

In the Breaking of the Bread

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 4 May 2014, by David Gill. Readings for the third Sunday of Easter were Acts 2:14a,36-41 and St Luke 24:13-35.

Last Sunday I spoke about hanging on to the faith by one's fingernails, the doubting of Thomas, and our movement through doubt to knowledge.

[Incidentally, my sermons here go up on the St Stephen's website, thanks to the IT skills of our versatile Director of Music. So if you are away one Sunday and want to discover what the congregation had to endure in your absence, look it up on the website. If you doze off, mid-sermon, and want to find out what you missed, look it up on the website. Or if you decide that I've uttered something outrageous and are about to take umbrage, check whether I actually said what you think you heard. Look it up on the website!]

So, last week, the doubting of Thomas. Today, the third Sunday of Easter, we heard about another of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. It's a great story.

Easter Day. Two friends are on the road to Emmaus. They're full of the drama that has just taken place in Jerusalem, including a claim by some women a few hours earlier that the crucified Jesus is alive. A stranger joins them, chastises them for being a bit dense and tries to help them understand. Nearing their destination the stranger makes as if to walk on. Middle Eastern hospitality prevails, however, and they eat together. The stranger takes bread, blesses and breaks it -- and at that moment: recognition! The two race back to Jerusalem, with the news that the Lord had walked with them, talked with them and made himself known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Several things to note.

First, don't ask me what was the actual experience that lies behind the story. Who knows? But the story has its own power. You don't have to be Sherlock Holmes to detect the special resonance it must have had for those who first heard it. Imagine listening to the story through their ears.

It was probably around the end of the first century of our era that the third and longest of the gospels, the one attributed to Luke, started to become widely known in the early Church. Small groups of Christians had been gathering in private homes to pray, to sing some psalms and maybe listen to their Hebrew prophets, to learn more about Jesus of Nazareth, to ponder the

mysterious purposes of their God. And to share food. Breaking bread and sharing wine together, they recalled that unforgettable last supper of the Lord and Jesus' words: this is my body, this is my blood, do this, and remember.

Into their lives comes Luke's version of the Jesus story, including his two accounts, in close proximity to each other, of the last supper and the encounter on the Emmaus road. Meals, both of them. Moments of blessing, both of them. Moments of special presence, both of them. Together, those two accounts reinforced what was becoming the lived experience of the early Christians. For they too were discovering the times of bread-breaking, wine-sharing and remembering to be times of blessing and special presence.

Inevitably, the gatherings over meals in private homes passed. They had to: you can't baptise 3,000 people, as today's first reading reported, then invite everyone home for lunch! So Christian worship moved into special buildings. Leadership was regularised. The bread-breaking, wine-sharing and remembering developed a more coherent form.

In the centuries following the practice would take a variety of shapes and be known by different names – the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, the Mass, the Eucharist. That last one, eucharist, derives from a Greek term meaning, appropriately, thanksgiving. It's a good ecumenical word that works well for all the churches, so we should get used to it.

The eucharist, along with baptism, was called a sacrament, a special outward sign of God's invisible grace. But whatever its shape and name, bread-breaking, wine-sharing and remembering has continued through two millennia as the central act of Christian worship.

However, precisely because it was so central, the eucharist has also been caught up in some of our arguments and, ironically, our consequent divisions, to the point where Christians now cannot celebrate and receive communion together. At the very table of the Lord, we must part company. What a scandal! That is the bad news.

But here is the good news. We're making great progress in finding our way back to unity, at the table of the Lord. People from the different churches have talked together, prayed together, thought together. Misunderstandings have been removed. Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, Protestants and Pentecostals have studied together our common Christian sources: the Bible and the Spirit-led tradition of the undivided Church. Instead of reading the bible to prove

that the other lot is wrong, divided Christians have started reading it to discover where we ourselves may not have been listening.

The result? After all the slanging matches of centuries past, a new atmosphere. The churches find themselves close to a common understanding of the eucharist. That of course is bringing change in all denominations, our own included. Worship in the Uniting Church, and right here at St Stephen's, has begun to reflect the emerging common mind. You may have noticed, for example:

1. We've started to celebrate the eucharist more frequently. No longer quarterly but at least monthly, and in this church every Tuesday as well.
2. The eucharist *is* the service, no longer something extra for the more pious that's tacked on to the end.
3. The note of joy and gratitude is more marked: -- "Lift up your hearts! We lift them to the Lord! Let us give thanks ..." -- with some wonderful choral settings that help our sluggish hearts lift.
4. The emphasis is not on our worthiness for communion -- as if anyone ever could be -- but on all that God has done for us in Christ and the inclusiveness of amazing grace. There is a place at this table for everyone.
5. The Lord nourishes us at his table, on that the churches are agreed. Old arguments about how -- transubstantiation and all that -- have faded. Instead of losing sleep about *how* Christ may be present to us in the eucharist, we are content affirm that by the power of God's Spirit he truly is.

More important than any outward change, we are receiving anew within ourselves the special blessing of this sacrament. We are discovering afresh why it has meant so much to so many for so long.

Today, thankful for the eucharist that has nourished Christian people through centuries past, grateful that it is becoming once again a centre of unity, we remember the encounter on the Emmaus road. True, you and I cannot join in the conversation of that day. But we can join in the eating, the drinking, the remembering, the celebrating, the hoping, the yearning.

And we can echo believers through twenty centuries, as we pray: “Lord, be known to *us* in the breaking of the bread”.

*