



First Eucharist  
of  
Joanne Lee Baynes, Priest

Thursday 2 July 2009  
St Nicholas, Carine

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*Genesis 22:1-18; Matthew 9:1-8*  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7EYAUazLI9k>

I dare say you may be wondering about those scripture readings. Why on earth would we choose the story of the sacrifice of Isaac and the healing of the paralytic for Joanne's first Eucharist? Such questions are easily answered: we didn't choose them. These are the scriptures appointed for today. What we like or dislike has nothing to do with the price of fish. These readings are not what you and I might have chosen, they are strange to us, they come out of left-field as a gift - pure gift, pure grace - thrown up by the Church's living tradition and offered for our meditation. Like Joanne herself, who is also gift and grace, a newly ordained priest of Christ, these readings come from outside the cozy circle as God's good gift to us.

The first story, of course, is ancient indeed. It comes from a time in history when human sacrifice was still widely practiced, when the life-blood of human beings was routinely offered to appease the gods. But this is also a transitional story, a 'hinge' story or turning-point in history, for the text is a window on that moment of insight, that moment of vision, when human sacrifice is finally put away, when animal sacrifice takes its place. To vegetarians and vegans and other sensitive modern souls this may seem like small beer, but in fact, of course, it is a mighty leap. For the sacrifice of Isaac is no sacrifice at all, at least not in the old sense, and thanks to this story we are privy the holy moment, privy to this seismic shift in understanding ourselves and understanding God. Well may Abraham name the place 'The LORD will see', but this is also the place where Abraham sees something new, where we all perceive a new reality; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the LORD there is vision.'

When we say the sacrifice of Isaac is no sacrifice at all, we could go on to say that the sacrifice of the mass, the Eucharistic sacrifice, the Christian sacrifice at which Joanne presides for us for the first time tonight, is also no sacrifice at all. Before we come to that, however, I want to interrupt the two scripture stories by inserting that video clip we watched as this celebration began. After all, there are all sorts of sacred texts, and this one is another gift. It landed unannounced by email one bright morning a few weeks back and quite set me up for the day. It also got me thinking about what we would be doing together this week. My first thought was: this is Christian mission; here is an image, a wonderful image, of the mission of the whole People of God! Business as usual in a busy European railway station, everyone preoccupied in the hard slog of getting from A to B – workers and travellers and tourists – all locked up in their own little worlds, isolated from each other as they focus on themselves and what they have to do and where they have to go. Suddenly, the glory breaks in and the ordinary becomes extraordinary. It takes only one or two crazy individuals and a bit of music to break through the facade, for all sorts of people to break out of routine and respectability and begin to have fun. It takes only a few fools for Christ to open us up afresh to the simple joy of being alive, to the sacramentality of everyone and everything and every place, to re-ignite in us the familiar joys of eye and ear and heart. And this outburst of joy is as infectious as anxiety or fear, perhaps even more so. Just for a little while the world shines, then everything returns to normal, except for the fact that we are changed; except for the fact that the whole course of the day is transfigured.

This is the Church's missionary task, the evangelistic work to which all the baptised are called and commissioned. Like salt or light or yeast or grains of mustard seed – all minority images – the mission of the Lord's little flock is to season, to enlighten, to leaven, to spice up the plodding routine, to crystallise childlike wonder, to fan the spark into flame, turning isolation into company and conversation and companionship and communion and conversion of heart. It is not some strategic plan for growing churches, it is not about bums on seats, it is not about balancing parish budgets, it is not about scalp-hunting for Jesus. It is pure gift and pure grace, the sacrificial gift of our selves, our souls and bodies after the pattern of Christ himself, who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.

If this is the task of the whole Church, it is pre-eminently the task of the priest. Our new priest, like every priest, is to be a choreographer, a theatre director, an orchestra conductor, a dance instructor. As of this week, it is Joanne's task to make sure the Christian community knows the dance steps, helping us work together rather than apart, singing from the same song sheet, harmoniously playing our distinctive parts in the great symphony. This, of course, is what she does in presiding at the Lord's table, and what we see tonight is both who she now is by God's grace and who she will become as we surrender our precious autonomy to her God-given authority. As one Lutheran theologian spells it out – 'The food and the thanksgiving over the food express their meaning in tandem. The thanksgiving of the bread and the cup, the cup and bread of thanksgiving – these two expressions are interchangeable, for the food and the prayer over the food signify the same

thing. In the prayer we stand before the Creator of all things in Christ; the prayer speaks out its thanksgiving through Christ and through the Holy Spirit. In the food, which itself can be called *eucharistia*, ‘thanksgiving’, we receive the gift that places us before God, the saving body and blood of Christ crucified. In eating the food we eat the meaning of the prayer. In praying ‘the prayer of the word which is from Christ’ (Justin, *1 Apology*, 66) we find the food ‘thanksgivingized.’ The prayer over the food is given us by Jesus Christ, takes place through Christ. The food of the prayer is the presence of Christ. The whole, prayer and food together, is gift. Through it we receive what human beings need: food, love, and the restoration of creation. We do not give anything to the gods or to God. Rather we receive what we ourselves need – to stand before God as we share our food, with a wider horizon around us than we could have given ourselves.’

Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1993) p. 153

The only sacrifice we Christians have, the pure sacrifice, is not really a proper sacrifice at all. The Christian sacrifice involves no procession of the victim, there is no sacred knife, no ritual bloodshed, no violence to humans or animals; our sacrifice is nothing but a meal, a sharing of food in thanksgiving. As St John Chrysostom says, ‘Almsgiving is a sacrifice and the givers are anointed priests. To feed the poor is to put food into the mouth of God more surely than burning up the offering.’

A moment ago I mentioned Joanne’s God-given authority. ‘Take authority to preach the word of God, and to minister the holy sacraments in the congregation where you are appointed. Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; whose sins you retain, they are retained.’ Most of us are a bit nervous about authority, but God-given authority is not authoritarianism. This is proper authority, the necessary authority of the choreographer, of the director, the orchestral conductor and the dance instructor. This is the authority given to Jesus himself, who forgives sins, heals the sick, raises the dead to new life, and brings us to our true home. ‘In order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ – he says to the paralytic – ‘Rising up, take your stretcher with you and go home.’ Without such authority we are simply an aimless, sectarian rabble; with it we are community and communion, Christ’s living body, Christ’s loving heart, Christ’s healing hands and Christ’s joyful voice in today’s world.

Thanks be to God for blessing us all with the gift of Joanne, priest of Jesus Christ! May she call us always in Christ to healing and wholeness and newness of life, living and working and singing and dancing together.

