

Love Bade Me Welcome

1. Lord, I am not worthy: To think of ourselves as ‘worthy’ in the presence of God is to show that we’ve misunderstood the question. Only God is truly good (Mk 10.18). Meeting the living God knocks us off balance. (Cf. Isa 6.5: “*Woe is me! ... for I am a man of unclean lips ... and my eyes have seen the King, THE LORD Sabaoth.*” (Isa 6.5) Of course, alongside the language of utter Transcendence the Bible has images of great intimacy between God and his people (e.g. Isa 41.14; 49.15-16; Hos 11.4; Ezek 16.8), but fundamentally in the face of the Almighty, talk of being worthy is completely idiotic. God is ever beyond us, unattainable (and inherently undeservable). Yet we encounter the mystery of divine election: God stoops down to choose us for reasons we can scarcely fathom; what some would call accident of birth and what we would call Providence and Vocation.

Consider Jesus’ Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Lk 18.9-14). While we are trying to be ‘worthy’, we remain in charge, performing according to whatever ethical or spiritual code we set up. We have no need for God and no room for God. There’s no emptiness for grace to fill, no space for Christ to come and make his home. That’s the revolutionary power of those words: “*Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof. But only say the word and my soul shall be healed.*” I can only receive the Lord as pure gift, from a position of hunger and poverty, of non-achievement. We have to become like little children (Mk 10.15) and learn to see things in a new way, ‘as if for the first time’. We won’t discover Christ while we’re focused on being ‘learned and clever’ (Mt 11.25-26).

2. The Gospel Comes From The Margins: That’s why Jesus went to the margins, to the people who couldn’t pretend any more – the tax-collectors and the sinners and the prostitutes and the disfigured and the lepers and the people labelled by others as ‘possessed’. Only the empty can be filled, only the broken mended. Jesus’ biggest bugbear seems to have been hypocrisy (literally ‘play-acting’). Consider Luke’s Beatitudes: “*Blessed are you are poor ... you who are hungry now ... you who are mourning now ...*” (Lk 6.20-21) These aren’t moral categories. There’s no spiritualisation of experience. Poverty, hunger and bereavement are undeniable and uncomfortable; each asks us to venture dependence on help from beyond our capacities. That’s where receiving Holy Communion makes greatest sense.

3. Being Empty-Handed: There’s a need for a change in the whole way we think; what the Bible calls *metanoia*, literally turning our mind (our *nous*) around. Does my faith make me look again at reality or see things differently? If not, it’s just an ideology. Receiving communion in the hand isn’t just an act of reverence (‘making a throne for’ or ‘cradling’ Christ). It reminds us of the most basic truth: I *inevitably* come to the Lord empty-handed. That is a real challenge in our society. We don’t know how to be empty-handed, non-achievers, use-less, non-productive. Actually, more basically, we don’t even know how to be empty, never truly hungry (an essential image in the spiritual life). We ought simply to note exponential growth in ‘things’ in our lives in the last 150 years, the fruit of mass-production and mass transport, and gently to ask: What is the cost of all this – to planet, to producer and to end-user? Do we own our things or do they own us? Our economy is founded on cultivating discontent. By contrast, the spiritual life is about making sure that we are people who *do what we are* instead of thinking *we are what we do*. But we seem to live a constant flight from stillness. Individually, we risk never meeting ourselves or facing the inevitable solitude at the heart of every human life, the space for faith, for hope and (paradoxically) for communion with the divine. As a society, we risk making undiscerning decisions, mere reflexes, devoid of *under-standing* and wisdom. Perhaps we get the politics we deserve ...

4. Re-Discovering The Real Presence: To flourish in our over-stimulated setting we need the gift of presence, an awareness of the depth of being. We Catholics are particularly blessed, for we have at the heart of our Eucharistic theology the doctrine of the Real Presence. Here (to quote St. Thomas Aquinas, tr. G.M. Hopkins): “*Seeing, touching, tasting are in thee deceived; how says trusty hearing? That shall be believed.*” It is the language of **encounter** which is most likely to speak to us today. Think of the disciples at Emmaus (Lk 24.13-34; cf. Jn 21.12; Rev 3.20). Sharing communion invites us to enter that encounter and welcome that presence; indeed to continue dwell in that presence and to take it with us when we leave. There seems to be a reawakening of the sense of the Real Presence in the Church today. Perhaps it is time to teach again how to have that encounter – so long as we don’t once again reduce the *action* of Jesus in giving himself for and to us to yet another ‘*thing*’. to add to our collection of ‘*things*’. In the Middle Ages *seeing* the Host became a substitute for *receiving* communion (in part because of the ‘purity’ game – the need to be ‘worthy’). Also, we ought to remember *why* the host was reserved in the first place: primarily to allow the Lord to be taken to the sick at home. Again, the Sacrament points beyond itself – ***the Presence is given for the absent***, chiefly the sick and housebound, but perhaps also all those who cannot find their way to the Lord, and all those barred from receiving by ecclesiastical rules or by their own wounds. The Sanctuary Lamp proclaims that presence of the One who came not to condemn but to save and to share with us eternal life (Jn 3.17); “*a lamp for my feet, a light on my path*” (Ps 119.105); “*the light of the world*” (Lk 2.32; Jn 8.12).

5. Our Strange Master: “*Blessed those servants whom the Master finds awake when he comes. In truth I tell you, he will do up his belt sit them down at table and wait on them.*” (Lk 12.37) When he comes, he’ll sit us down at table and wait on us, just so long as we’re awake enough to receive the invitation. He does this because this is who he is and why he came (Mk 10.45). He calls us not servants but friends and commissions us “*go out [joyfully] and to bear fruit, fruit that will last*” (Jn 15.11, 14-17).

Guess what?! The Father of the Prodigal Son isn’t the slightest bit interested in whether his Son is worthy! And Jesus isn’t at all worried whether Zacchaeus has changed: he just simply *must* stay at his house today (Lk 19.5). “*Love bade me welcome ... ‘You must sit down,’ says Love, ‘and taste my meat.’ So I did sit and eat.*” And when I reach this point I’m ready to understand what it means to share in the Eucharist; to be served by the Lord, who takes me utterly seriously, as I am; to be welcomed without question, like all those people whom he sat with in his life on earth. Am I worthy? No I’m not. I’m just loved. And I belong. And I am hungry. And I am fed. And I am lost. And I am found.

And the bread and the cup are passed to me for sharing, whether liturgically, as a Eucharistic Minister, or metaphorically, by the simple fact that Christ chooses me to be his Companion at table. That’s what challenges us in the depths of our being. That’s what requires radical conversion, *Metanoia*, a total re-thinking of my life and relationships on my part; and constant renewal on the institutional Church’s part. We Catholics were told to recognise the need for constant reformation at the Second Vatican Council - *Ecclesia Semper Reformanda* (UR n.6), so perhaps it’s time, in the run up to the fifth centenary of Luther’s publication of his 95 theses to recover that language and that sense of urgency.

And maybe that at last might be the thing that could change the world, our table-fellowship; like those first Jerusalem disciples, who “*Each day, with one heart ... went to the Temple but met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked up to by everyone. Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved.*” (Ac 2.46-7)