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### **Real Presence (John 13: 21-30)**

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Three weekends ago, some of us were on a silent retreat at the old Redemptorist monastery, St Clement's, near the village of Galong. During one of our meals, I found myself at a table at the end of the dining room, a large print of this painting – Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* – hanging on the wall before me. It's an image that's somewhat of a staple – even a cliché – in monastic dining rooms. It was commissioned in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century to adorn just such a place – the refectory of the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. But as I gazed upon it this time, it struck me in a new way.

Tonight we celebrate our first Holy Communion for the year as a Benedictus community. This is the ritual meal that Christians celebrate in accordance with Jesus' 'institution' of the Lord's supper at the 'last supper' he shared with his disciples. I am conscious that we bring many different experiences of this ritual meal, different responses, different understandings of its meaning and significance for our own journeys. Like all powerful symbols, Holy Communion signifies, it *communicates* in a whole range of ways. There is no 'single', tied down meaning to be had or sought. Yet, having said that, I thought it might be helpful for us to reflect once more and together on what we're doing here tonight – and for me to share something of my sense of this sacrament and why it matters that we celebrate it.

Leonardo's depiction of the Last Supper is based on the story as told in the Gospel of John. He paints the moment of consternation that occurred among the twelve apostles when Jesus announces that one of them, 'the one to whom I give this piece of bread', will betray him (John 13: 24-25). Various features of this incredible depiction have been discussed by scholars of art – you might notice the

four groupings of three, each showing slightly varying reactions, and some of the details that allow particular disciples to be identified.

Judas Iscariot, Peter and John form the group at Jesus' right hand (on the left of Jesus as we look at the picture). Judas, the one who betrayed him, is in shadow, looking withdrawn. He is the only person to have his elbow on the table and his head is also vertically the lowest of anyone in the painting. If you look closely, you'll see that he's clutching the common purse. According to the Scriptural text, Jesus predicts that his betrayer will take bread that he gives him. The disciples Thomas and James, to Jesus' left, look to be reacting in horror as Jesus points to a piece of bread before them. Meanwhile, apparently distracted by the conversation between John and Peter, Judas reaches for a different piece of bread, not noticing Jesus stretching out with his right hand towards it (Matthew 26: 23). Could it be that he does not yet know what he will do?

The angles and lighting of the painting draw attention to Jesus, whose turned right cheek is located at the vanishing point for all perspective lines. One scholar has written that the painting demonstrates Da Vinci's masterful use of perspective as it 'draws our attention to the face of Christ at the centre of the composition, and Christ's face, through his down-turned gaze, directs our focus along the diagonal of his left arm to his hand and therefore, the bread'.

But what struck me at Galong was another dimension of the image. What I noticed is Jesus' profound stillness and stability, by comparison with the postures of the disciples. All of *them* seem to be in motion, and not just moving, but dislocated, their bodies and faces twisted, agitated, off-balance. They are gesturing and pointing and talking and half-turned away, either from Jesus or each other. Only Jesus seems fully there, fully embodied, realised. And what struck me is that Leonardo has painted 'real presence'. As has Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, in her very different depiction of the Last Supper. Here again, the icon of Jesus is stable. He holds the circle of fellowship at the apex of the cross, while 'Judas' at the bottom

left, is in a process of catastrophic disintegration, distraction and separation from the whole.

Now, as some of you will know, in Eucharistic theology, the phrase ‘real presence’ has been highly controversial. In particular, the question of *how* Jesus is present when we celebrate Holy Communion, has (ironically) provoked profound division between Christians across the centuries. Some insist that ‘real presence’ means that Jesus is in some sense *bodily* ‘in’ the bread and wine, so that (in some sense) we take him bodily into ourselves. ‘Take, eat, this is my body, given for you’. Some argue that he is not so much bodily in the elements, as with us in spirit, in the fellowship of the community, wherever ‘two or three’ are gathered in his name. And others insist that this meal is not so much a reception (here and now) of Jesus’ body and blood, his presence with us, as a remembrance of what he has done for us, a memorial meal: ‘do this, in remembrance of me’.

In my view, there’s truth (as well as potential for distortion) in all these ways of putting it. And what really matters is not so much how we understand what we are doing here, as that our enacting of this symbol, this sacrament, is effective; that is, that it helps us touch into and be transformed by the reality of which it speaks.

What is this reality? It’s the astonishing fact that Jesus persisted in giving himself to us and for us, right through his disciples’ incapacity to recognise him, or love him or truly receive him. This persistence is evident through his whole life with them, and it comes to a point of extraordinary focus, in this last supper. Look again at Leonardo’s image ... He is present, fully there, with them and with the One he called Father, God ... see that open window and light coming in from behind him? Because he is fully present, because he’s awake, he knows what is about to befall.

So it’s precisely in the face of their distraction, their inattention and incapacity to receive, that Jesus hands himself over symbolically in bread and wine, giving them himself, his life force, his communion with God. He does this ‘on

the night he was betrayed’, so that on the other side of his death and resurrection, his disciples might have a practise to share, a embodied way of receiving the gift he is and ever wills to be. As Dominican theologian Timothy Radcliffe writes, ‘Jesus did not just make *any* sign. It was a creative and transforming act. He was to be handed over into the hands of his enemies. He would be entrusted by one of his own disciples to the brutal power of the Empire. He did not just passively accept this: he transformed it into a moment of grace. He made his betrayal into a moment of gift. He said: “So you will hand me over and run away. I grasp this infidelity and make of it a gift of myself to you”’.

What difference does this make for us? In this bread and wine, in our fellowship around this table, we trust that Jesus is present to us, just as he was present to his disciples at that last supper. For some of you, I know, this is almost a felt thing – a tangible awareness, such that participating in the Eucharist is for you a deeply nourishing practice. For others, I know, there can be a sense of not quite getting it, feeling it, not being on the inside of it – and so some pressure, at times, to manufacture what we think an ‘appropriate’ responsiveness might be. I’ve often felt myself in this kind of place.

But I think this is where our contemplative practice is significant. As in our prayer, so with our participation in this Communion, the invitation is really just to relax, not to try too hard. To trust that God wills to be in communion with us, the gift is given and this celebration is a chance to receive and deepen our *capacity* to receive it. The more fully we are present – to ourselves, to one another, to these gifts of creation – the more we become subtly attuned to the Presence. And just as opening ourselves to this presence in the silence of meditation changes and slowly softens us, so we are changed and softened as we open ourselves in a non-anxious, non-grasping way, to Christ’s presence in this meal and in those with whom we are called to share it. So as we prepare ourselves for this celebration of this reality and call of Communion, let’s take a moment to be present, to be still, to be fully here – whoever and however we are. For this gift is for you.