

Along the track

Alone or with Others?

Some years ago I was a visitor at a country parish church for Sunday eucharist. I was early so, after being greeted very warmly in the foyer, I went into the almost empty church. Over the next ten to fifteen minutes, the noise outside grew and grew, and I wondered what on earth was happening. Just people gathering for the usual Sunday celebration, meeting up, sharing their week, telling stories just as people do when they get together. Sound familiar in your parish? When the music started and the gathering hymn began, people did just that – they continued the gathering but this time inside. The priest was out there with them and he came in with them. The atmosphere was welcoming and joyful. People wanted to be there, they wanted to be together. The priest prays later in our gathering that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable... We are in this together!

The celebration of the eucharist is a multi-layered event. Christ is present in a number of ways during the celebration, not just in the transformed bread and wine, Christ is present in the person of the priest who leads the celebration of Mass, Christ is present in the readings from Scripture proclaimed at Mass. As the Decree on the Liturgy says: When the Scripture is proclaimed at Mass it is the Lord who speaks to us....

It is often surprising for many people that Christ is present too in the group of people who gather to offer the Mass.

Not only did Jesus promise to be with his followers whenever they gathered in his name, but the people who gather at Mass are members of the Church, the Body of Christ, his continuing presence in the world. Christ is present in this community that gathers to celebrate together for all sorts of reasons, for those who are full of faith, for those who are struggling and seeking answers, for those who have been wounded, those who need companionship and community. So how do we welcome them, this community that has come together in the name of faith, this community that comes together where Jesus is present with them and in them.

As we gather as the Body of Christ, does anyone ask, how are you today? We are real people, people of faith, the people of God, we bring our lives, not just our presence. In the opening words of The Church in the Modern World:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men (sic) of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.

Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.

We gather with our joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties – we don't leave them at the door. Do we ever think about what these others we gather with are bringing today, what joys, hopes, sadnesses, what worries are you bringing today? What are you celebrating? How do we make them feel welcome, accepted, how do we make them feel that we are glad that they are here with us? Many churches ask us to acknowledge those around us, especially if we have not done that on the way in.

The first thing we are told as we gather as this community of the followers of Christ that we are sinful. We know that already. It may be one of the reasons we have come. So perhaps it might be worth starting by reminding us that we are welcome here, reminded of the goodness of God, that we are loved, that the grace of God fills us with great potential, that we are glad that we have all gathered today, that God wants us to be here.

Joyce Rupp, author of the book *Jesus, Companion in My Suffering: Reflections for the Lenten Journey* in a recent interview said: *Quite frankly, I'm tired of being reminded at the opening of every Eucharistic liturgy that I am sinful. That's a given. What I, and others in the pews, really need to be reminded of is how much goodness (God-ness) there is in us, our potential to be superb human beings.*

What if we focussed on the free gift of God's grace and goodness, what if we focussed on the fact that God is with us and has made us gifted, talented. What if we changed the greeting at the start of Mass to: *"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit are with all of you"*. Perhaps simply changing that might be a reminder that the goodness of God is alive within us and in this community gathered here today, because the people who gather at Mass are members of the Church, the Body of Christ, Christ's continuing presence in the world. That is a big responsibility. To do that we need the inspiration of Jesus and the inspiration of the Spirit of God but also the companionship and inspiration of one another.

Regards
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