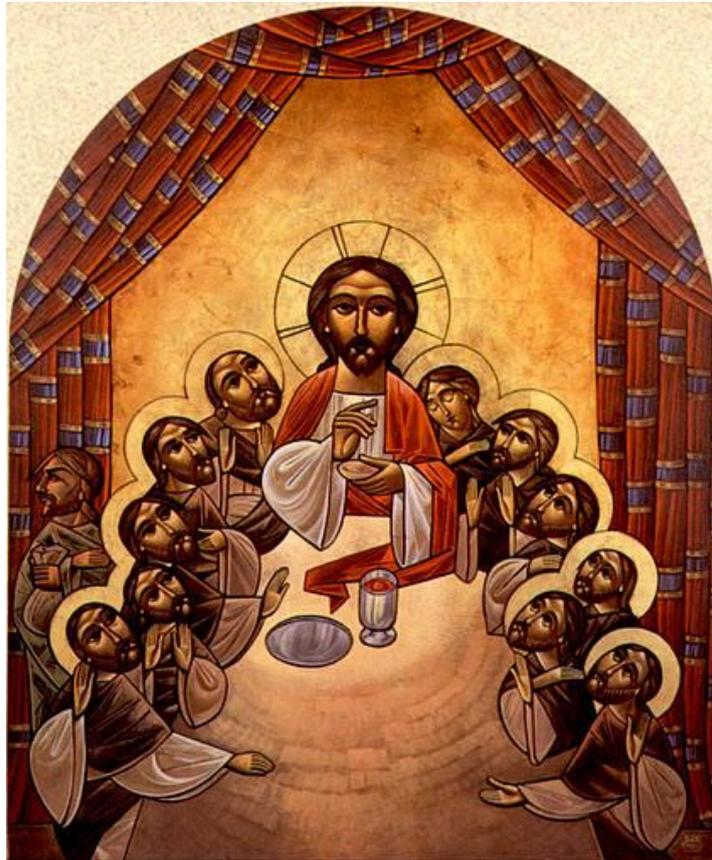




# loretonormanhurst

*A few words. A little bread. A splash of wine.*



Next week is Holy Week, and one of the most moving and beautiful ceremonies of that week, is that of Holy Thursday evening, The Mass of the Lord's Supper. Acts of love always touch our hearts in a profound way. I always think that their poignancy has something to do

with the humble stance of the lover, the open heart and vulnerability in the act of self-giving to another. And so it is when we ponder Jesus' act of love that night.

"This is my body", said Jesus, as he took the bread, gave thanks to God for it, broke it and passed it around to his friends gathered at the table with him. "Take and eat". He did the same with the cup of wine. "Drink from it, all of you" (Matthew 26).

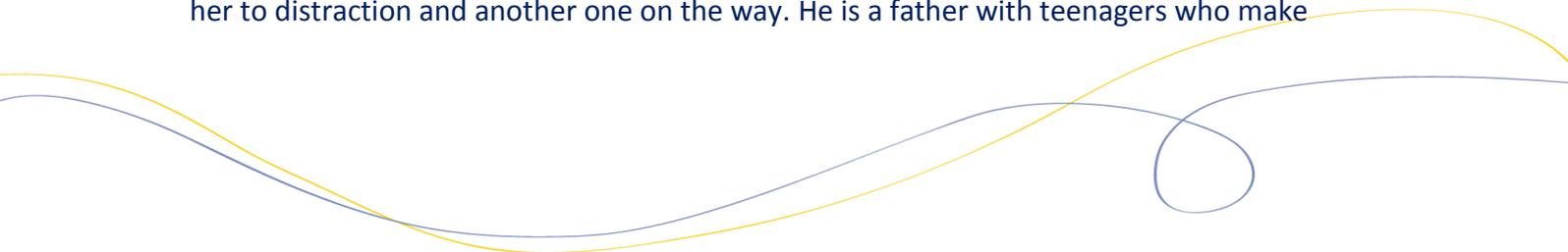
These familiar words echo down through the millennia. They are uttered every day in the ritual of the Roman Catholic Mass and still they speak to us today. They invite us, as we gather together around the altar, the table of the Lord, into something quite remarkable. Mitch Finley, in his powerful little book, *The Joy of Being a Eucharistic Minister*, writes:

"A few words. A little bread. A splash of wine. But the words and the bread and the wine, no longer mere words, no longer just bread and wine, mysteriously they carry the Love that makes the cosmos spin and sparkle in an orderly fashion, the Love that keeps life pulsing in our hearts, now and forever, world without end, in this life and the next".

The words, and the bread, and the wine, are but the surface appearances of the Reality they carry. And this meal to which we are invited is no ordinary meal. This is a transformative meal, a subversive meal. This meal, the Eucharist, is the school for Christian life. It reveals a Reality that only faith in a loving intimacy with God, in and through Jesus, can perceive.

In any church, on any Sunday, or indeed any day of the week, as we watch and join the line of people slowly making their way forward to receive the Body of Christ, we may see it all as rather ordinary, perhaps even rather casual and routine. But just look at what Finley has to say:

"The people who line up to receive Communion may seem to be respectfully nonchalant. They shuffle through the Communion line, and when they get to you they extend their hands or tongue for Communion. Maybe they step to the side and bless themselves with the sign of the cross. Then they return to their pews. It may all seem rather ordinary. But don't be fooled. Who is this ordinary looking person who shuffles up, extends hands or tongue for Communion, and shuffles away again? This is a person who at least some of the time, perhaps much of the time, struggles with hopelessness. He or she has more than a fair share of anguish to carry. Who is this person? She is a mother with young children driving her to distraction and another one on the way. He is a father with teenagers who make

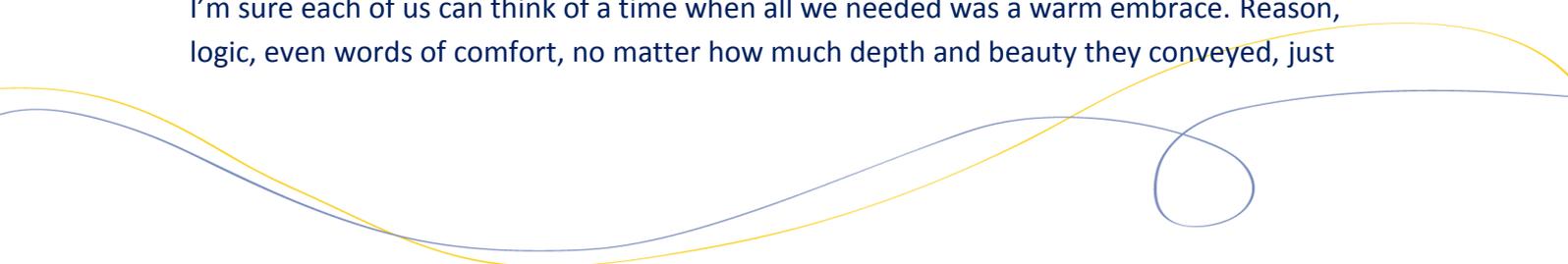


choices that keep him awake at nights, worrying. She is an unemployed woman who doesn't know where her next rent payment is coming from, or if it will come at all. He is the husband of an alcoholic. She seems to have a fairly comfortable life, but her husband never comes with her to church. Who knows what anguish she lives with. His son has been expelled from high school for drug possession. Her teenage daughter is pregnant. His wife has Alzheimer's disease. Their doctor told them a few days ago that their baby will be born with a genetic defect. She was sexually abused as a child. The list is virtually endless".

Everyone has a story and sometimes those stories are very painful in that all-consuming, unavoidable way, and sometimes those painful stories are more fleeting, just part of the warp and woof of everyday life. But at that moment they fill us and disturb us. We come to this meal just as we are. Everyone is seeking peace, a tender touch, hope. And so we come, in response to the invitation, "Take and eat. This is my body given *for you*". The words 'body and blood' are a Semitic expression that means the whole person. This 'whole person' is the risen Christ - the life, love, hope, joy, compassion, peace, forgiveness, that Jesus embodied in his earthly life, given to us all, *now*, always. When we are invited to "take and eat", we are offered that same love, hope, peace, joy, forgiveness.

This is a transformative meal. As Saint Augustine said of the Eucharist, we become what we eat. Finley reminds us that we all have our crosses to carry, whether they be large or small, and he invites us to use our imagination as we look at that shuffling Communion line: "You can't see their crosses of course but they are real. Use your imagination. Use the eyes of faith. You will have no trouble believing that each person who approaches you for Holy Communion carries a cross and needs some hope, a little bit of hope to get through the day ahead, the week ahead. Keep this in mind as you place the great mystery, the whole person of the risen Christ, in each person's hands". What a mind-blowing statement! What an utterly awe-inspiring reality! Ronald Rolheiser speaks of the Eucharist as God's physical embrace. He reminds us of how it is when little children are tired, worn out at the end of the day, tense and miserable, and there is just no way to pacify or reason with them, and mum's patience is running low too! The only thing that is needed is a great big hug. What she does is scoop up the tiny little bundle whose emotions are just too big and overwhelming at that moment, and hold her close. And this is how God embraces us too: in the Eucharist we are simply swept up into that tender, warming, soothing and transforming love.

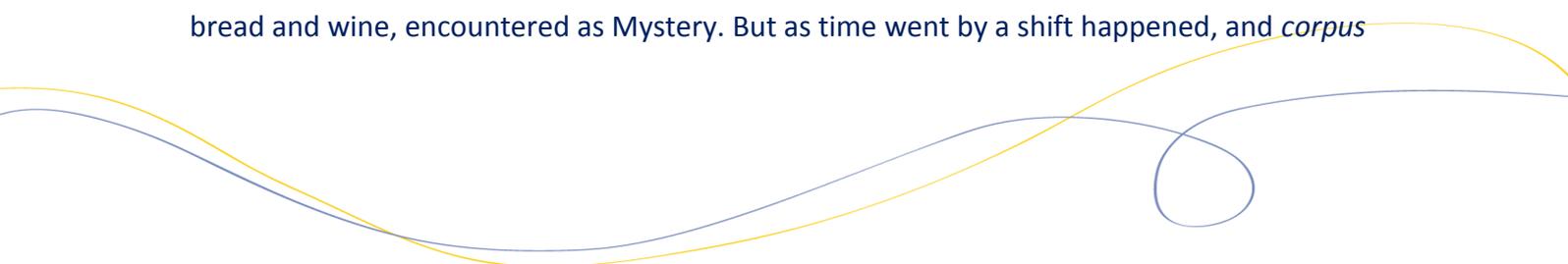
We all know there are times when words are inadequate, particularly in situations of crisis. I'm sure each of us can think of a time when all we needed was a warm embrace. Reason, logic, even words of comfort, no matter how much depth and beauty they conveyed, just



couldn't do it. Rolheiser reminds us that Jesus went beyond words of consolation, forgiveness and peace, even though those words did stir hearts and healed people. Something more was needed. "So on the night before his death, having exhausted what he could do with words, Jesus went beyond them. He gave us the Eucharist, his physical embrace, his kiss, a ritual within which he holds us to his heart". And so, here we are today, just as we are, meandering through all the big and little hurts of life, and still we are embraced and held in love, held in forgiveness, held in peace ... . An embrace needs to be physical.

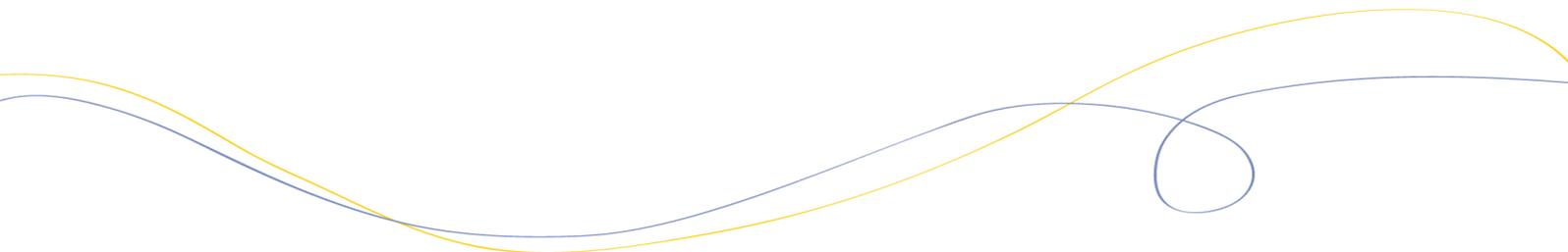
The Eucharist transforms us. It transforms the community. This was how the original followers of Jesus understood the invitation to "take and eat" as, after his death, they gathered in his memory to do what he had done. Taking part in this meal is what brought them together and made them church. *Eucharistia facit ecclesiam*, said Augustine of Hippo, in the fifth century, in one of his sermons. The Eucharist makes the church. The Eucharist is where we are schooled in Christian living. We become a Eucharistic people, a transformed people. From hurt and vengeance, hostility, loneliness and darkness, we are taken to love. A Eucharistic people is a community which embodies the love, justice, forgiveness, hope, compassion and tenderness of Jesus. And - the challenge of Jesus! And this is where the Eucharist becomes a subversive meal. As we are transformed and become people of justice, compassion, peace, so are we sent out to *do* justice, to *show* compassion and *create* peace in the world. Inherent in this meal is a commissioning. We cannot keep silent. We are sent out to critique, discern the evil in structures, practices and relationships, and speak out, work for change. The Orthodox Church talks about 'the liturgy after the liturgy' – the transformation of the world. First we enter God's kingdom – this 'place' of love, forgiveness, hope - and then we take this back with us, and through us, into the world. God's hospitality, God's welcome of us, must be given to the world through us. It's a beautifully disturbing thing, this meal. It is peace beyond imagining, *and* it is the end of complacency and self-absorption.

Somewhere, however, over time, the Eucharist as a transformative and subversive meal, took second place to a more mystical focus. If we cast our eyes back in time we can see something of how this happened. Originally the term *corpus verum*, the true body of Christ, referred to the people, the church - people who became the body of Christ as they gathered and shared in the Eucharist and were loved, forgiven and transformed. And another term, *corpus mysticum*, referred to the Eucharistic elements, the bread and wine, no longer simply bread and wine, encountered as Mystery. But as time went by a shift happened, and *corpus*



*verum* was seen to be the Eucharistic elements, the bread and wine. And in the twentieth century, in the pre-Vatican II Church, we inherited that shift of focus. How did that happen?

Well, this teaching grew out of a disagreement between two ninth century monks in Corbie, in France, Radbertus and Ratrammus. They asked the question: what exactly *happens on the altar*? What does it mean to say that the bread and wine are Jesus' body? Radbertus gave a physicalist account. He said that the bread changes properties and *literally* becomes the body of Jesus. Ratrammus disagreed. He spoke of the change *in figura*, meaning that in a vague spiritual sense Christ is with us. As so often happened, this disagreement sparked off a great theological debate. The Church said that neither approach was adequate, and for the next seven centuries all theological energy was on *how the change happens on the altar* rather than on how the community is transformed. In the thirteenth century the great theologian, Thomas Aquinas, drew on the philosophical categories of the Greeks, using the concepts of 'substance' and 'form' to explain the change. Form was understood to be the outer or material reality, substance its inner meaning, its nature, we might say. For example, trees have many different forms, but all have tree-ness! So, said Aquinas, the change in the bread and wine happens at the level of substance. While the physical properties, the form, remain the same, the reality of what it is, changes. The bread and wine, under their ordinary appearance, become the 'Real Presence'. This became the subject of much debate and disagreement and today we have inherited in Christianity a range of ways of understanding the Eucharist across the many denominations, and ways of explaining the change, or indeed whether the notion of a change is accepted or not. And so the focus shifted from *our transformation* to the change happening on the altar. Practices such as Eucharistic adoration developed. The emphasis was on the 'sacrifice' of the Mass and mystical union with Christ. It is interesting that the Orthodox Church did not get into this kind of philosophical debate. What happens on the altar, they say, cannot be explained, and they refer to it as Divine Mystery.





In the last fifty years since the Second Vatican Council there has been a balancing of this, with a shift into becoming more aware of the transformative nature of this meal to which we are invited, and which is the 'source and summit' of our lives as Christians.

The Real Presence does not remain on the altar and in the tabernacle. It is taken into the lives of each one of us and into the community of the church, and into the world. The life-giving love at the heart of Jesus' action two thousand years ago when he broke the bread and passed around the cup, can be alive and well in us, and we are invited into that same rhythm of self-giving love. We are invited into gift-giving. This is pure gift to us, and it demands a return. To accept this gift is to be changed by the gift, and to become a gift ourselves. This is to be the logic of our own lives and the logic of the life of the Church. We who are both strong and weak, magnificently capable and yet broken, sometimes convincing and sometimes fragile, light and darkness, joy and pain, stumbling in our mistakes and sometimes deliberately sinful, are embraced and transformed, and we need to go out into the world, which is just as we are, and embrace it and transform it.

The life we are drawn into when we take part in the Eucharist is a taste of that fullness of life and light which knows no darkness. The Body of Christ, the whole person of the risen Christ, the ultimate triumph of light over darkness, gives us what we need to work for the ultimate triumph of life over death in our world. It shows us the way. To be Eucharistic people is to gather to celebrate faith, hope and love, and to make the logic of faith, hope and love our way of life.

Michael Morwood, in his book, *Praying A New Story*, expresses it perfectly. So in this Holy Week, you may like to take a few quiet moments and simply sit with this story - it is utterly compelling and will surely draw you into its power and tenderness:

We remember the night before he died,  
when he took bread,  
gave thanks for everything he had,  
broke the bread and shared it with his friends  
asking them to remember his total surrender  
to the Spirit of Life and Love  
and his enduring love for each of them.  
We take this bread and eat it,  
mindful of the Spirit at work in our lives,  
in the ordinary,  
in the everyday,  
and in our desire to love  
as generously as Jesus loved.

Likewise, knowing his life was to be poured out,  
Jesus shared the cup of wine with his friends.  
We drink now,  
mindful of our bonding with Jesus  
and with all people  
through the Spirit at work in our lives.

For ourselves gathered here we ask the grace  
to be who and what we ritualize here:  
the “body of Christ”,  
people committed by our “Amen”  
to allowing this Spirit to move freely in our lives.

*Ms Kerry McCullough*  
*Dean of Mission*

