

‘You are What You Eat’

David Lee discusses some issues in Eucharistic theology.

As the TV dietician speaks we see on screen obese people gorging on chips and cream cakes and then bright young people eating fresh fruit and vegetables looking slim and healthy. The message is clear. ‘You are what you eat.’

The slogan may also have a religious connotation. When Jesus gives bread to his disciples he says: ‘This is my body’. (Matthew 26: 26). The bread we eat becomes, by digestion, a part of our physical body. So Jesus gives what is potentially his body to his disciples. They, by receiving it, make it into their body. So as Christians receive the bread and wine of the Eucharist in that sense they receive Jesus, and thereby become his presence in the world to do his work and proclaim his message.

This understanding of the Eucharist may be of interest to the theological non-realist because it does not suppose any miraculous transformation. However, in the traditional doctrine of the Eucharist, the natural order of human existence is reversed so that, as Mary had a child but remains a virgin, Jesus dies on the cross yet rises again to life, the flesh of his human body becomes bread which may be eaten.

The earliest Christians gathered together to break bread and drink wine as a memorial to their Lord. They were devout Jews and they thought of the death of Jesus as a sacrifice: ‘Christ, having

offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, took his seat at God’s right hand.’ (Hebrews 10: 12)

This sacrifice was conceived to be the fulfilment of and, indeed, the completion of, the sacrificial system of the Jewish religion. Central to that system was the Peace Offering. This was the slaughter of a living creature, usually a lamb, and a feast in which part of the lamb was offered to God and part was eaten by the worshippers (Leviticus, chapters 3 and 4). Indeed throughout the Old Testament it is recorded that the slaughter of lambs was the sacrifice required by

God to forgive the sins of the Israelites. In the liturgy we have the words: ‘Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.’ The bread and wine are received with the words: ‘The body (the blood) of Christ keep you in eternal life.’

These words declare the re-enactment of the ancient Jewish Peace Offering transformed into a Christian sacrifice centred on the life and death of Jesus – the Lamb of God. To the outsider and indeed to anyone not familiar with the

Old Testament background they may well be incomprehensible.

As Christianity grew further and further away from its Jewish roots the Eucharist was gradually transformed. The words remained but the meaning and the practice developed. It is the defining action of the Christian Church throughout the world. It began as the celebration meal of



*The Last Supper (with whippet),
in the manner of Paolo Veronese 1528-88*

the local community of believers and it eventually came to be used in such events as the crowning of the emperor, the thanksgiving for military victory, the comfort of sick and dying persons, and in a hundred other different situations.

Two new facts of increasing importance emerged. First, the Church used excommunication as a means of punishing sinners and enforcing discipline. In the Middle Ages it became an instrument of political power. So in 1077 AD the Emperor Henry IV made a penitential submission to Pope Gregory VII, so that his excommunication could be lifted and he could resume his authority. With the secularisation of society this practice has lost some of its force.

Secondly, there was the addition of miraculous and superstitious elements to the service and its setting in the local church. For example, the cult of the saints and the veneration of sacred relics had a profound effect on the design and furnishings of church buildings. The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century resulted in the despoliation of such traditional furnishings of church buildings in those lands affected.

There are those who feel that for these and other reasons the Eucharist is not suitable to carry the responsibility of Christian mission and service in the modern world. One example is the Salvation Army, which has developed a military style culture and discipline as the foundation and method of its very effective work of social service and witness.

However, for a large part of the Christian community the weekly Eucharist is a symbolic meal in memory of Jesus and the most effective basis for its life and work. From the middle years of the 20th century the liturgical movement and the rise of the Parish Communion meant that the Eucharist was no longer the esoteric preserve of the priestly class at which lay people were passive observers and listeners, rather it has become the real expression of the community of believers in which clerics and lay persons play a full and active part. In so doing, they feel that they are indeed the Body of Christ which they receive and by which they are changed. You are what you eat.

The Venerable David Lee is a retired cleric of the Church in Wales and an occasional contributor to *Sofia*.

Tapestry

*'The universe is always singing
That means that man must learn
to listen so that his heart
may join the universal chorus'*

Words on a Quaker tapestry

Quakers are always listening
hearts singing
as they make new Jerusalems

They sang in the courts
abjuring oaths and made
a grace of affirmation

Sang at the massacre of Peterloo
their Meeting House
a sanctuary from murder

Sang as conductors
on the underground railway for slaves
going North by the drinking gourd

Sang in their chocolate factories
Respected, paid and housed
the new working class

Sang in thousands against
the Great War, refused to kill
the Christ in everyman

Sang of Hiroshima and Nagasaki
as their hearts broke
at the Jerusalems of ash

Still march at Easter to the
mad laboratories of Aldermaston

Sing for murdered children
from Damascus to Kabul

Reject the new Jerusalem
of guns and occupation

Roy Lockett

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