

Corpus Christi 2019

Mthr Mel Marshall

Whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord's -

You have been formed, each and every one of us. In your thousands, millions even, shaped and moulded, and then sealed: with the sign of the cross. A selection of you has been brought into this church. You are presented at the altar. Each one is counted, not one forgotten, or lost. You are touched, you are blessed. And then you are doled out: to be ground up, sucked dry, until you are wholly consumed.

You are hosts. Literally and metaphorically. You are those who open up to let Christ in. No one forces you (these days). But no one is going to congratulate you, either. Perhaps once the host was held in respect, an object of reverence. Not now. The world is for the most part blind to the presence, the gracious stranger. Blind to the idea of presence at all. The fashionable thinking says this is a material world, and so that we are deceived, if we think that these hosts are anything more than molecules in varying arrangements. Stuff. To be put to use - not with any larger goal, or any thought of an ultimate purpose, which notions are of course anathema.

Just stuff, then. And stuff, as we know, has no meaning. Stuff is just there - to be handled, discarded and consumed. Naturally, we affect outrage at people being handled. MeToo outrage. Outrage at the thought of 40 million people trafficked each year. Lynch-mob levels of outrage against sex offenders. Useful distractions, all, from a culture that cheerfully condones anonymous hook-ups and rampant porn use; "saviour babies", and the poorest women paid to be surrogates; the national insurance we don't pay our cleaners. Outrage distracts us from our collective bad conscience about the way we handle people's bodies, which is only the way our world teaches us to handle them, which is, any way we want.

Stuff. To be handled, to be discarded. In a world in which it makes sense for Denmark and Iceland to aim to be "Downs-Free". This year's UK poll showing 93% of people in support of voluntary euthanasia for those with a terminal diagnosis; with 88% support

in cases of dementia if prior consent was secured - motivated, I'm sure, by the utmost compassion. And with the assumption that we can always make a crystal clear distinction between the patient's wishes and interests and those of the understaffed hospital, the underfunded NHS trust, the exhausted family. If as Christians we question whether that clarity is always possible, then we are in a minority, because everybody knows that stuff – cheap clothes and the kids that sew them - is there to be discarded.

Above all, though, stuff is there to be consumed. And here we Christians can get on board. We are hosts, being consumed is the whole point of our existence. Consumed, mind you; and not - as 28th of the 39 articles of religion scathingly reminds us - to be “reserved, carried about, lifted up, or worshipped”. We are to be chewed up and swallowed. Used as fuel, for some bigger process, a comic purpose that we will only ever glimpse, if that. But for which our contribution is indispensable.

Is this what we want? Being chewed up and swallowed? Being reserved suits us better, as a rule. Being “lifted up” and “carried about” even more so, life in a sedan-chair, yes please. And if we can be worshipped for our looks, brains, charm - well, that sounds in every way nicer than being chomped on.

Trouble is, we cannot escape being chomped on. Our world makes morsels of everyone, hosts or not. So as Christians we say: bring it on. Chomp on me. You want the right cheek? Have the left as well. You want my coat? Fine, take my jacket. I'll work in the care home, the AIDS ward, the slum estate. And maybe we can startle people, by looking normal (fairly normal), as ordinary as anything you might find at the bottom of the breadbin. But secretly containing in ourselves the very person of Christ, who gave himself, freely, for the life of the world. Happy to be consumed.

So yes, this is what we want. What we signed up for - what we were +signed up for. Being blessed, broken, and dished out, to do - whatever good we can. To be those who, when we see the world's hungry multitude don't say, as the twelve did, “Send the crowd away, that they may find themselves something to eat”. *Qu'ils mangent de la brioche*. But to absorb into our very being the Lord's rebuke, his command: “You give them something to eat”.

The bread of heaven. The food of angels. Sounds yummy. The sort of thing someone might nibble on while being “lifted up” and “carried about” in their sedan chair. We Christians? Kneel. Week after week, before this executioner’s block. To receive our commission - come, let us go and die with him. To die with Christ, and as Christ, whose body we now are. And so we approach these gallows as Christ did. Every one of us a Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Straight-backed, firm of purpose. Ready to die. And so to proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Freedom to die. Not so unlike our euthanasia-loving countrymen after all. Except, we surrender ourselves, not as those who despair of the value of our lives, but who know the infinite value of our lives: sheer gift, given to us only to be given to others. We surrender ourselves not as those who balk at suffering. But who walk towards the inevitability of suffering, even when the only good we can bring is simple solidarity. Always carrying in our bodies the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

Life. The divine itself. That mystery, that presence that consecrates us and elevates us far above mere stuff. The world has not known this. But we have known this. So that in the stomach of every Christian is the guts of a little girl, a peasant, illiterate, eleven years old. Who refused to accept the value placed on her by her would-be rapist. Who knew that she was worth more than to be handled, and discarded. That poor and little as she was, she was Christ’s and could not for less be told. The Lord is on my side (and in my inside): what can flesh do to me? Do to us, who are already a living sacrifice? Already torn up, a basket full of broken pieces. To be consumed, by all who need us, all who come to us, all to whom we are given. Poor and little as we are, weak and flaky, mere crumbs, the sweepings under someone’s table. And yet, by God’s grace, by his miraculous providence, enough.

Blessed, praised and hallowed be Jesus Christ on his throne of glory and in the holy sacrament of the altar.

St Maria Goretti, pray for us.