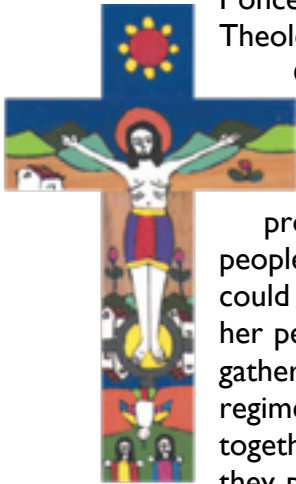


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“Brothers, we want the government to face the fact that reforms are valueless if they are to be carried out at the cost of so much blood. In the name of God, in the name of this suffering people whose cries rise to heaven more loudly each day, I implore you, I beg you, I order you in the name of God: stop the repression”.

These words were preached by the Archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero, just days before he was shot dead at the altar whilst presiding at Mass on March 24th March 1980. His words – spoken at the Eucharist – were an invitation to the people of El Salvador to rise up in peaceful protest against a repressive regime; they were words that were to cost him his life. I was reminded of his words on Wednesday as the Church in Wales Calendar marks his martyrdom on that day. As we enter Holy Week, Romero’s death is a reminder that we haven’t really moved on from the barbarity of Jesus’ day; the world still needs its sacrifices and state violence goes on claiming the lives of the peace-maker and the innocent alike. Where there is religion, violence does not seem to be very far away.



I once read a very challenging book called *Torture and Eucharist* written by an American Theologian, William Cavanaugh. The book discusses the role of the Roman Catholic Church during the 1970’s Pinochet regime in Chile. In the early days of Pinochet, the Roman Catholic Church was content to stay out of politics, believing that the Church’s role was just spiritual – to care for the soul, whilst the state was there to look after the body; a neat separation of religion and politics. But as the years progressed - and as Pinochet’s regime became more violent and dictatorial, innocent people began to disappear, and the climate became more savage - the Church knew it could remain silent no longer. To be silent was to be guilty of the torture happening to her people. So against the bloodshed, the Church called her people to re-commit and gather for the Eucharist, that at the Eucharist they might resist the tortuous Pinochet regime. Archbishops and priests alike called the people to come to mass, to stand together in Eucharistic solidarity. And the people came. They came in their hundreds and they partook of the Eucharistic meal: the simple meal of Jesus. It’s a meal that stands in

direct contrast to the meals of Herod and Pinochet; for their meals were occasions when heads would be served on platters and the table conversation rehearsed plots of violence and torture. The Church was calling her people to a different meal – the mass, the meal of peace.

Day by day, week by week, month by month, the people came, and the numbers grew. The eucharist gathering enabled them to forge communities of the faithful who voiced their opposition to the torture of the state; confronting violence through the solidarity of Eucharistic love. As Cavanaugh writes: “The Eucharist anticipates the future Kingdom, re-members Jesus’ conflict with the powers of this world, and brings Christ into the present in the form of a visible body”. It was a body of protest that the state could no longer ignore so that violence was toppled not with gun or army, but bread, wine and agape and love.

As we move into Holy Week and Maundy Thursday in particular, what Cavanagh reminds us is this – what we do in the Eucharist is no cosy religious farce cut off from the world, rather it has the potential to be a political act whose implications are socially explosive. Here we lift our eyes and our hearts thankfully to heaven and what we glimpse is a vision of human individuals and of human society at peace, rightly ordered, no longer prey to violent and destructive forces. That’s what the Eucharist ought to be. The problem of course is that we in the West have sanitised the Eucharist with our neatly measured wafers and our tiresome debates about whether a man or a woman can preside. We have reduced the Eucharist into a magical ritual, a mass in masquerade.

Perhaps on Maundy Thursday we can be reminded that the Eucharist is not theatre, it is first and foremost an act of peaceful resistance – for it began ‘On the night that Jesus was betrayed’. “On the night that Jesus was betrayed” – in other words, on the night when all the violent forces of the world were conspiring against Jesus, Jesus took bread and he took wine. In other words, the context of the first Eucharist is violence, and Jesus’ action in that maelstrom of menace is significant because it is peaceful: Jesus didn’t reach for a scapegoat, like Herod’s beheading of John the Baptist, Jesus didn’t respond to violence by spilling blood – rather he took inanimate, non-sentient bread and wine; he tortured no body, but simply tore bread and poured out wine. And it’s only very recently struck me that Christ taking bread and wine whilst those a stone’s throw away from that upper room where plotting his death, is what the Eucharist is really all about. Here we have decidedly non-violent, non-retaliatory actions that lay the foundation for a new, peaceful world. Bread and wine are used as an antidote to flesh and blood; in the very midst of a world that bays for retaliation against our enemies, Christ shows us a wholly different way to live. So it’s almost as if what happens at the Eucharist is a parody – if not a mockery – of the world’s sacrificial and torture-driven mechanisms. It’s as if Christ is completely sending up our need for violence, just as he did with our need for power when he rode into town on a donkey. The Eucharist is an example of how Jesus dismantles the world’s powers by mocking them – here we witness the divine irony of a God who makes himself present in bread and wine within a world that demands much bloodier sacrifices to keep its order going.



If then in our worship we must dress up the Eucharist with all the pomp and ceremony and incense we can muster, let us be clear why it is that we do it. We celebrate the Eucharist so that we can shame and mock the world in its desire for blood with a ritual whose only victims are crushed grapes and some grains of wheat. The Eucharist is an act of sacred spoof where Christ mocks the world’s terror and, through bread and wine, lays the foundation for a new and peaceful world.

Happy Holy Week.

As ever,

Gareth