



taken, blessed, broken, given

I know I've said it to you before – but I'm going to say it again – you are making quite a distinctive choice coming to church to a service like this. And I think you're brave.

Our predecessors attending this church in almost every century but our own would be doing so at least partly because it was expected of them, it lent them some respectability.

Not now. Not in 2018 London.

For many people – let's be honest most people - especially of a younger generation it's a bit incomprehensible – if they think about it at all. So you're making a pretty strong choice. And there will be as many reasons as there are people here.

Some will come to find a sense of community in a huge and often lonely city. Some will come because it is a chance to contemplate and be contemplated by – the mysterious presence of God. Some will come because you are disciples of Jesus. Why do you come? Why are you here?

But what we do when we get here is both completely different and absolutely the same every week.

Whatever has happened to you this week: whatever anxieties or troubles, whatever good times or scared times, whatever griefs or joys you are carrying – this is a place to return to. To remember your first love of life, and to be shown again - that you are loved, you are loved so very much. Your life is held in the gaze of the one who created you.

And we do that in the context of meal; a sacred meal – a sacrament called Eucharist – which as you will know just means Thanksgiving. A unique event in the life of the church, unique every time but ancient as the earth itself. A moment where time meets eternity; where we on earth are irreducibly close to the ones who have gone ahead of us into eternity. A touching place. A true place. And that's why it takes courage to come – to face the truth of the world as it is and God as God is and we as we are.

You are brave to want to be fed with this bread and wine because it is broken bread and poured out wine; not only the cup of salvation, as we say, but the cup of suffering.

Today I want to talk a little about your vocation – partly because we are saying good bye to Ruth our pastoral assistant today – and also Susy who has been coming here for she thinks 12 years and who has in the past few years been the leader of our Camino course where we explore the basics of faith in the world.

As it happens, they are both moving house in order to go to theological colleges in Birmingham and Oxford - to train to be priests. But my purpose here today is, while celebrating these brave women - to make sure that we don't mistake or narrow a sense of vocation to the rather particular and specific ordination that they are going towards.

Vocation – just means calling. You all have one. I have one. Many of us have more than one. We are bi-vocational. Or tri-vocational. We are summoned into being, drawn up, called out, given a name and invited to live as fully and bravely as we dare.

Every one every one is called to be the person God creates you to be. And it's a lifelong task, including for people who seem to have a visible vocation like a priest, - it's a lifelong task to grow into your vocation, see what it is, try it on, move around in it. And it changes over time.

I want to suggest today that our vocations, as varied as they are, can find a home here in the setting of a church community, rooted in what we are doing here this morning. So that whether your vocation is to be a kind friend, or a father, or a faithful sister or an artist or academic or parent – whatever it is – we can be in solidarity with each other and hold each other in our lifelong learning about what our vocation is.

And it's rooted in this Eucharist. This Eucharist as every Eucharist - is a celebration – but it's a broken hearted celebration because it is held the

very night before Jesus died. And the night before someone dies, is remembered with poignancy, their last words hung on to, their last actions given deeper meaning and edge. Knowing he was leaving, Jesus creates a memory with the ones he loved that they would be bound to repeat and repeat over generations – to – as he said – remember him. In today's gospel, Jesus says one of his mystical sayings – *I am the bread of life* he says. And everyday normal living, fed by this bread of life, is exactly what this Eucharist is about.

The Eucharist is not primarily a memorial service, looking back, imagining Jesus in a sheet, however tempting that might be. It is a sacrament pointing towards the future. Towards a future that we are invited to help build. A future where all are welcome, where everyone has enough to eat and drink. Where justice and mercy are principles to live by.

And the signs pointing towards that new future are right in front of us every week; because we say that – we are many but we are one body because we all share in one bread.

We then take on, both as a group and as individuals, a Eucharistic identity.

There are four liturgical actions at the Eucharist. The bread is taken, blessed, broken and given. Watch and participate as that happens later.

And I want to suggest that this gives us our own pattern for living – that we ourselves are taken, blessed, broken and given. It is in our spiritual DNA. Because we celebrate this together, because we learn this pattern of living – not on a Sunday but on a Monday and Wednesday and Thursday, the Eucharist runs through us like a stick of rock. This sacrament only makes sense when it infuses the whole of our life – when it is our pattern for living in the world.

We ourselves are the body of Christ in the world today. And so it is we ourselves who are - taken, blessed, broken and given.

First we are taken: This is the mystical part of this vocation. We are scooped up by an unseen God who carries us out of ourselves. We are taken up into the life of the Spirit.

There are times in our lives where we might begin to see the outline of how a life taken up into the Spirit might be lived. You remember that in the Hebrew Scriptures Jacob sees it while he's half asleep; what an enticing prospect – a ladder to climb – who knows where to – but step by step he might be able to commit to putting one foot in front of the other. We don't have a lot of time in modern life for this kind of spacious dreaming. In work and personal life, we value decisiveness, purposeful achievement, even drivenness. While from time to time these things are important, they are usually detrimental to a lively and creative spiritual life; the movement of the Spirit is that of a wild and free energy that finds its way in through the cracks; the twilight moments of living – the inbetween times. What are the inbetween times of your day –of your life – what are they as a church? and do we have enough of them to be open to this kind of being taken up by God's purposes and God's presence? If there aren't enough of them, be brave and find some doing nothing time when you simply put yourself at the disposal of the God who will take you up into the contemplative life of the Spirit.

We are blessed: The promise God makes to us is that we are blessed. Blessing does not translate into pain free or smooth running or easy. Blessing, in the tradition that Jesus inherited, was given to those who were elite, even godlike themselves. He changed this in his Sermon on the Mount so that the blessed ones were the ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the ones who mourn, the ones who are poor. Blessing is the abundant, undeserved, outrageous profligate love that is poured upon the world. Our job is to notice it and learn ever more deeply to live in the knowledge of it. I was recently in Syria and I spent some time walking about in the utter utter devastation of the bombed East Aleppo. Utterly shocking, total destruction. All around the debris of slaughter. And in the wasteland of human destructiveness, the birds were singing for all they were worth. No human noise any more. Just the joyous, undefeated song of the blackbirds, and the swooping movement of the swallows. A moment of blessing in amongst the rubble of human hubris.

Without being too Pollyanna about it, what are the blessings you know about in your own life? For what do you want to give thanks today? And in the spirit of the beatitudes, know that it is where you are poorest that blessing emerges.

We are broken: I mentioned that the Eucharist is always, even on a day like Christmas day or Easter Day, a broken hearted celebration. That's because Christianity will always resist any attempts to sanitise life or construct a fantasy religion. The murkiness of our own mixed motives are exposed in the story of Jesus's last days and so we are confronted with this every time every time we celebrate together.

But there are many kinds of brokenness. As CS Lewis wrote on the death of his wife about grief: *it has so many ways to hurt me....I only learn them one by one.* As the years go on, the wounds we carry inside us are not always visible to everyone else.

Our parish pilgrimage group recently returned from Berlin and Auschwitz. We were following in the steps of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor murdered by the Nazis just before the end of the war. He made incredibly difficult choices about what to do in the face of Nazi totalitarianism; and he has been lionised as a Christian martyr, even saint – because of his strength of faith and courage under fire. But his writing revealed a much less certain man; a person broken by anxiety and paradoxical searing worry. However confident or OK we might seem, especially as a church, we in the church have to know how to be broken hearted otherwise the broken hearted people won't know that they belong here too.

There is no substitute in our church life for spending time face to face with people who are destitute, addicted, grief stricken, and for getting to know the destitute, desolate and addicted parts of ourselves, knowing that this part of ourselves is where God is most likely to be found. Staying close to this Eucharist will lead us not to the sunny uplands of a false utopia – but to the broken heartedness of loss, of violent hubristic tendencies in ourselves and others. Will take us close to the fire of grief. And will give us the will and the depth of commitment to withstand the burning.

We are Given: There is a lot of discussion in society it seems to me about self-help, self-fulfilment. If our western late capitalist mature market economy has a mantra, then it might be "you can achieve whatever you want if you work for it". Self-definition – surely a good thing in essence – can lead to a rather brittle jaw jutting

demand with no compromises– you have to accept me exactly as I am.

But our vocation as a church, as individual Christians as the body of Christ, is not to become all that we can be, for our own sake – or for our own happiness. Our vocation is to become fully the person we are, so that we can give ourselves away.

How do we give ourselves away in this church community? It is important to note how counter cultural this is, and to commit to doing it more as the fourth distinctive element in this life that we have said we want to live. It was a former rector of this church William Temple – who said famously in the 1930s that the church is the only institution that exists for the benefit of the people who do not belong to it. To retain that open heartedness is very hard, especially when we are, as we all are, somewhat in the business of keeping the show on the road. But to keep our own hearts and minds prised open, to keep the thresholds of our churches low, to keep our jargon to a minimum – all of these things are practical ways for us to give ourselves away, even to the point of our own apparent failure.

We are Anglicans and so we believe in the priesthood of all believers. This is the vocation of every single person here – we know the pain we each carry, we know the hope and energy that we carry too.

There is much in modern life to resist and be worried about. Social media trolls, an uncertain economic future, the blandification and to some extent the brutalisation of our political culture, the pressure on young people, the housing crisis – not to mention a worrying rise in incendiary rhetoric towards migrants.

We celebrate this Eucharist then not in some religious fantasy world, but in this real world, remembering for the sake of our own broken heartedness and the broken heartedness of all grown up human living in the world, that we are church; for Christ's sake, taken, blessed, broken and given: a vibrant and adventurous vocation.

I'm going to end with a poem by the Sufi poet Hafiz. From a different mystical tradition, he puts into vivid words the kind of real-life love that this

Eucharist embodies it seems to me. This kind of love is the kind of love that I experience and understand. And so I offer it to all of us – and to Susy and Ruth - as they embark on their own particular vocation to love and be loved by God and to love the people they will serve.

Tired of speaking sweetly

Love wants to reach out and manhandle us,
break all our teacup talk of God.

If you had the courage and
could give the Beloved his choice, some nights,
He would just drag you around the room
by your hair,
ripping from your grip all those toys in the world
that bring you no joy.

Love sometimes gets tired of speaking sweetly
and wants to rip us to shreds
all your erroneous notions of truth
aniel Ladinsky

that make you fight within yourself, dear one,
and with others,
causing the world to weep
on too many fine days.

God wants to manhandle us,
lock us inside of a tiny room with himself
and practise his dropkick.

The Beloved sometimes wants
to do us a great favour:
Hold us upside down
and shake all the nonsense out.
But when we hear
He is in such a “playful drunken mood”
most everyone I know
quickly packs their bags and hightails it
out of town.

from The Gift: versions of Hafiz translated by D