

Pentecost 13 2024 All Souls' **O TASTE AND SEE...** dtw

Jesus said, "This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." (Jn 6.58)

In his arresting and levelling book, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, Eugene Peterson tells the story of Bruce:

'Thirteen four-year-old children sat on the carpet of the sanctuary at the chancel steps on a Thursday in late February. I sat with them holding cupped in my hands a bird's nest from the previous season. I talked about the birds on their way back to build nests like this one and of the spring that was about to burst in on us. The children were rapt in their attention...The riotous colour in the blossom and bloom in Maryland's dogwood and forsythia, redbud and shadbush catches me unprepared every time. But this year I was prepared – and getting the children prepared – for all the glorious gifts that were going to be showering in on us in a week or so. We were looking at the bare bird's nest and *seeing* the colours, *hearing* the songs, *smelling* the blossoms.

There are moments in this kind of work when you know you are doing it right. This was one of those moments. The children's faces were absolutely concentrated. We had slipped through a time warp and were experiencing the full sensuality of the Maryland spring. They were no longer looking at the bird's nest; they were seeing migrating birds and hatching chicks, garlanded trees and dewy blossoms. Then, abruptly, at the centre of this moment of high holiness, Bruce said, 'Why don't you have any hair on your head?'

The spell was broken. Spring vanished. Reality collapsed to a vireo's nest and a pastor's bald head. Why didn't Bruce see what the rest of us were seeing – the exuberance, the fecundity? Why hadn't he made the transition to 'seeing the invisible' that we were engrossed in? All he saw was the visible patch of baldness on my head, a rather uninteresting fact, while the rest of us were seeing multidimensional truths... Only four years old, and already Bruce's imagination was crippled.

It usually doesn't happen this early. Childhood, naturally rich in imagination, has a built-in immune system to the cultural poisons that destroy it. But sometimes the immune system, unsupported by stories and songs, succumbs to the poison gas of television. We who are made in the 'image' of God have, as a consequence, *imag-*

ination. Imagination is the capacity to make connections between the visible and the invisible, between heaven and earth, between present and past, between present and future. For Christians, whose largest investment is in the invisible, the imagination is indispensable, for it is only by means of the imagination that we can see reality whole... Explanation pins things down so that we can handle and use them - obey and teach, help and guide. Imagination opens things up so that we can grow into maturity – worship and adore, exclaim and honour, follow and trust. Explanation restricts, defines, and holds down; Imagination expands and lets loose. Explanation keeps our feet on the ground; Imagination lifts our head into the clouds. Explanation puts us in harness; Imagination catapults us into mystery. Explanation reduces life to what can be used; Imagination enlarges life into what can be adored... Imagination and Explanation cannot get along without each other.

Is it time to get aggressive, time for the Christian Community to recognise, honour and commission its pastors as Masters of the Imagination, joining our poets, singers and storytellers as partners in evangel witness? How else is Bruce going to hear the Gospel when he grows up – hear Isaiah's poetry and Jesus' parables, see John's visions and Jonah's plight? It will be sad if when he is forty years old and enters a congregation of worshipping Christians and ministering angels all he sees is a preacher's bald head.' (I can identify with that!)

Through Baptism and the Eucharist, you and I have been set aside – consecrated - to unfold the secrets of the Kingdom and to touch holy things, that all might truly 'taste and see that the Lord is good' and capture the rapture of it all. *Here, O my Lord, I see thee face to face; here would I touch and handle things unseen, here grasp with firmer hand the eternal grace, and in my weariness upon thee lean.* (vs 1 AHB 438 Horatius Bonar)

Today, once more, we receive the Bread of Heaven. I said last Sunday that I cannot overestimate the privilege I have to preside at the Breaking of the Bread. I have done so in a variety of different settings and for a variety of reasons. I would now like to share some timeless words of Dom Gregory Dix (inclusivised) from his classic book *The Shape of the Liturgy*. And I make no apology that most of this sermon is not my work!

Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacle of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. We (ed) have

found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; for the proclamation of a dogma or for a good crop of wheat; for the wisdom of the Parliament or for a mighty nation or for a sick old woman afraid to die; for a schoolboy sitting an examination or for Columbus setting out to discover America; for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover; in thankfulness because my father did not die of pneumonia; for a village headman much tempted to return to fetich because the yams had failed; because the Turk was at the gates of Vienna; for the repentance of Margaret; for the settlement of a strike; for a child (ed) for a barren woman; for Captain so-and-so wounded and prisoner of war; while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheater; on the beach at Dunkirk; while the hiss of scythes in the thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church; tremulously, by an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his vows; furtively, by an exiled bishop who had hewn timber all day in a prison camp near Murmansk; gorgeously, for the canonization of S. Joan of Arc – one could fill many pages with the reasons why we (ed) have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them. And best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unflinchingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this just to make the plebs sancta Die – the holy common people of God.

Amen.