

The Cost of Communion (Matthew 22. 1-14)

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You might have heard of the practice of *lectio divina* – the slow, prayerful reading of Scripture. Tonight, I want to begin with a *visio divina* – the contemplative reading of an image. This is a painting by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr.



Miriam-Rose, as many of you know, is a former Senior Australian of the Year; she's from Daly River in the Northern Territory and, as well as being an extraordinary artist, she's best known for her teaching on *dadirri* – a practice of 'inner deep listening and quiet still awareness'. Miriam-Rose is a nationally respected indigenous elder and a practising Catholic whose art expresses profound theological insight, through bringing together the wisdom of indigenous and Christian spirituality. Amazingly enough, this painting belongs to Benedictus – it was a gift to us from one of our members, who had worked with Miriam-Rose years ago in the NT Education Department and had bought this painting directly from her. What do you think it depicts?

It's the Last Supper. I invite you to spend a moment or two gazing upon it. I'd like to share some of the things that strike me – though I'm aware there's much I don't know how to 'read' in this astonishingly rich image. I notice first that, unlike the long table in Leonardo da Vinci's famous depiction of the Last Supper, Miriam-Rose's table is circular. It seems to be surrounded, held, in a light which pulses and shimmers as if with infinite energy – the light of eternity. Jesus sits at the top of the picture – first among equals. Interestingly though the light shines around him and radiates from him with particular intensity, he's no larger than any of the other figures. In fact, the figure of Judas, disintegrating and dissolving into chaos as he's pulled away from connection with the table at the bottom right of the painting, somehow looms larger.

In the bottom half of the circle are tongues of fire – the Holy Spirit present in the midst of the meal, the offering and sharing. I don't know what exactly is symbolised by the colours and radiating lines in the top half of the circle – though perhaps this is an image of resurrection. I'm not sure either about the white shape that sits beneath the cross – perhaps it is the Godhead itself, uncreated light. But the cross at the centre is unmistakeable; its vertical arms are linked directly to Jesus' figure at the top and rooted in the ground at the bottom. And underneath the transverse arms of the cross, is a Coolamon – traditionally used by Aboriginal women

to carry water, fruit and nuts, as well as to cradle babies. This a vessel, then, that bears water, nourishment and new life, positioned at the very junction of the Cross, which is the symbol of Christ's self-offering life.

For me, this painting offers a profound theology of the Eucharist – of Holy Communion. The meal depicted here is not just a fellowship meal – or a farewell gathering of friends. It's an enactment of the costly hospitality of God. Jesus sits at this table with those who have already betrayed him (in the case of Judas) and with those who will within hours be pretending they never knew him. Jesus knows it. But as an act, as it were, of *pre-forgiveness* for these fragile, flawed and frightened friends, he breaks bread and shares the cup with them, making these elements into symbols of his own life and enduring presence. The bread stands for his own body, soon to be handed over and broken; the wine symbolises his blood soon to be poured out. They will run away, but he will not. And so he enacts what it will cost him to keep being with and for them, in the face of all the forces bearing down upon them, in the face of their incomprehension of their own limits, and their incapacity to receive what he offers.

Why does he do this? All along, his passion has been to set them free of the domination of threat and fear; all along, he's sought to draw them to dwell with him in the limitless energy of God's love. But at the end, he must allow the world's fear and violence to consume him. Only by undergoing it, only by bearing the light and love of God into the horror of mercilessness, selfishness, hate and death, and then emerging out of that abyss still offering hospitality, still inviting friendship, can he liberate them, show them that there is a way out of the nightmare cycle of shame, blame, destruction and illusion in which they're helplessly trapped and helplessly perpetuating.

The events of this past week have been at times overwhelmingly painful and sad. In Australia, the Referendum on constitutional recognition to enshrine a Voice to Parliament for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, held today, seems likely to be lost. The invitation offered by the Uluru Statement from the Heart for us

to walk together from the betrayals and denial of our past into a different future has been perceived by many not as proffering a gift, but as issuing a threat. The costly hospitality of people who have undergone violence and death but risen in a spirit of forgiveness to offer the possibility of real friendship has been portrayed as a threat to business as usual, a threat to false peace, a threat to threatened identities. And even if the Referendum is won, it will be difficult to celebrate unequivocally. For much has been uncovered over these months that shows the extent of a kind of disintegration in our body politic. Like Judas, disconnected from the whole and self-destructing, we see our society tossed in waves of misinformation and manipulation, with self-serving interests, cynical politics and an overwhelmed populace conspiring in diabolical ways to divide, diminish and decreate.

On the other side of the world, this week has seen the horrors perpetrated in Israel and Palestine. Unhealed trauma and the intergenerational legacy of violence once more inflicted on the defenceless bodies of those trapped in Gaza, trapped on kibbutz, the nightmare cycle set again in murderous motion. And there's Ukraine, Sudan, Syria and the ecocide of the natural world – the familiar catalogue unfurls – and that's before we get to our local and domestic scenes of conflict and dysfunction in institutions, workplaces and families. How are we to be in the face of all this? What are we, as a community, called to offer at a time like this?

The sign of the Eucharist is that whatever we do and however often we refuse the invitation, God continues to offer hospitality. God's passion is that all God's children, 'good and bad', might join the feast. But there is, as I've said, a cost of communion. For Jesus, enabling it asks his complete self-giving into the violent heart of the world, so as to break open its terror from the inside – to show us we don't have to live run by that power. For his disciples, in the aftermath of his death, receiving his hospitality anew involved getting real about their complicity in violence, and the consequences of their fear and threatenedness. Real freedom from

perpetuating the old cycle is won only as they own their failure and let themselves be given a new identity, discover new forms of relating, sourced in the life of God.

This isn't cheap grace. In the parable, this seems symbolised by the guest who, though invited along with everyone else, does not put on a wedding robe. In the context, a wedding robe isn't some elaborate outfit only the rich could afford. It 'could have meant nothing other than clean, preferably white clothes'. But this guest has come, thinking he can remain unchanged, as if accepting the invitation to share at this table will ask nothing of him. But that's not how it works. Not because God sets conditions on who is worthy and who isn't, but because to participate in the fullness of what's offered means putting off your old habits of being, letting yourself be reclothed (as St Paul puts it) in compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience (Colossians. 3.12).

We are a community that celebrates Communion together. We seek to accept the fullness of God's hospitality by facing up to that which needs transforming in our own lives and in our life together. And we are a community that seeks to share God's hospitality with all who come – to hold open this space, this possibility of liberating, redeeming love in the midst of a world so painfully fractured and confused. Not offering cheap grace – as if untruth, injustice and violence can be minimised or denied; but neither foreclosing the possibility of its transformation, not giving up or turning our backs on those who wound, violate, deny, neglect or destroy ... as God does not give up. So how do we do that? When we ourselves feel angry, betrayed and defeated by the outworking of injustice.

It seems to me that to do this truly – not as a pious exercise or patronising platitude, but deeply, seriously, committedly seeking to participate in this work of love – is incredibly difficult. It's a cruciform work. It requires us, in and with Christ, to hold steady at the junction of suffering, cruelty and inattention, to open ourselves to the pain of it, while tethered to the never failing love of God. There are times we cannot and should not seek to practice in this way – times when we ourselves are too traumatised, wounded, distressed and unmoored to bear it. Times when we

need to let ourselves be however we are – angry, unforgiving, desolate, despairing – placing our pain in the sight of God, acknowledging our own incapacity, our profound need and hurt.

But there remains a question for us as a body – a contemplative community seeking to be in the world as an opening to grace, a place of transforming hospitality. The heart of our prayer, the heart of our calling is to join and enable the communion of all. As best we can, then, let us continue to give ourselves to this work of love in which we ourselves are infinitely held.