

Back home in Cardiff I meet with volunteers who work with vulnerable and homeless people to reflect upon and discuss their activities. Most teams out on the streets each night around the year belong to churches, with a heart for serving the poor. Some say how much they learn from and admire those who survive on little, patiently enduring the trial of having no place of shelter to call their own. *'The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'* and *'As you do this to the least of my little ones, you do it to me.'* are phrases which spring readily to mind. The talk is of people who need food, sleeping bags, medical care, a shower and change of clothes. They may be mentally ill, addicts, abused, unemployed, estranged from family. All need help with their problems, but when asked what they feel they most need, most often expressed is - someone to talk to, someone to listen, take me seriously. They suffer from loneliness. Not like solitude from choice, feeling the need to have time for your self. It's feeling you have nobody to turn to, nothing to share but your need, that makes loneliness such a curse.

Urban housing demand is growing with more people living alone. Not just young students, or the widowed but people from broken homes, compelled by relationship failure to be single again. These are lucky to be able to afford somewhere to live. But they know what loneliness is. Look at the personal ads in the papers, all those dating and social networking websites. When people are moving or commuting in search of work or self-improvement, it means neighbourhoods where fewer people than ever know those living around them. So many people are constantly looking for friends, for community, for enduring companionship.

Companionship - it's a great word - from the Latin, meaning *'someone with whom I share bread'*. And that's another thing we do far less of. Sitting together around a table, taking time to share meals and talk. Another casualty of hectic modern lifestyles. Another contribution to this sense of loneliness. It's not heaven sent. Before God created Eve to be with Adam at the start of Genesis, God declares: *"It is not good for man to be alone"*. It's not an expression of prohibition, but of the creator's concern for human well being.

Jesus travelled everywhere with a group of disciples, men and women and was so surrounded by crowds that he needed to escape into the hills to be alone with God for un-distracted prayer. He was surrounded by crowds in Jerusalem, but on the eve of the Passover, he and his closest friends, like a family withdrew into the privacy of a home where they had been offered hospitality, to keep Passover, to re-tell the defining story of their people's liberation from slavery in Egypt, and to praise God for his providence and mercy since then. Social and spiritual companionship were one on such occasions, as they are in any Jewish household for the weekly Shabbat meal. On this occasion however, something different happens. When Jesus gives thanks for the bread and the cup of wine they share as part of the ritual of saying grace before during and after this special meal, he adds into the traditional blessings words which none of his companions have heard before. *'This is my body broken for you', 'This is my blood poured for you and for all, so that sins may be forgiven. Whenever you do this, remember me.'* With the hindsight of twenty centuries of Christian history, from the other side of the Cross we can read many deep meanings into his words. But what if anything did his disciples understand by them?

Jesus ministry is inspired by and modelled on God's suffering Servant as portrayed by Isaiah. The Servant is a prophet, spokesman for God to his people. Prophets declared God's Word by actions, and signs as well as in speech. Jesus makes a paralysed man walk saying *"your sins are forgiven"* So too his words and deeds at the supper table, changing the content of a time hallowed ritual, mark him as a prophet, making God's power and presence real. Even if his table companions take time to work out the full meaning of what he says, they won't forget this word, this unique moment.

To a Hebrew or an Aramaic speaker *'this is my body'* would be a way of saying *'I am here'*. So there it is - the broken bread means *'I am here, broken for you'*. To speak of blood is to speak of life itself. To speak of blood out-poured is to speak of a violent death, and in the context of Temple ritual, of sacrifice. This cup of wine, poured for sharing means - *'My life, sacrificed for you'*. And he says : *'Do this - remember me'*. Jesus knew that his challenge to the practice of religion put his life at risk, and several times he warned his friends this was so. But they were in denial, they had seen so

much success with him, they were so optimistic about the progress they made with him, they could not comprehend failure. How on earth could anyone reject let alone destroy, so wonderful, appealing & compassionate a man, evidently blessed by God? Surely everyone would come around to his way of thinking eventually? What do they make of his discomfoting talk of brokenness and sacrifice?

The mood darkens further when he declares that someone at the table will betray him, hand him over. All except Judas are bewildered. Each wants to know, "*Is it I, Lord?*" Judas seems to accept that Jesus guesses he's up to something even though he hasn't shared his plan to bring the authorities to him. Judas is keeper of the common purse; it's no surprise when Jesus appears to dispatch him on an errand, giving him a piece of bread dipped in the juices of their passover lamb roast.

After he's gone, yet another disconcerting thing happens. Jesus calls for water and towel, strips off and washes the disciples' feet, as a slave would, despite protests from Peter, indignant that his Master should stoop so low, when they owe Jesus everything. He gives them an example of what real leadership means - acts of humble service that value highly those who are being led.

The Gospels were written by men, for a world where men dominated in the public realm. Yet we know from small references that women accompanied and supported Jesus. In this household, the meal would most likely have been prepared and served by women. I can't help wondering if there were women unreported among those whose feet Jesus washed - or would it have been one taboo too strong to break?

One can see so often in the Gospel, whether in dealing with children, crazy people, or women desperate to touch him as he passed, Jesus' responses embarrassed his straight laced Galilean peasant companions. One way or another, this would have been an awkward and uncomfortable meal, with nobody understanding what was happening. I imagine the disciples being relieved, finally to sing their closing hymn and go out for some fresh air in the Garden of Gethsemane, just across the valley from their city lodgings. There they relax in the still air among the olive trees under the Passover moon, singing, chatting, musing, dozing, while Jesus with Peter, James and John go apart from them for some quiet seclusion to pray. Did they wonder what he meant by

all the references to brokenness, sacrifice, betrayal? Were they perturbed just a little? All we can do is put ourselves in their places, these companions of Jesus, at home with one another in his company, happy, despite awkward moments, to have a sense of purpose and calling to serve God with him. But as they rest awhile, Jesus is alone struggling in prayer, nobody to turn to, waiting for God to confirm that he has put himself in the right place at the right time to enable whatever God wills to happen. Already the time of conviviality at the table is far away from him and his thoughts. You can tell this is a hard moment for him to face. He takes Peter James and John with him for company. But soon they are asleep, unable to watch and pray with him as he earnestly requests. There they are close by sleeping like innocents, unaware of danger approaching. Here, after the intimacy of supper companionship, he is lonelier truly lonelier than at any time since he confronted Satan in the desert.

Here is where he has to battle with his fears. He's a man and he loves life to the full. He doesn't yet know what he will have to face. He's still not sure if he can measure up to the test of doing his Father's will in complete obedience. "*If it be your will, let this cup pass away from me.*" is his prayer. "*But not what I want, but your will be done.*" He has offered his life for the Father's cause, declared this symbolically in his actions at the supper table. It's only natural he should shrink from a fate which might be very cruel. How much Jesus did or didn't know of what lay ahead, is not ours to speculate. In a way it's harder not to know, to be alone with unknowing, in the dark in every way All he could do from now on is trust, and keep trusting. "*Your will be done.*" Out of the darkness Judas arrives, and embraces Jesus to identify him to the Temple police and officials accompanying him. The disciples are rudely awakened. Peter at least, is ready for a fight, and behaves dangerously with a sword, earning yet another memorable rebuke: "*Those who live by the sword will die by the sword.*" Jesus stands his ground commandingly, but refuses to defend himself or let himself be defended. All he does is to question his captors. They'd had plenty of chances to take him before in the Temple. Why now? Why like a thief in the night? His only form of resistance is to embarrass his assailants by challenging them to consider their motives. Judas has delivered him, but so far, there are no miraculous deeds, no revelations of divine

power and glory. And the longer into the night Judas waits for the expected sign that doesn't come, the more his false optimism plummets into despair. The despair of the former terrorist, who knows he only has himself to blame for failing to realise that he didn't understand the mind of Jesus. It had all been wishful thinking on his part, far far away from the plan and purpose of God. He had been duped by his own ambition and hunger for power. And now it was all too late.

St John, the beloved companion of Jesus, refers to Judas as a thief, bitter that he was instrumental in advancing this tragedy. Whether or not Judas stole from the common purse, we don't know. But he stole from Jesus the choice of how he would bring his ministry to a conclusion, substituting his own plan for whatever Jesus may have had in mind before his agony in the garden.

Jesus' inner struggle, to the point of sweating blood, as he prayed, was to trust and accept that no matter what was to happen, God would still be present and active within it. This would be the ultimate test of his faith. All of us come to the same place whenever we face up to things in life over which we have no control, long before we arrive at the final frontier of death. God is with us too.

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