sure that they are spiritually ready to eat - 'Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves.'

In Communion we obey Jesus command to share in blessed bread and wine, and in doing so allow ourselves to be changed. This is why Holy Communion is more than a re-enactment of the Last Supper. In communion Jesus Himself comes to us. When we eat, drink and pray we are taking Jesus into our very selves, in that he feeds us, renews us and strengthens us. Bread and wine are the outward signs. The very

presence of Christ in us is the inward change. This is why Communion is sometimes called 'The Food of heaven' – it can change us.

This is what Jesus is trying to describe in the uncomfortable words we heard from John's Gospel. To our ears, as well as those listening in on the edge of the sea of Galilee, Jesus inviting his followers to eat him is confronting, and to some offensive. But like all John's writing, this passage is figurative, not literal. When we eat food it courses through our body as it is digested, bringing nourishment. It in this way becomes, quite literally, a part of us. Jesus in this passage invites us into an intimate relationship, a sharing which transcends how we might feel at other times, to allow Jesus to be in us.

In other words, when we share in Christ – in word and action; he becomes part and parcel of who we are. Christ energizes us to do God's work. And this is not just as individuals, but as a community. Together, inclusively, as one people, around one table we are inspired, nourished and nurtured in a way that might lead all who receive to overflow into actions of love.

It is not to be taken lightly, for the act of communion changes us. I suspect that sometimes we would rather God just wasn't quite that close! But the reality is, in the Eucharist, in our prayer life, God is at the centre of all we are, the energy which lives in our veins.

This is not a sharing that is only for some – it is an invitation to us all to have God at our centre. I wonder how we feel included in this meal – do we allow God into the centre of our being as we share? Do we share this with others?

Life in communion with Christ is not confined to a few moments in public worship but is a morning 'till evening, every waking moment living in and with God.

This week I had several profound experiences where I was reminded that God invites us into a moment by moment conversation and practice. So often God is at the table waiting for us to sit down for a chat, but we are so distracted we take our cup and run!

As we prepare the altar for communion today we will sing a very old hymn, and I hope its words inspire us, to feel welcome at the table, and to want to share that welcome, and take the time to sit and engage with God.

*O thou, who at thy Eucharist didst pray  
that all thy church might be for ever one,  
grant us at every Eucharist to say  
with longing heart and soul, 'Thy will be done':  
O may we all one bread, one body be,  
through this blest sacrament of unity.*