

The table of fellowship

Sitting together for a meal can generate a special feeling of togetherness. Each of us will have our own memories of table companionship or fellowship. Many of these will be happy experiences of celebration and laughter, of love received and shared. Some memories of table fellowship may be sad, times when we were more aware of one who was absent than of those who were present. Jesus shared table many times with his disciples. It is likely that, when sharing food with his disciples, he also shared with them his vision of God's kingdom. At table, the disciples imbibed something of Jesus' mind and heart and spirit. Of all the meals he shared with them, the meal that stayed in their memory more than any other was their last meal together, what came to be known as the last supper. Today's gospel gives us Mark's account, his word-picture, of that last supper.

This last meal Jesus shared with his disciples stood out in their memory, capturing the imagination of generations of disciples right up to ourselves. He did more than share his vision with the disciples; he gave them himself in a way he had never done before, and in a way that anticipated the death he would die for them and for all, on the following day. In giving himself in the form of the bread and wine of the meal, he was declaring himself to be their food and drink. In calling on them to take and eat, to take and drink, he was asking them to take their stand with him, to give themselves to him as he was giving himself to them.

It was because of that supper and of what went on there that we are here in this church today. Jesus intended his last supper to be a beginning rather than an end. It was the first Eucharist. Ever since that meal, the church has gathered regularly in his name, to do and say what he did and said at that last supper — taking bread and wine, blessing both, breaking the bread and giving both for disciples to eat and drink.

Jesus continues to give himself as food and drink to his followers. He also continues to put it up to his followers to take their stand with him, to take in all he stands for, living by his values, walking in his way, even if that means the cross. Whenever we come to Mass and receive the Eucharist, we are making a number of important statements. We are acknowledging Jesus as our bread of life, as the one who alone can satisfy our deepest hungers. We are also declaring that we will throw in our lot with him, as it were, that we will follow in his way and be faithful to him all our lives, in response to his faithfulness to us. In that sense, celebrating the Eucharist is not something we do lightly. Our familiarity with the Mass and the frequency with which we celebrate it can dull our senses to the full significance of what we are doing. Every time we gather for the Eucharist, we find ourselves once more in that upper room with the first disciples, and the last supper with all it signified is present again to us.