

Tree of Life

- exploring the meal that brings spiritual growth and formation

SETTING THE TABLE

Food is sacred

All food is sacred; it is sourced and sustained in the uniqueness of the divine. Across the world-faiths food is seen to have a source beyond itself. It is understood to be a point of connection with the spirit:

- It points towards its source in God
- It is eaten and shared in recognition that it is a gift from God
- It sustains our life; 'we don't have a body, we are a body'
- It feeds our bodies that are both physical and spiritual
- It demands respect for the natural world
- It is a means of grace
- It is a medium for the spiritual
- It nurtures and nourishes more than just the physical
- It results from human and divine inter-activity
- It demands we are responsible for how we use it
- It builds community as it is shared

It is spiritually significant and unique, because it originates from the generous and creative hand of God. It must be eaten and shared in recognition that God has given it to us as a gift.

The 'bread of the Presence' in the tabernacle and temple represented and reminded everyone of the sacredness and source of all food:

"And you shall set the bread of the Presence on the table before me always."
(Ex 25:30)

'He may eat the bread of God,
both of the most holy and of the holy things'
(Lev 21:22)

Jesus makes it clear that the manna in the wilderness pointed towards himself as the 'Bread of Life':

"Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven;
my Father gives you the true bread from heaven.
For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven,
and gives life to the world."
Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life;
the one who comes to me shall not hunger,
and the one who believes in me shall never thirst."
(Jn 6:32-35)



Notice the link between ‘the manna’, ‘the bread of God’ (the bread of the Presence) and Jesus – sacredness runs through all food. This is something that has always been understood in the Orthodox church.

***Inuksuit*: journey encounters**

Much farther north from the rock and sand of Asia, enormous natural forces shape the seemingly trackless tundra, mountains and islands of the Arctic. However, for the Inuit, this is *Nunatsiaq* (the beautiful land). Carefully and strategically placed across this seemingly forbidding landscape are the *inuksuit*;¹ stone structures of varied shape and size, carefully erected by the Inuit from unshaped rocks and boulders. They are similar to ‘cairns’, but are built with much greater thought, care and sophistication, and often filled with deep and subtle meanings. These *inuksuit* were designed to be messages fixed in time and space. Built from whatever unworked stone is at hand, by people of varying talents, each *inuksuk* is as unique as a fingerprint. Some may have been in place for over 3000 years.



- **They may be sacred**, marking a threshold in the spiritual landscape, a ‘thin’ place, where the spiritual and physical flow together. Some *inuksuit* are seen as material forms of power; not ‘symbols’ of power, but points where power is actually encountered
- **They may be indicators**, which may say, “You can live here” (all the resources needed to live are found here), or placed by a river, “This is a safe place to cross.” On other occasions they are warnings, “Beware; dangerous water, rocks, ice or snow”
- **They may be way-markers**, with a stone pointing in a clear direction to aid navigation, “This is the best way home.” It may point to the North Star (*Nigirtsuitug*) a key guide in Inuit travel
- **They may be personal**, even intimate communication, messages from one traveller to another, perhaps from a husband to a wife asking her to follow on as soon as she can
- **They may be memorials**, perhaps remembering a particular event, or an expression of grief marking the place where a loved one perished

... and very much more ...

¹ The term *inuksuk* (the singular of *inuksuit*) means, “to act in the capacity of a human.” It is an extension of *inuk*, human being. It implies ‘the presence of an *inuksuk* is like human standing there and speaking with you’

Some *inuksuit* are revered, though their meaning has been forgotten. Some older Inuit lament the fact that many young people in their communities no longer know how to read an *inuksuk*.

When thinking about the Peacemeal, with reference to the *inuksuit*, there seem to be some tantalizing points of connection.² As we shall see, the Peacemeal is:

- Something very ordinary (a family meal) with extraordinary meaning
- A place of powerful spiritual contact and encounter
- Something that speaks to us with both encouragement and warning
- A way-marker on our spiritual journey
- Something that is deeply intimate and personal
- A reminder and a memorial of a person and events that have huge significance

... and again, so very much more ...

All this starts to set the scene for beginning to explore the significance and possibilities of Breaking Bread.

Feeding on the Tree of Life

One of the most powerful biblical images for life-giving communion with God is feeding on the Tree of Life. It is there among the opening creation stories that feature the garden and forest grove of Eden ...

‘And out of the ground the Lord God made to grow
every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food,
the tree of life also in the midst of the garden’
(Gen 2:9)

Living in obedience and feeding on the Tree of Life would have enabled them to become like God and live forever ...

... put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life,
and eat, and live for ever" ...
(Gen 3:23)

That is why disobedience led to their exclusion from its presence.

When we fast-forward to the closing images of scripture and we look at the community once again in communion with God, with Jesus and with one another, it is the image of the Tree of Life that is central ...

“To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life,
which is in the paradise of God ...
Blessed are those who wash their robes,
that they may have the right to the tree of life
and that they may enter the city by the gates”
(Rev 2:7; 22:14)

² I do not want to press any analogy between the *inuksuit* and the Peacemeal too far, they are not similar in type and there are of course many differences, but neither should this detract from the value of reflecting on some fascinating points of connection.

'Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal,
flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb
through the middle of the street of the city;
also, on either side of the river, the tree of life
with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month;
and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations'
(Rev 22:1-2)

Here is the new heaven and earth; this is the new creation in all the completeness of *shalom*. Central is the 'Tree of Life'.

Between these two visions there is the centrality of the person and work of Jesus, whose life, death and resurrection are seen in terms of the Tree of Life.

Jesus dies *on* a tree, but as the 'Tree of Life' it is in fact death itself that is overwhelmed and defeated. Its roots reach into the depths of destructive darkness and break its power forever, bursting out in the resurrection life of freedom, vitality and joy! It is as though Job anticipated something of this centuries before, looking at a tree stump hacked close to the ground:

"For there is hope for a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again,
and that its shoots will not cease.
Though its root grow old in the earth, and its stump die in the ground,
yet at the scent of water it will bud and put forth branches like a young plant"
(Job 14:7-9)

The New Testament writers proclaim the truth clearly:

'The God of our fathers raised Jesus
whom you killed by hanging him on a tree.
God exalted him at his right hand'
(Acts 5:29-31)

'They put him to death by hanging him on a tree;
but God raised him on the third day'
(Acts 10:39-40)

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree,
that we might die to sin and live to righteousness'
(1Pt 2:24)

So to share the Peacemeal is nothing less than to feed on the Tree of Life'. To take into our very being the person of Jesus by the Spirit, to receive the fullness of his life, death and resurrection and to grow and become like him in the way that we act and live:

'They are like a tree planted by streams of water,
that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper'
(Ps 1:1-3)



'The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life'
(Prov 11:30)

'A gentle tongue is a tree of life ...'
(Prov 15:4)

We come to breaking bread in anticipation of feeding on the 'Tree of Life' and we respond to the voice of Jesus:

'Listen, I stand at the door knocking;
if you hear my voice and open the door,
I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me'
(Rev 3:20)

▪ **Table of Sacrament**

- Under the open heaven:
 - Taste of heaven / means of grace
 - *Sacramentum* - making the spiritual real
 - *Mysterium* - mystery / mystic
 - Physical / spiritual interaction
 - The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world ...I am the bread of life" (Jn 6:3-35)
 - 'Outward sign of inward grace'
 - 'Kingdom of God ... justice, peace and joy' (Rm 14:17)

▪ **Table of Miracles**

- Place of wholeness:
 - Feeding the multitude (greatest miracle?)
 - Encounter with the power of God
 - Wholeness out of brokenness
 - Place of healing - 'by his wounds we are healed' (Isa 53:4-5)
 - Physical / emotional needs met
 - Woman with haemorrhage (Mk 5:25-34)

▪ **Table of Service**

- Opportunity for ministry
 - Priesthood is servanthood
 - Priesthood of all believers
 - 'Washing one another's feet' (Jn 13:14)
 - Sharing with one another and serving each other
 - Being the Body of Christ

Central texts

The whole understanding and development of Breaking Bread in different Christian traditions is based upon interpreting key biblical texts, especially those that focus on the words of Jesus during the last supper in the upper room:

- **Paul** provides us with the earliest recorded account of what Jesus said and did:



'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 (broken) 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." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.' (1Cor 11:23-26)

- **Synoptic gospels** (Mk 14:22-25; Mt 26:26-29; Lk 22:14-20), with slight variations, build very much on Paul's account. Luke mentions two cups, before and after the bread (v16, 18), and they all include a form of the added phrase:

'Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.'

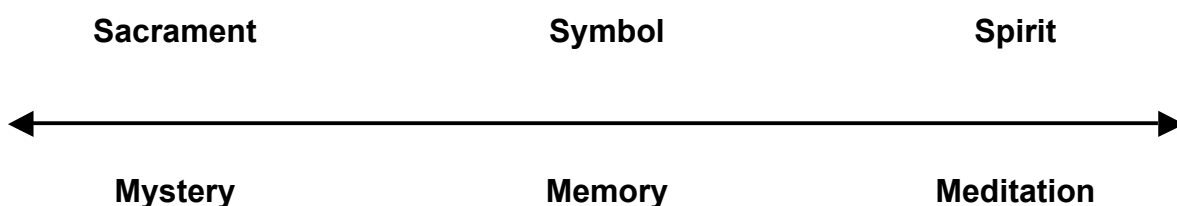
- **John's gospel** (6:22-59) gives a sustained eucharistic meditation in the context of the feeding of the multitude with some very disturbing words:

'Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink."' (v53-55)

Centuries of global Christian meditation and practice around these words have produced many different responses and insights. We shall now look at some of the main ways Christian communities have interpreted and implemented these texts.

Clear continuum

The only way we can begin our attempt to be fair to the variety of Christian understandings and responses to the texts we have referred to above is to imagine a 'eucharistic continuum' along which different denominations, groups and individuals place themselves. Their primary emphasis might be expressed something like this:



In reality this continuum must be seen as multi-dimensional; most groups will affirm the significance of those principles to which other groups will apply primary importance. This chart simply identifies the area of main emphasis for the community of faith mentioned.

▪ Sacrament / Mystery

- **Eastern Orthodox:** ³ A 'sacrament' is 'a physical element that becomes a vehicle for the Spirit', such as the bread and wine of the Eucharist, which are understood as the 'mysteries'⁴. The Eastern Church understands itself to be a eucharistic community; 'members of Christ's body (church) receive his body (sacraments)'. The outward organization of the church is always secondary to its sacramental life. During the Liturgy (Eucharist) the priest and the people are bound together as one, the worship and words of *both* priest and people *together* lead to the consecration of the bread and wine. This only finally takes place at the completing of the words of the Epiclesis:

Send down thy Holy Spirit upon us and upon these gifts here set forth:
And make this bread the precious body of thy Christ,
And that which is in this cup, the precious blood of thy Christ,
Changing them by thy Holy Spirit. Amen, Amen, Amen.

After these words the bread and wine are understood to be no longer mere symbols but in reality the body and blood of Christ; no attempt can be made to explain the change (Gk: *metousiosis*), this is the mystery.⁵ The idea in the Eucharist is that of 'sacrifice'; the sacrifice offered is Christ's self-sacrifice, it is the true sacrifice, but not a new sacrifice, for Christ died once only for all time. Jesus' death and resurrection are a single act with Christ as 'victor' rather than 'victim', emphasizing God's kingdom and the resurrection.

- **Roman Catholic:** The Catholic Church liturgy of the Mass has much in common with the Orthodox Eucharist. The main difference is the role of the priest in relation to the congregation; in the Orthodoxy they are seen as one, but in Catholicism the priest is distinct and their words of consecration are key to the sacramental change taking place in the bread and wine. Both Catholic and Orthodox Christians use much of the same language interchangeably; liturgy, Eucharist, mass etc. They both speak of 'transubstantiation'⁶ for the change to the body and blood of Christ in the elements. This is based on a mediaeval theory of matter derived from Aristotle. All matter has an *accidentia* (outward appearance) and *substantia* (inner essence); at the consecration the *substantia* of the bread and wine change to the 'substantia' of the body and blood of Christ, while the *accidentia* remain the same. The Catholic church stresses the suffering and the death of Jesus as sacrifice in its celebration of the Mass.

High Anglicans also have a 'sacramental' approach to Breaking Bread, very similar to the Catholics.

Both the Orthodox and Catholic churches take Jesus' teaching in John's Gospel, about eating and drinking Christ's body and blood, very seriously, hence their strong sacramental emphasis. The strength of Jesus' words in John is largely ignored by other Christian traditions.

³ This section is adapted from Fr Kallistos Ware '**The Orthodox Church**' Penguin 1964 pages 21, 246, 273, 278, 281, 286-95.

⁴ John Chrysostom said the 'mysteries' are so called because, 'what we believe is not the same as what we see'.

⁵ This is often referred to as the doctrine of the 'real presence'.

⁶ In the Orthodox church this is just one of a number of ways of speaking about what happens after the consecration and it in no way tries to explain the process, in the Catholic church it is the main way of referring to the 'change' but it is still understood as a spiritual mystery.



▪ Symbol / Memory

• Reformers

- **John Wycliffe** attacked the doctrine of 'transubstantiation' in 1380 and was thrown out of Oxford University as a result; he is symbolic of other medieval dissenters who protested against popular corruption and superstition in the church at the time
- **Martin Luther** believed the simple statement of Jesus, "This is my body", could not mean anything other than what it actually said; he held the view that because the risen Christ was 'omnipresent' everywhere, he must be in the bread and wine and so they were in fact the body and blood of Christ
- **Ulrich Zwingli** made the most extreme break with the Roman tradition saying that the bread and wine were only bread and wine; he interpreted the words, "This is my body" as 'this signifies my body' - 'only a sign', therefore he cannot be in the bread and wine"⁷
- **Anabaptists** spoke of Christ's presence through the Spirit in the community gathered around the communion table, being conformed into the shape of the cross by the Spirit in the life of the community
- **John Calvin** said we do not only remember, but we also receive Christ, by faith from God in the sacrament through the Spirit, as a result "the Spirit pours out his power to the worshipper by his Spirit where there is faith"

• Protestants

- **Baptists** like other Puritan and Separatist groups held disciplined and dignified communion services that had a simple memorial aspect to them
- **Methodists** developed from Anglicanism; John Wesley was very influenced by both Pietism, with its disciplined spiritual life, and the Moravian pattern for having 'love feasts' and the annual renewal of covenant
- **Brethren** focused on a very simple weekly Sunday service at which the 'Lord's Table' was the centerpiece, they focused on the death of Jesus and stressed their unity in the Body of Christ
- **Pentecostals** appear at the beginning of the 20th Century and are a child of the Methodist and Holiness movements and emphasize being open to the moving of the Spirit, they break bread because Jesus commanded it but it is only one of many ways of worship

▪ Spirit / Meditation

- **Quakers:** ⁸ For the Society of Friends the whole of life is sacramental; they do not say observing the sacraments is wrong, but they do not believe it is essential to wholehearted Christian discipleship and the full Christian experience; particularly in the age of the Spirit. JW Rowntree said, 'To the soul that feeds upon the bread of life the outward conventions of religion are no longer needful.' Bread and wine are unnecessary as Christ's real presence is known when two or three are gathered, in quiet expectancy,

⁷ This is described by some of his critics as the 'doctrine of the real absence'!

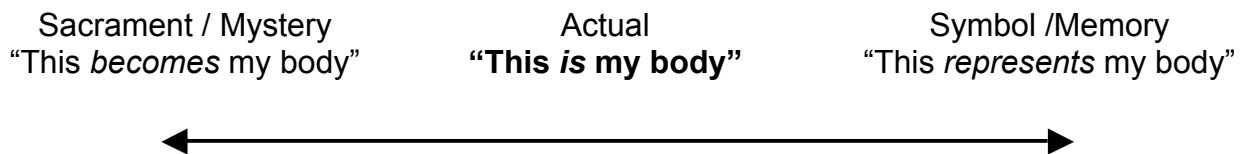
⁸ Freely adapted from the '*Christian life and practice in the experience of the Society of Friends*' London Yearly Meeting 1960 items 208-215.



in his name. An outward rite is not necessary *but* an inner transformation by the indwelling Spirit of God is.

- **Salvationists:** General Booth saw his work as mission and did not intend to set up a separate independent church so instituted no sacraments. Subsequently the Salvationists have come to hold a very similar position to that of the Quakers.

In conclusion, here is something to reflect upon. In the Gospel record of Jesus' words at the Last Supper, it is clear that he actually says, "This *is* my body." He does not say, "This *becomes* my body", nor does he say, "This *represents* my body":



The words, "This *is* my body", are tantalizing:

- They affirm the reality and immediacy that the 'Sacrament / Mystery' view seeks, but without implying that something has 'to be done' or 'happen' first: it *is*!
- They demand much more than just the representation that the 'Symbol / Memory' view suggests: it *is*!
- They imply the reality of the 'Sacrament' view, the physicality of the 'Symbol' view and the dynamic of the 'Spirit' view, each intertwined.

Questions

1. What do you think is the significance of Jesus saying, "This is my body" and "This is my blood"? What do you think he is implying?
2. What do you think a Christian's expectations when breaking bread ought to be?
3. Is the physical act of sharing bread and wine important? Can just remembering and imagining the act and its meaning be all that is necessary?

Reading and Resources

- R Banks '**Paul's Idea of Community**' Hendrickson 1994
GR Beasley-Murray '**Baptism in the New Testament**' Eerdmans 1973
A Dulles '**Models of the Church**' Doubleday 1978
RN Flew '**Jesus and his Church**' Abingdon 1938
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P Minear '**Images of the Church in the New Testament**' James Clarke 1960 /2007
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E Kreider '**Communion Shapes Character**' Herald 1997
H Kung '**The Church**' Shreed & Ward 1967
G Lohfink '**Jesus And Community**' Paulist Press 1984
J Moltmann '**The Church in the Power of the Spirit**' SCM 1977
C Raphael '**A Feast of History**' Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1982
JL Segundo '**The Community called Church**' Orbis 1973
J Vanier '**Community And Growth**' DLT 1989

