

Retreat at Alton

Sacrament: the moment of meeting God

Encountering God is the top and bottom of what our religion is about. I would like to set before you some questions: first, can we meet God? If so, how do we meet God? And where do we meet God?

The Church's first thought in the past, when the word sacrament was mentioned, would have been the seven ceremonies by which the Church celebrates, accesses, and delivers to its members the grace of Christ. In theory, it is asserted, all seven of these ceremonial signs were instituted by the direct will of Jesus of Nazareth. Some of them are framed in the Gospel narratives, like baptism and the Eucharist. Others, like the sacraments of forgiveness and healing, may not be mentioned in the narratives, but yet relate closely to what Jesus and his apostles did or said.

There were great fights over the nature of the Sacraments at the Reformation, as you might expect. One of the movements of human culture at that time was towards logic and away from mystery: towards empiricism and against superstition, towards individual experience and away from metaphysics. This process led to the Enlightenment and to postmodernism, in which we serve today. In order to have a full and positive understanding of the sacramental level of experience, we need to question some of the presuppositions of our age.

In the narrow defile that led the Church towards the Second Vatican Council in the 1960's, a Dutch theologian called Edouard Schillebeeckx published a book called *Christ: the Sacrament of Encounter with God*. This book was for many people a huge step forward in understanding, and I'd like you to get hold of its central thesis. Instead of working back from the Church's practice of the Sacraments to Jesus, Schillebeeckx presented Jesus as the total Sacrament, the one in whose very life humanity met God, and embraced. All the gifts of God were, in him, lavished on the life of one human being. His earthly task was actually to be the meeting-place. This is what led those who met Jesus to be strangely stopped in their tracks. They knew there was something uncanny about this one, who took possession of their attention as no-one else had or would. What might this encounter have been like for them?

Beatitude They seemed to know first of all that here was a uniquely abundant *human* life. That's what you'd expect from someone on whom the whole gift of God had been poured out; they sensed a kind of blessedness in him which was hugely attractive. Being divine did something unforgettable to his humanity. Disciples, at his call, left everything to follow him. They wanted to know what it was that filled him: and emptied out themselves. John says: *We saw his glory, the glory that was his as the only Son of God, full of enduring love.*

Benevolence They also sensed that there was a benevolence about him which would be welcoming to them. They knew all about the sort of blessedness which isolates: for instance, the blessing of earthly power, which kept Pilate safe high in his Praetorium, the blessedness of the Beckhams, who build a wall round their house against the relatively unblest world outside.. But here was a joy that was available, a wealth that was inclusively generous. When he spoke about the poor, people felt he was genuine, and that they were included. John says: *indeed, from his fulness we have all received, love in place of love: for though the law was a gift through Moses, this enduring love came through Jesus Christ.*

Power Thirdly, they felt a power in him which might come towards them in their need. That abundance of life in him seemed to be ready to leak out towards them, in their poverty or need. The sick felt it, even those considered incurable. Those who cared for the sick – even for the demented, and the paralysed - felt it. Those searching for forgiveness felt it, and so did those persecuting public sinners. He made great crowds feel it, by teaching them and encouraging them and feeding them. The authorities felt it, and resented it, trying to hedge it round and limit its influence. In the end they found themselves locked in a struggle against him which they pursued to the bitter end. It was there that they encountered the power of God, in the resurrection.

In all of this we can sense the significance of Jesus *then*; I suggest we should translate these categories into *present* realities, and find in them the reason why he matters to us. Those whose membership of the Church is developed and personal, rather than merely formal, continue to sense these realities across whatever time or space might appear to separate them from him. Behind, within, through the life of the first-century carpenter, Christian people sense the presence of God, absolute holiness, total love for us, power to reach out to us in our need. This is the encounter of which Jesus is the Sacrament.

I'd like to investigate these three qualities which we find in Jesus, and to use them to illuminate our understanding of the sacramental level of experience, which is a distinctive factor of being a Catholic. Let me start with blessedness.

The Blessedness of Jesus

This meditation is about the fulness of life people sensed in Jesus. It is hinted at on every page of the Gospel: in the calling of the disciples, everything they have seems suddenly negligible compared to being with him. Their demeanour before him for the rest of the story expresses their sense of him: "You call me Lord and Master, and rightly: so I am" (Jn 13:13). It's there in the moments when people come to him asking for guidance, like Nicodemus (Jn 3): "We know that you are a Teacher from God; for no-one could perform the signs you do unless God were with him". People listening to him were moved to cry out: "A woman raised her voice from the crowd, saying: *Blessed the womb that bore you, and the breasts you sucked!* But he replied: *More blessed still are those who hear the word of God and keep it.* (Lk 11:27). The fourth Gospel makes Jesus' final prayer to the Father spell out the source of this blessedness in Jesus: it springs and flows from his identity with the Father, the constant pouring-out of the love of the Father into his beloved Son. The prayer calls Jesus' blessedness by the names of *eternal life* and *glory*.

Eternal life isn't something promised for the future, but the inheritance of eternal meaning and destiny *right now*. If we have only this lifetime to work with, that's one thing; if what we experience now is open to eternity, that's quite another. There's a gulf between these two lives, and where there is a gulf, there's the possibility of crossing it, which I'll call *transition*.

Glory is the presence of God, as manifested to us in Christ. You can see this stopping apostles in their tracks: after the Resurrection certainly, but also at the Transfiguration. This leads on to the concept of *glorification* – the catching-up of something into the presence of God, so that it catches the fire of God's life, and appears in its eternal significance instead of its limited, timebound reality. This too requires a transition: now you see it unglorified, threatened by the absence of God: now you see it glorified, with the presence of God shining out of it.

Glory is God's to give or to withhold. The splendour that is released in glorification doesn't come out of what is glorified, because it doesn't belong to anyone except God. It seems that the transition required involves a making of room; by the abandonment of the unglorified state to make room for the glory of God; a sacrifice of earthly understanding is required before glorification can happen. This sets a pattern for those who want to meet God: a pattern of shedding a skin, making a choice, leaving the past behind. So Abraham leaves his people and his father's house, to set out for a country God will show him. The prophet Amos leaves his sheep in Judaea to speak for God in Samaria. The disciple leaves his boat and nets to follow Jesus. We all have to abandon our earthbound search for meaning in order to inherit eternal life and to be touched by the glory of God. *Total* abandonment of earthly meaning is called *consecration*, which is what Jesus does with his life, and what he prays that we might do in following him. He prays before his death:

Consecrate them in the truth: your word is truth. As you sent me into the world,
I have sent them into the world, and for their sake I consecrate myself, so that
they too may be consecrated in truth.

Perhaps our most personal grasping of the meaning of the passion will come from following Jesus in this way. It requires that we entertain the possibility that we might abandon very important elements of our life in order to make room for the divine encounter we believe in. If you scan the Scriptures for this theme, you will begin to sense a huge movement within them. Characteristically the Word of God asks us to prepare for a kind of exchange to take place: give up *this*, if you want to lay hold on *that*. Jesus doesn't limit this exchange to the sacrifice of evil things in favour of good ones: he asks for the sacrifice of the whole self, all our relationships, all our possessions: the ultimate example for this is the model of martyrdom, and the goal of it is the complete transformation of human nature, to be recreated in God's image. That creates the idea of a kind of sacramental transfer or transfiguration; it is when this has happened that we can speak of the blessedness, the fulness of life, which we sense in Jesus. Consecration to God creates the space in which the divine gifts can be received.

It's in the nature of things that, insofar as the consecration is incomplete, God's gifts can't be received. You can't receive half-gifts where God is concerned; the Old Testament says: *God is a jealous God*. This doesn't mean that he has a sulk if we don't come up to snuff. But if you want to receive God, you can't make do with anything less. Divine gifts are limitless, and if you limit them, they lose their infinite quality, and become *false* shadows of what they should be. *Half-meeting God* means meeting an idol. It is dangerous to worship half-gods.

In the Sacraments, we find the moment when God lays hold of what we have surrendered to him, and fills it with his fulness, so that it becomes blessed. We need to think of some examples.

When a man decides to seek Baptism, he will be taught that this encounter with the Lord must be prepared-for by a process called catechumenate. During this process, he will be led towards the renunciation of the world and of Satan that forms part of the Baptismal liturgy; and he will be taught the shape of the Christian Creed which he will embrace at the same moment. The theme of transition is very clear. If this seems very cerebral or intellectual, he will then be led to the process called *conversio morum* – the changing of one's ways – by which he will put flesh on the Gospel he has heard. Then in the moment of Baptism, as he walks down into the waters of the font, he will symbolically *drown* as a child of this world, and symbolically *rise from the dead* as a child of the Easter mystery. He will leave behind his former life and its failures. His resolve to live the Christian life opens him

to this reality, and God meets him in the sign, and *what is symbolised is what happens*. From that moment he will say *Our Father* within the community of the Church, having crossed over from the inheritance of a flesh doomed to die, into the inheritance of a life that is marked by God for eternity.

We can also read in this light the proper theory of the Eucharistic exchange. The community that gathers to celebrate the Mass is made up of people who are baptised, and share this new life; despite this, they are physically hungry, ill, poor, lonely, and everything else that human nature makes them. They bring with them the bread of the earth, and the fruit of the vine; as these things are carried to the Altar, which represents Christ, they are symbols of the earthly struggle for food which unites all who live, redeemed or despairing. But in their entrance into the sacramental economy, they are taken up into the consecration of Jesus, who made this ritual; like the man in his baptism, they lose their function in the economy of “bread that perishes”, and become food for eternity, “the true bread, that, coming from heaven, gives life to the world”. That’s what the endless fights about “transubstantiation” are trying to express. At this point what was a pretty insignificant fragment of bread and gulp of wine is opened to the mystery of Christ, and becomes the point of encounter which feeds the hope of the world. God the Father wants this meeting-place with us. Christ instituted it. We come to it in the Spirit which unites us with them. *Therefore it happens*.

Characteristically, the sacraments are therefore human acts and divine acts at the same time. God’s task is to make them full from his side, to keep the promise they make to us. Our task is to make them full from our side, to make sure we are open to the gifts we seek. We will never finish this effort until we make our consecration complete by pouring out our life to God in death.