St Mark's Church

Living Thinking Faith

'Living Eucharist'

A Fresh Look in the Light of Jesus' Practice

by

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JESUS WORDS, 'Do this in remembrance of me,' spoken on the occasion of the Last Supper, are repeated in this church, as in many thousands of churches around the world, each Sunday. But what did Jesus mean by 'this' and, by implication, what does it mean for us to be a eucharistic people, true to his intention? These three sermons invite us to take a fresh look.

One

Towards a Jewish Theology of Food

(Genesis 2. 4 – 10, 15 – 17 & Matthew 6. 25 – 34)

THIS IS THE FIRST of three sermons I hope to preach over the next few weeks on the Eucharist – its meanings and role within the life of our church community. I offer them to help us reflect both on what we think we're doing here each Sunday morning and on how the Eucharist informs our common life as well as our personal faith-journeys. Also, to consider whether the evolving way in which we perform the Eucharist is not only true to Jesus, but also life-giving for his people today. And after the third sermon, I shall be seeking your views so that we can put into practice what we've learned and discovered.

To make a start, though, let's begin with a question to ponder. Why is it that a ritual meal with very particular elements, bread and wine, resides at the heart of our worship? We are so used to this being the case that we've probably never given it much thought, although it's worth noting that until the 1950s, Holy Communion was nowhere near so prominent within most Church of England churches and, to this day, many denominations reserve it for special occasions or relegate its significance altogether.

Not so here and now, but why? The obvious answer is because Jesus commanded it. In 1 Corinthians, chapter 11, our earliest witness to his words of institution at the Last Supper, we read:

> *For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' (1 Corinthians 11.23-25)*

Well, that seems clear enough, but it does beg another question, namely why did Jesus issue such a command – what was so important about food and hospitality that led him to interpret open-tabled commensality, communal eating with all and sundry, as a defining characteristic of his kingdom ministry and demonstration of God's presence in the present?

Now to answer this question we need to explore the significance of food in general and consider how its theological currency took shape within the Jewish faith tradition.

To state the obvious, without food we would perish. It is essential for life. Without consuming those dietary ingredients necessary to sustain our bodily functions we would either die of malnutrition or become severely deformed in some way. It was ever thus.

And although we have developed sophisticated means of growing and harvesting food of all kinds, as well as preparing it so that its nutritional value can be maximised, this is a relatively recent state of affairs and even today the majority of the world population is not able to access such advances.

For them, as for our predecessors and almost every other species on the planet, most of waking life is spent securing sufficient food to survive today and, if fortunate, to make provision for tomorrow – with all the uncertainty and danger this entails, including coping with weather patterns, climatic conditions and other natural phenomena which are largely beyond human control and yet which have the power to nurture food production or to destroy it.

Yet, whilst food in its most basic form is essential for subsistence, it possesses the potential for human flourishing as well. For food is not only the vital ingredient for life, it supplies almost limitless ingredients for human creativity as techniques for preparation are devised and recipes conceived, transforming raw materials into nutritional, appetising, pleasurable offerings.

And more, whilst securing food for survival can be a source of competition and conflict, sharing food can nurture relationships and create togetherness as it cultivates well-being and associations which enable us to fulfil what would otherwise be beyond us – as we become, if you will, ingredients within a living recipe be it family, tribe, interest-group or some other expression of community.

In the light of this brief overview, it is hardly surprising that food has and continues to be considered sacred by many religions and cultures. In truth, without it and, equally, our ancestors ingenuity in unlocking its goodness, the human brain would never have evolved to the point of being capable of abstract thought or theological contemplation such as this!

And the Hebrew-Jewish faith tradition is no exception in which Yahweh, Israel's God, is worshipped as the great provider and where food becomes a currency of grace: God gives food as a blessing, shows favour by supplying it in abundance, expresses displeasure by destroying it or disrupting growing conditions. Listen to the psalmist:

> *The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love … The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living creature. (Psalm 145.8, 14-16)*

Remember also how in the opening chapters of Genesis, God is celebrated as the great creator who shapes the course of evolution engendering the flourishing of all life-forms, whilst ensuring humankind not only comes into being, but is properly provided for and able to recognise in that provision the mark of its Maker and the melody of God's love.

A little earlier in the service, we read from one of the creation stories, here is an extract from the other:

> *So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them … and said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. (Genesis 1.28–31)*

And this appreciation of God as the provider and of food as an expression of God's loving care yielded another association, namely between eating and covenant, with food becoming the medium for encountering the sacred.

Think of when Abraham and Sarah offer hospitality to the three travellers by the oaks of Mamre and find themselves in the presence of Yahweh, their God (Genesis 18). Or when the Hebrew people, liberated from thraldom in Egypt enter into covenant with Yahweh and we read:

> *Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up [Mount Sinai] and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank. (Exodus 24.9-11)*

In truth, God manifesting providential care and demonstrating covenantal faithfulness by satisfying human hunger is a defining theme within the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus' Bible. Again, think of how God provides a ram as a replacement sacrifice for Isaac, once Abraham's faith had been tested (Genesis 22.1-19). Or of God supplying 'manna and quails' for the children of Israel to eat as they made their way through the wilderness (Exodus 16) in search of the promised land, which is repeatedly described as a land overflowing with 'milk and honey' (Exodus 3.8; Leviticus 20.24; Deuteronomy. 6.3).

In fact, this theme became so central that when visionaries attempted to express their hopes for the coming of the Messiah to fulfil God's promise of salvation they would portray it in terms of the bountiful fruitfulness of the earth, yielding a super-abundance of food. Here is one such account:

> *[. . .] the Anointed One will begin to be revealed [. . .] The earth will also yield fruits ten thousandfold. And one vine will be a thousand branches, and one branch will produce a thousand clusters, and one cluster will produce a thousand grapes, and one grape will produce a barrel of wine. And those who are hungry will enjoy themselves and they will, moreover, see marvels every day. For winds will go out in front of me every morning to bring the fragrance of aromatic fruits and clouds at the end of the day to distil the dew of health. And it will happen at that time that the treasury of manna will come down again from on high, and they will eat of it in those years because these are they who will have arrived at the consummation of time. (2 Baruch 29.3–8)*

A remarkable image! And faith's recognition that food is a gift from God engendered within the Hebrew people a spirit of appreciation and thanksgiving – one that finds expression in the sacrificial cult of the Jerusalem Temple and the purity laws prescribing the 'what', 'how', 'when' and 'with whom' of consumption. It also characterizes many of the Jewish festivals and the weekly observances of the Sabbath.

In fact, all of life, for each meal would begin and end with a special prayer of blessing, such as this:

> *Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, for you nourish us and the whole world with goodness, grace, kindness, and mercy.*

And if food is a gift from God – a demonstration of divine love and covenantal faithfulness – then every meal becomes a sort of 'holy communion' between Giver and recipient. An encounter, if you will, with our Life-giver and Sustainer, an occasion of blessing and abundance, of joy and thanksgiving.

For this reason, whenever there was cause for thanksgiving, God's people celebrated with a feast. Take the occasion when the Jewish priests and intelligentsia had returned from exile in Babylon in 6th century BCE, the Temple and city walls having been rebuilt, the Torah (God's word of life) rediscovered. And, in response to all this, Nehemiah, the governor, and Ezra, the scribe and priest, say to the assembly:

> *Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength. (Nehemiah 8.10)*

Let's celebrate with a feast! And notice how open-handed hospitality is a vital component ('and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared') – for if God is generous, then God's people must reflect that generosity as well.

All of this constitutes Jesus' inheritance and hopefully by now we will have begun to appreciate that food, meals and table-fellowship were intimately tied up with Jewish identity and, more so, with God's identity as loving provider and source of blessing.

Next sermon, we will explore how Jesus draws on this background to demonstrate God's presence and God's purpose in the here and now. In conclusion, though, what are the implications of these insights and convictions for us today? Let me suggest three.

Firstly, food is precious. Implicit within every act of consumption is a sacrificial economy. Whether we're eating a carrot or a cow, life has been taken from one source to be given to another. So we should eat responsibly and respectfully – not taking more life than we need whilst ensuring, wherever possible, food is not wasted.

Secondly, food is gratuitous. It is part of a currency of grace sustaining our existence and animating our humanity. Whether we produce it for consumption or purchase it to eat, food is superfluous possessing a quality that is beyond us – a life force capable of bringing it into being. And if this doesn't feed our sense of wonder and appreciation, every bit as much as bodies and minds, then we have failed to recognise its sacramental texture.

And, finally, food is for all. One of the great affirmations of the Hebrew Scriptures is that God provides food for everyone and not just for the chosen few. In fact, it is the responsibility of the chosen few to ensure that everyone is fed, in God's name. So hospitality – feeding people and enabling people to be fed - can never be seen as an optional extra for God's people; it must always be central to their vocation and practice.

So let us eat responsibly and respectfully; let us eat in a spirit of gratitude and appreciation; and let us share our bread so that all may be fed.

Two

Jesus' Eucharistic Ministry

(Acts 10.34 – 41; 2.44 – 47 & Mark 2.14 – 20)

THIS IS THE SECOND of three sermons on the Eucharist and on what it means for us to be a eucharistic community, inspired by Jesus' kingdom vision, seeking to embody his risen life. In the first one, we discovered how food, meals and table-fellowship were intimately tied up with Jewish identity and, more so, with God's identity as loving provider and source of blessing. Yahweh, Israel's God, demonstrates care and covenantal faithfulness through sating hunger and quenching thirst. Yahweh, Israel's God, bestows blessing and good favour through abundant fruitfulness and ample flourishing.

Through these insights, food became imbued with a sacramental quality as meals, especially feast-like occasions associated with weekly Sabbath celebrations and annual Festivals, became a kind of sharing in divine munificence and communing on sacred generosity. What is more, covenant with Yahweh was not only celebrated through food, it was restored through the offering of food mediated by the sacrificial system in operation at the temple in Jerusalem where worshippers could be put right with their God through the offering of an animal or, in certain circumstances, arable produce.

So what was eaten, when, where and how it was consumed and with whom were not insignificant issues for Jews in Jesus' time – with rules, regulations and guidelines laid down in holy writ and developed further within the different Jewish denominations, especially the Pharisees and Essenes.

Before turning our attention to Jesus' ministry and to consider the role of food, communal eating and hospitality within it, we need to pause briefly to reflect on what life was like in first century Galilee. Although the situation was different in large conurbations such as Sepphoris or Tiberias, the majority of the population (estimated at around 150,000) worked on the land as tenant farmers or day labourers on large estates.

Nazareth, the place of Jesus' upbringing, was a village of no more than 400-500 persons. It's economy, like much of the region, was agrarian, its demography largely peasant class and its culture predominantly Jewish. Most if its inhabitants will have endured a subsistence existence, struggling to meet basic human needs after satisfying the demands of those making claims on their lives – tribute to the Emperor, taxes to Herod Antipas who ruled on behalf of Rome and tithes to the Temple, as well as, in many cases, rent to local landowners. For all that Jesus and his compatriots resided in the land Yahweh promised to their forebears, a land overflowing with milk and honey, it must have felt more like exile in Babylon or captivity in Egypt.

With resources so tight, survival depended on solidarity within family and kinship groups where each member would have a role to fulfil for the benefit of all. There was trade and exchange beyond such alliances, but on the basis of equivalence over time – if I give you a measure of flour today, you are obliged to supply me with a jar of oil or the like in the future.

Unsurprisingly, the arrival of strangers or outcasts was a source of potential danger to village life. Had they come to rustle or steal? Were they bearers of contagion whether in the form of disease or ritual impurity? What was their purpose and could they be trusted? Hospitality and charitable acts did take place, but they tended to be the prerogative of the wealthy; in truth, more often than not, they were demonstrations of status, prosperity and influence.

In villages such as Nazareth, you wouldn't share your food with anyone you didn't need to. And meals were not only a source of nourishment, but also a means of reinforcing social bonding, group identity and interdependence. But more so, they provided opportunity to frame existence within a theological perspective. Through the daily prayer of blessing over food or the weekly Sabbath observance or the annual Passover Seder, lives of austerity and banality found a measure of meaning and hope within a momentum of faith that bore witness to a God of generosity and justice, of blessing and covenantal faithfulness. A God who must, in the experience of many, have seemed very remote.

And emerging onto this canvas is one who initially must have been to his kith and kin at best a disappointment and quite probably something of a wastrel. Not only was he unproductive as a breadwinner within a fatherless household, but he also left his mother and siblings to fare for themselves as he headed off to Judea to become a follower of John the Baptizer who preached repentance and righteousness in preparation for the day of reckoning when God would break silence, coming in power to judge and to redeem.

But when Jesus returns to his homeland, there is neither sackcloth on his back nor ashes on his head. Instead of fasting as an expression of contrition, there is feasting as a demonstration of joy. His message is one of crisis – but it is the crisis of opportunity:

> *The reign of God's presence is emerging in our midst:*
> *break free from old ways of thinking and being;*
> *trustingly, embrace the good news. (Mark 1.15, paraphrase)*

It is, indeed, a bold message and one that would have been all but impossible to believe unless accompanied by happenings that amplified its substance and gave credibility to its convictions.

And this, of course, is what we find as Jesus embodies divine life: ministering healing and forgiveness, teaching with wisdom and authority, nurturing an appreciation of God within the raw materials of the ordinary and every day rather than through the exclusive religious practices of Temple sacrifice, synagogue worship, Torah observance and maintenance of ritual purity – most of which were beyond the reach of Jewish peasants and artisans.

Central to Jesus' kingdom programme was hospitality – food offered and meals shared in God's name. According to the Gospels, he is remembered as eating not only with friends and disciples, but also debating-partners and opponents, even those considered to be bad company – those deemed to be sinful, despised, contagious, impure – as well as with vast crowds gathering in his name.

In the light of the subsistence conditions characterising Jewish village life as well as the strict hygiene regulations and social protocols observed by the likes of the Pharisees, Jesus' seemingly indiscriminate practice of eating with all and sundry must have been as remarkable as it was controversial. From our Gospel reading:

> *And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples – for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?' When Jesus heard this, he said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.' (Mark 2.15–17)*

For Jesus, the inclusiveness of his table-fellowship, in conjunction with the highly symbolic and sacramental nature of eating, drinking and communing together, embodied essential characteristics of God's vision for humanity – reconciliation and peace, generosity and abundance, trust and openness, equality and justice, belonging and mutual obligation, worship and joy – and enabled others to tangibly participate in that vision. Meals became potent expressions of sacred presence and divine favour.

Furthermore, by rooting divine encounter within human experience at the table, Jesus purposefully establishes another means of access to God – an alternative 'altar', if you will, not mediated by religious professionals nor restricted to the pure, nor requiring bloodletting and sacrifice; but one open to all and sundry, whatever their condition, reconstituting God's covenantal community from the ordinary stuff of human existence as the contours of grace are extended to embrace anyone and everyone who is ready to take their place and eat with Jesus.

And as someone who earned a reputation for being a 'glutton and a drunkard' (Matthew 11.19/Luke 7.34), eating with Jesus could be quite an affair! In truth, he could hardly have chosen a more potent vehicle for communicating his message. If God is present then no one goes hungry and all are fed. If God is among us then fasting gives way to feasting and sorrow gives birth to joy.

How Jesus gained access to large quantities of precious resources, food and wine, remains a matter of speculation, but there can be little doubt that the practice of hospitality was a defining characteristic of his ministry and evidently became an enduring means of mediating his presence after the crucifixion. From our first reading:

> *We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. (Acts 10.39-41)*

And this, as we shall see in my final sermon, is our legacy.

Three

Jesus' Eucharistic Legacy

(1 Corinthians 11.20 – 34 & Mark 14. 12 – 25)

WE ARRIVE AT OUR THIRD and final sermon on the Eucharist and on what it means for us to be a eucharistic community, inspired by Jesus' kingdom vision, seeking to embody his risen life. So far we've discovered how food, meals and table-fellowship were intimately tied up with Jewish identity and, more so, with God's identity as loving provider and source of blessing. We noted how food possessed a sacramental dimension embodying Yahweh's generosity and covenantal faithfulness, communicating God's providence and presence. We also noted how it could be a means not only of communing, but also of being put right with God through the offering of animal sacrifice in the Jerusalem Temple.

We paused to reflect on village life in 1st century Galilee, recognising the austere conditions caused by oppressive tax regimes and low wages, as well as the dangers posed by strangers and undesirables who represented a potential, if not actual, threat to property and personal safety or who could be a source of contagion whether in the form of disease or ritual impurity.

These circumstances, exacerbated by a lack of healthcare or welfare provision, meant that survival depended upon belonging to tightly-knit social groupings – families or other kinship alliances – where each member, children included, would have a role to fulfil on behalf of the group as a whole.

Within such a climate of limited resources and pronounced anxiety, you wouldn't feed any mouths you didn't need to and you'd be very circumspect about offering hospitality to anyone outside your sphere of relating. What is more, mealtimes were occasions for reinforcing social bonding and afforded

the opportunity to catch a taste of sacred blessing – food to sustain the body and nourish belief in Yahweh's goodness; company to reinforce a sense of worth and of belonging to a momentum faith rooted in the conviction that God will provide in abundance for God's own – if not now, then in the future.

So it is highly significant that Jesus, from the outset, places the practice of hospitality, offered and received, at the heart of his ministry as a means not only of reinforcing his message about the in-breaking of Yahweh's reign of blessing, but also of enabling others to experience something of that reality for themselves – for if God is truly present then no one goes hungry and all are fed. And if God is among us then fasting gives way to feasting and sorrow gives birth to joy.

Furthermore, at a time when what was eaten, when, where and how it was consumed and with whom were defining issues, it is nothing less than revolutionary to eat bread with all and sundry whatever their state of moral probity or ritual purity and, surrounded by oppressive regimes and austere circumstances, to sup wine celebrating Yahweh's presence among God's people once more, as divine encounter is transposed from the exclusivity of temple sacrifice in Jerusalem to an open table of inclusive sharing in the company of Jesus, wherever he happens to be.

Now this is the background against which we must attempt to interpret what became known as the Lord's Supper and, in particular, what was Jesus' intention when he took bread and wine and distributed them among some of his closest apprentices and what was his meaning when he said to them, 'Do this in remembrance of me' (1 Corinthians 11.24-25; Luke 22.19).

And perhaps the place to begin is with the acknowledgement that the New Testament contains two versions of what Jesus said over the bread and wine. Our earliest source to Jesus' words of institution is contained, not in the Gospels, but in Paul's first letter to Christ-followers in Corinth, where we read:

> *For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' (1 Corinthians 11.23-25)*

Notice how the apostle uses a technical formula for passing on tradition (cf 1 Corinthians 15.3): 'For I received … I also handed on' *(paralambanô … paradidômi)*. Notice also how the 'bread' and 'wine' words are not symmetrical, for whilst a direct association is forged between the bread and Jesus' body ('Jesus took a loaf of bread … and said, "This is my body"'), an indirect one is established between the cup – not the wine – and Jesus' blood ('Jesus took the cup also … saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood"'). Here the direct association is between the cup of wine and the new covenant – the new way of relating to God and one another that characterised Jesus' ministry and their time together. A covenant that is, in some sense, dependent upon Jesus' blood, presumably implying his death. Luke, who also seems to be using the same interpretative tradition, expands the cup words a little: 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.' (Luke 22.20)

In contrast, both Mark and Matthew bear witness to another interpretative trajectory in which there is correspondence in Jesus' words of institution, with a direct association made between bread and body, wine and blood:

> *While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.' (Mark 14.22-24)*

Although it's not impossible that Jesus uttered both versions, it is unlikely – just as it is highly improbable that Jesus uttered all seven sayings from the cross recorded in the Gospels. So how do we account for this diversity and judge which is more likely to be the original. Diversity in circumstances such

as these reflects interpretative history – how Jesus' words were received, interpreted and performed within different communities gathering in his name. Remember, for the first generation or so, few of Jesus' words were written down; rather, they were communicated orally and, in part, were shaped by the meanings that his followers found in them – otherwise they wouldn't have survived.

We know that from an early stage, a ritual form of celebrating the Eucharist evolved in which the elements themselves were experienced as communicating Jesus' presence in a sacramental way – a practice that is, perhaps, reflected in how it was celebrated within the communities to which Mark and Matthew belonged, explaining the direct correspondence in their rendering of Jesus' words of institution between bread and wine, body and blood.

This sacramental appreciation of the Eucharist very quickly established itself. Early in the second century, Bishop Ignatius of Antioch described the bread administered at the Lord's Supper as 'the medicine of immortality and the sovereign remedy by which we escape death and live in Jesus Christ for ever more' (*Ephesians* 20.3). And with this elevating of the status of the bread and wine came a desire to restrict those who should partake to the initiated and worthy. Paul reminds Christians in Corinth that whoever 'eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord' (1 Corinthians 11.27). And in the *Didache*, an early church order from around the end of the first century, we read:

> *Let no one eat or drink of your thanksgiving [meal] save those who have been baptized in the name of the Lord, since the Lord has said concerning this, 'Do not give what is holy to the dogs.' (Didache 9.5)*

In a very real sense, we belong to this interpretive tradition in which the Eucharist is celebrated in a liturgical setting, rather than within the context of a full meal, where bread and wine are set aside and, through the invocation of the Holy Spirit, are transformed sacramentally to communicate Christ's presence.

But in recent years we have done so mindful of Jesus' intention at the Lord's Supper as we have explored the version of Jesus' words of institution recorded in 1 Corinthians and Luke's Gospel, in which Jesus speaks of the cup of the new covenant – the new way of relating to God and one another that had characterised his kingdom ministry from the outset – in which a link is forged between sharing the cup of wine and participating in the blessings of God associated with Jesus and extended to those who keep his company.

It is a covenant that would cost Jesus his life, but it is not one that required his death, because, as his ministry manifestly affirms, it is one rooted in the offering of hospitality in God's name rather than in the offering of blood sacrifice on an altar in the Jerusalem Temple or an any other altar for that matter. And, in any case, would Jesus really have encouraged fellow-Jews to drink blood – something prohibited within the Torah and abhorrent to Semitic sensitivities (Genesis 9.4; Leviticus 17.11)?

But there is more, because if Jesus associates the cup of wine with their new way of being together in God's presence, then how should we understand his words over the bread: *'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'* Here, it helps to recognise that the Jewish mind-set often interpreted human anatomy symbolically rather than physically.

For example, when Jeremiah claims that 'the heart is devious above all else' (Jeremiah 17.9), he is not passing judgement upon an organ of the body any more than the author of Genesis is referring to human tissue when noting 'all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth' (Genesis 6.12). So when Jesus takes bread and says 'This is my body' there is a strong likelihood that he is using the word symbolically to refer to himself as a whole, his entire personhood, if you will.

Viewed from this perspective, Jesus taking bread, blessing it in God's name, investing it with symbolic meaning and then distributing it among his disciples becomes a profound commissioning through which he entrusts his life into their hands and, with that, his vision, vocation and ministry.

And when Jesus goes on to say, 'Do this in remembrance of me,' the 'this' can mean nothing less than to live out that vision and vocation through continuing his life's work – an undertaking that can be celebrated and resourced through liturgical performances of the Eucharist on Sundays and other days, but can never be equated with it if we wish to be faithful to Jesus' intention.

It is for this reason that church in general, and St Mark's, in particular, exists.

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