

Broiled fish

A sermon preached by Revd William Whyte on Sunday 14 April 2024

There is something wonderfully comic and very human about today's Gospel reading. It's not the surprise at Jesus' appearance, nor the fear the Disciples feel. It's not the teaching nor the explanation – at last – of who Jesus is and what he's there to achieve. No, the detail I like most in the passage is the delightfully particular mention of fish – and not just any fish, *broiled* fish – which is given to Jesus so he can eat it and prove that he's not a ghost.

I love this detail because it's both absurd and deeply revealing. The absurdity comes from its specificity: why broiled? Why not grilled? Why not boiled, or roasted, or fried? What is broiled fish anyway? (I have been given at least six contradictory definitions, and I'm still none the wiser.) But this very specificity is of course deeply revealing too. It is exactly the sort of silly, apparently trivial detail one might remember about a hugely important event – just as I can still recall the awful prawn cocktail (my first ever prawn cocktail) at Freshers' Dinner or the equally ill-chosen pizzas we had on my first evening out with my future wife. The broiled fish is recorded here because someone remembered it and someone then thought that every detail of the event – even the specific food – needed to be recorded, even if it didn't seem to make much sense. And so, 2,000 years later, here I am talking about broiled fish.

This is not, as it happens, the only time in the Gospels that food (and drink) proves to be important enough to note down. There is also the wine at the wedding in Cana. There are the loaves and the fishes beside the Sea of Galilee. There is the bread and wine at the Last Supper. There is extraordinary Easter-tide story of the journey to Emmaus, where the Disciples only recognize Jesus when they share food. 'When he was at the table with them', we read, 'He took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and began to give it to them. Then their eyes opened and they recognized him.'

Such a repeated focus on food and drink speaks of many things. It reveals that desire to capture any detail of the miraculous life of Christ. It also, however, reminds us of the very ordinariness of that life: that he lived and died and was resurrected among everyday people who shared simple food – whether bread or wine or fish. His world, his people, his food and drink were not grand or rich or impressive. In our terms, they were really rather poor.

But food is always important, always revealing, always tells us more than that. In a famous book called *The Raw and the Cooked*, the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss showed that the way in which societies treat food tells us about what they value, what they desire, what they fear. Food, he writes, is both good to eat (*bonne à manger*) and good to think with (*bonne à penser*).

In this case, food seems to do two things. In the first place, it shows that Jesus – even the resurrected Jesus – share our humanity. He does that most fundamentally human thing: he eats. He eats something as simple, as ordinary, as a piece of broiled fish. But, at the same time, and just as importantly, it's through food that Jesus reveals his divinity. The breaking of bread at Emmaus; the feeding of the 5,000; the miracle of turning water into

wine: in each case, Jesus takes something deeply ordinary, wholly commonplace, and makes it into something utterly extraordinary.

And, of course, that's precisely what we are doing here too, because that's exactly what the Eucharist is. We take bread and wine. We obey the commandment Jesus gave his Disciples 2,000 years ago. We consecrate and make it his body and his blood. We share in that miracle and share in his very being.

Just like our readings, the Eucharist symbolizes something important about us. It gives us a clue about how we should behave and who we should be as well as what we should believe. In the Eucharist, as in our readings, we see ordinary things made extraordinary. They encounter God and they are transformed.

That's exactly what is meant to happen to us too. That's exactly what we're called to be in the first letter of John. An encounter with Christ, it makes clear, should transform us. It should make us not just sinless but incapable of sin. It should be so overwhelming, so all consuming, that we are utterly changed for good and for ever. And if that sounds terrifying – then it is. We should be terrified. It's a call not just to follow Christ, but to become Christ; not just to worship God, but to become divine. The words of I John sound impossible – and they are. But if we take our faith seriously, no matter how terrifying – how impossible, it seems – that is precisely what we are called to do.

Our great comfort, however silly it may seem, is found in that piece of broiled fish, in that ordinary bread, in that everyday wine. If God can use that, then God can use us. If God can transform that, then God can transform us. All it takes is for us to allow God to do it.

For that is the miracle of the Eucharist, the extraordinary grace of what we're doing here and now: that God will take ordinary people (will take us) and ordinary things (will take the bread and wine) and will transform them into something divine. It is a free gift, freely given, and all we need to do is say Amen.