

## *Some Steps to Spiritual Renewal*

### *Part 5*

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**Open to God through Weekly Corporate Worship** We have seen how, what we call the Holy Communion service, falls into two parts. The first part is sometimes called the Liturgy of the Word, centred around readings, a sermon and prayers together with 'psalms and spiritual songs' - all very much after the model of the service in the Jewish synagogue, which the early Jewish Christians continued to attend. The second part of the service today is the Eucharist proper. In the early days, of the infant Christian church, while Christianity was an illegal religion in the Roman Empire, this service, called the breaking of the bread, was held in the homes of the early Christians.

'The breaking of the bread' in the homes of Christians was a simple fourfold act, based on what Jesus *did* as much as what Jesus *said* at the Last Supper. Scripture tells us that Jesus *took* the bread, *blessed* it; *broke* it and *gave* it to those seated around the table - or rather, lying around the table as the custom was in the Middle East at that time. Earlier we spelt out the first two of the four actions - the taking and the blessing.

**He broke.** Of course in the Middle East then, as now, there was no other way to eat bread. You did not cut it with a knife; rather you broke it and handed parts of it to those seated near to you. You *shared* the bread, by breaking it. However, as we shall see, the breaking of the bread was to have a particular symbolic significance, in the context of that Last Supper when Jesus equated the broken bread with his 'broken' body on the Cross. Yet it was self-evident, - and indeed still is - that it is only by breaking the bread that it can be shared and so fulfil the fourfold act of *taking, blessing, breaking and giving*.

So we read in the story of the Road to Emmaus, that the two disciples in the evening of the day of the Resurrection, recognized Jesus as soon as he sat at table with them and broke bread with them in his distinctive and characteristic manner. He did it in much the same way as he took the loaves and fishes, - by giving thanks and furthermore - and this is most important - *raising his eyes to heaven* to thank His Father for all God's gifts, including life itself.

In this way Jesus hallowed and consecrated every aspect of life, and by breaking it open reordered it, so releasing and sharing the new life of God Himself - that risen life of Easter Day - giving his Body and Blood and his very life of love to all who partook of the mystery of God's loving purposes for his world.

Feuerbach, the nineteenth century atheistic philosopher once said - as he thought very cynically: 'Man is what he eats.' In fact, without knowing it, he was getting to the heart

of the matter, for as St. Augustine said: 'We become the Body of Christ by eating the Body of Christ.' For what we eat and drink becomes part of us. Jesus said

- 'This is my Body which is given for you.' It is of course the most intimate way of saying 'I love you so much, and I give myself to you in a similar way to that in which the bridegroom says to the bride on their marriage night.

The mistake we often make of course is that we think that the life of the spirit can *bypass* the physical world of matter. But to believe that is to believe that we are angels rather than human beings, embodied spirits, for such is what we are. By the Incarnation, God has sown himself through Christ into the world of matter, so that from then onwards God chooses to communicate his love to us *through* flesh and blood; food and drink, *through* Jesus Christ our Lord, which is what all prayer and worship pass through to God our Father. This is especially true in the sacrament of the Eucharist and especially so when we meet together as a body for our weekly corporate worship. The food of the Eucharist feeds us and builds us up into mature disciples, taking our proper place and function in the whole Body of Christ, whose members we are through baptism - in what we call the church of God. For the words of Jesus still hold true: 'Unless a man eat of my body and drink of my blood, he has no life in him' - no *real* life, abundant or resurrection life.

So St. Augustine can say: 'We are the body of Christ, that is to say, we must be taken, blessed, broken and given, so that we may partake of the eternal Charity.'

And so it was that the Eucharist or the breaking of bread became the distinctively characteristic act of corporate worship for Christians from the very earliest days - the Lord's own service on the Lord's own day, the first day of the week, the day of resurrection and new life!