



SESSION

5

Ritual

SESSION 5: RITUAL

Extract from *Catching Fire*

Ritual is fundamental to the meaning – making of human beings and, because of this, is common to both ‘secular’ and ‘sacred’ worlds. Words, actions and symbols are used in a way that requires little or no explanation to those participating because they speak so clearly to a shared ‘knowing’. In the Catholic tradition, liturgy – the formal prayer of the church – developed out of the rituals of the early Christian communities who gathered together to remember, to break bread and to celebrate the living reality of Jesus.

There is a ritual pattern common to most gatherings whether they be secular (e.g. birthday parties, sporting events) or sacred (liturgies of the Church, prayer rituals and devotions). The elements of this pattern are: we gather; we listen; we respond; we go forth. All the official liturgies of the church –including the Eucharist, the other sacraments and the Liturgy of the Hours – have a gathering rite, proclamation of scripture; response in spoken word, song or ritual action, and a concluding rite that sends us forth. Prayer rituals and other celebrations, which allow for more flexibility in structure and style also follow this pattern.

All Catholic ritual is founded on an incarnational understanding of God and the belief in the sacramentality of all things. That God is revealed in the world and in a particular and powerful way through Jesus Christ means that God is revealed and encountered in the real and tangible moments of everyday life. The seven sacraments name and celebrate moments that are key points of this divine encounter.

The power of ritual in our Catholic Christian tradition invites us into a deeper reality that engages all our senses – head, heart and hands – in a way that turns the ordinary into the extraordinary. When we understand this, we cannot help but see the world and each other with eyes of reverence.

1. The Christian Year – What does it mean to celebrate it?

The Christian year tells a story. We begin with Advent, awaiting the birth of Christ, then make our way through Christmas, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, the Ascension and Pentecost, until we get to the end of the year, which looks forward to the end of time, the final coming of Christ and the Kingdom of God. We are invited to find ourselves inside this story. This book follows the evolution of this drama and offers material for us to celebrate its seasons.

What does it mean to live within this story? It tells us two things: who we are and what we hope for. First of all, then, who we are: one of the ways in which we understand ourselves is by telling stories about ourselves and other people. When we come home at night after a day’s work, we tell stories of what we have done and whom we have seen. We tell stories of our childhood and of our friendships. We tell stories of our holidays and school days. All these stories explore and express our identity.

There are also stories that explore the identity that we share with larger groups, as members of a family, tribe or nation, as a supporter of a football club or a pupil of a school. I discover who I am by exploring who ‘we’ are. The only prize that I ever won at school was called, I think, Little Arthur’s History of England. I was very proud of this prize, although I must admit that everyone in the class won a prize too! This history of England was intended to give me a sense of who we are as English people. It mainly told how we

went around killing lots of other people, although I hardly noticed that at the time. But we carry with us lots of other stories: stories of our ancestors that tell us what it means to belong to this family, or stories of the wonderful victories of Newcastle United (founded by the Dominicans!), which tell us what it means to belong to the community of their supporters. Part of being a Dominican is that I learn stories about the foundation of the Order, and of what we have done through the centuries.

Every year, we live through the drama, which is the Christian year, from waiting for Christ to be born, until we finish with the Feast of Christ the King. To live within this story is to express and explore an identity. On one level it is obvious that this is the identity of being Christian rather than, for example, Muslim. They celebrate Ramadan and we celebrate Lent. You can spot some Christians on Ash Wednesday by the smudge of ash on their foreheads. This shows that they are taking part in the annual cycle of feasts and fasts that belong to the Christian life. One used to be able to spot Catholics because we always had fish on Fridays.

But the Christian story is an odd one, because it is not fundamentally about being a Christian but about being human. The story that we re-enact each year points us not towards some cosy future in which all Christians will be gathered together around Christ, but towards the Kingdom in which all of humanity will be reconciled and united. To be a Christian is to claim that one's ultimate identity is to be found only in unity with the whole of the rest of humanity, when in Christ all divisions have been destroyed. He is the one in whom 'all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross' (Colossians 1:19f). When, as a child, I become absorbed in Little Arthur's History of England, I was being initiated into an identity that marked me out from other people. I was English and so not French or German or American. But to live within the rhythm of the Christian story should not give me an identity which is exclusive – not Muslim, or Buddhist. It invites me beyond all exclusive identities. It tells me that we cannot flourish fully and be properly ourselves outside the Kingdom, in which all injustice and suffering and inequality will be over. Herbert McCabe OP asserts that 'baptism is not the sacrament of the membership of the Church, it is membership of the Church; it is the sacrament of membership of humanity.

Stories tell us where we belong and what our home is like. Stories of England or India or Zimbabwe tell people that this is where they are at home. It is interesting that the story that we live every year as Christians has its roots in the Jewish story of the Exodus, which told of how the Hebrews were summoned by God out of slavery in Egypt to worship him in freedom on Mount Sinai. God then led them to the Promised Land, flowing with milk and honey. This was the story that Jesus remembered and celebrated with his disciples as they gathered together in the upper room on the night before he was brutally killed. They celebrated the Passover, the story of liberation and homecoming. But then Jesus took bread, blessed it and broke it and gave it to them saying, 'This is my body, given for you.' And so with the wine. This is the core of our Christian story, and tells of the homecoming of all humanity, the promise that in Christ all conflict and rivalry and hatred will be finished. So to be a Christian is to have an odd sort of identity. On one level, it is an exclusive identity. If one is a Christian then one is not an atheist or a Hindu. But on another level, it is an identity, which points one beyond all exclusions, to a home, which we cannot yet imagine or understand, as a citizen of the Kingdom.

The seed, from which the Christian year grew, then, was the memory of the events, which spanned Maundy Thursday and Easter Sunday. During the early centuries the story began to expand backwards and forwards to cover the whole year. In the early fourth century it spread backwards to include Lent, which was originally the time during which converts prepared themselves to enter the community by baptism during the Easter Vigil. And it spread forward, with the Easter season continuing until Pentecost. In this Easter time it was forbidden for Christians to kneel down or to fast. We had to stand up to show that God had raised us to our feet and will raise us up after death. And we feasted to celebrate our redemption. Then in the mid-fourth century we see the emergence of Christmas, with Advent being added in the sixth century. The story gradually evolved so as to explore more deeply who we are and what we hope for.

Each year we live through this long story. It stretches open our little identities, as English or Irish, as followers of this football team or that band, and points towards a larger identity which is beyond words, which is to be a member of the whole of humanity in Christ. No matter what is going on in our personal and family lives, Advent comes and we begin to wait for the birth of Christ. It has a rhythm that may not always chime in with what we are feeling at that moment. On some Good Fridays we may be filled with happiness for some reason: Newcastle United has won a match, the sun is shining and we shall be meeting someone we love at the end of the day. And yet this day in the year summons us to sorrow. On Easter Day the Church summons us to rejoice, but we may be feeling miserable. Notoriously Christmas is a time when millions of people feel depressed.

So what is the point of our lives being shaped by this Christian year, with its rhythm of anticipation and celebrations, mourning and rejoicing? It reminds us that we belong with people who are different from us, whom we do not even know and yet who are our brothers and sisters in God. For some of the poorest, it is always Good Friday. Millions are crucified by debt and poverty. On Good Friday we share their desolation. For if they are dying then so are we, for they are flesh of our flesh. On Easter we are invited to rejoice, even if our lives are sad for some reason. We rejoice with the whole community, which celebrates the conquest of death and injustice.

Following the story of Christ's life takes us through every possible emotion, from desolation to exultation. It stretches open our hearts and minds to identify with people who live all these moments now. Christ now is arrested unjustly and tortured by the police and soldiers all over the world. Christ today has his head covered with plastic bags and is beaten on his feet in torture cells everywhere. Christ is humiliated and mocked, and dies in millions of people. Christ today rises from the dead, in millions of small victories over injustice. Our story is his story. His story is ours. The Christian year stretches us open to all humanity, with its suffering and flourishing. Be celebrating the drama every year our own personal and private stories are taken into the story of humanity.

The mission of Christian Aid and CAFOD is to work for a world in which poverty and injustice will be over and in which the dignity of every human being will be respected. This is about more than economics. It is about helping a world to emerge in which who we are and what it means to be human will be visible. If the humanity of any of our brothers and sisters on this planet is hidden or destroyed, then humanity itself is wounded. So making our way through the cycle of the Christian year, making all its seasons, is a reaching out to discover who we are with each other in Christ.

We celebrate this year. The word 'celebrate' comes from the same root as 'celebrity'. To celebrate is to rejoice in, to pay honour to. We live in a culture of celebrity. Surveys have shown that the highest aspiration of the young in both Europe and the United States is to become a celebrity. To be a celebrity is of course, as it is often said to be famous for being famous! But being famous is a sort of peak of existence. To be seen on the television is to really exist, to matter. This desire for fame has always existed. When St Augustine was a young man, he and his fellow young Africans longed 'to live for ever in the mouths of the people'. But celebrities are puffed up for a moment, and then deflated by the media that gave them existence. Most of the six billion people on this planet will not be known for a few miles from where they are born and die. The vast majority of people live and die virtually in oblivion.

We celebrate the Christian year. And that means that we celebrate something deeper than celebrity. We celebrate the God whose memory embraces everyone and who never forgets. Inside this vast story sweeping from creation to the Kingdom, there is a space for all the little stories of the small people who are easily overlooked. In the Gospels we see Jesus meeting lepers, whom people wished to forget, and widows with their mites, whom they would never have noticed. We celebrate that you do not have to be a celebrity to matter, for in this story of God's friendship with humanity, no one is too insignificant, for God Jesus said, 'Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me.'

This book is supposed to be a resource for the celebration of the Christian year. And one way that it does that is to include as often as possible the stories of those who are often unnoticed or ignored. The celebration of the Christian year honours those who are not famous, who have no adulation, and whose memories are not cherished. We hear their stories, and are offered the possibility of praying with their prayers. The book is full of their names, from all over the globe.

In Natal, one of my brethren, Philippe Denis, runs a project for AIDS orphans. Often these children lose both their parents. They grow up with no memories of their ancestors, and so no knowledge of who they are. Philippe helps them to make memory boxes for keeping photos, letters, bits of clothing: anything that preserves a memory of those who gave birth to them. This means that they have some sign of their identity, of their roots in the past. They have a sense of who they are, to which they can cling in this uncertain world. But humanity needs its memory boxes too. They have their part in the story of humanity that we celebrate. In this book we offer the prayers and reflections of people who come from all parts of the globe. When we prepare meetings or worship to celebrate the seasons of the Christian year, then we will be able to hear their voices too. Our own communities will be stretched open to hear the voices of our unknown brothers and sisters. We may be touched by a glimpse of the spaciousness of the Kingdom.

The second thing that this story of the Christian year does is to give us hope. Eight million people a year die of poverty; millions are suffering from malnutrition, AIDS and malaria. Unjust economic structures bring increasing wealth to some and poverty to others. Our planet is threatened by ecological disaster. The challenges are so great that we might feel tempted to give up and join the 'now generations': eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we shall die.

We live in a time in which many people have lost hope for the future. This does not mean that they are miserable or depressed all the time. It is just that at the beginning of the third millennium we have fewer shared dreams for the future of humanity. Oliver Bennett of Warwick University wrote a book called *Cultural Pessimism: Narratives of Decline* in

the Postmodern World. He argues that with the increasing inequalities of our world, the spread of AIDS, growing violence in the inner city, the diffusion of criminal networks, we are suffering from a collective depression. Gone are the dreams of the 1960s, when everything seemed possible. Faced with the future, we have no good story to tell. Many people have ceased to dream of how we can make the world a better place for everyone, and tend to concentrate on what we can do for ourselves. Progress has been privatised.

There are today two stories that are often told about the future of humanity. The first is of ecological disaster and the second is of a war on terrorism. Neither of these promises anything for us and our children. The leaders of the rich nations, especially the United States, seem to lack the political will to confront pollution, and the war on terrorism seems to hold out the prospect of endless violence. What could ever count as winging it? Sir Martin Rees, the President of the Royal Society, recently published a book called *Our Final Century? Will the Human Race Survive the Twenty-first Century?*

In the face of this temptation to despair, what is the hope that our Christian story offers? Does it tell us what is going to happen? Can we read the Bible and have a special knowledge of what is around the corner? I do not believe so. People have always tried to read the Book of Revelation as giving us hidden clues as to what is imminent, but it never turns out as they expect. In every generation people have examined the numbers and declared that 'the end is nigh', and they have always turned out to be wrong. I do not think that the Bible should be read as coded history. We do believe that God will be faithful to humanity, and that we shall ultimately find peace and flourishing in God. Human history will not turn out ultimately to be a dead end. The Christian story promises us the final triumph of meaning over absurdity, but it gives us no account of how this will happen. It is a story of hope, but it does not say how that hope will be realised in history.

The twentieth century was crucified by ideologies that knew the road map to paradise. Fascism, Nazism, Communism, and even to a certain extent, raw neo-liberal Capitalism, knew the way to the future, and forced human beings to march towards it in accordance with their plans. They knew the story and wanted humanity to conform to it. And so, tens of millions of people were sacrificed on the altars of their ideologies.

I cannot forget my visit to the Tuol Sleng genocide centre in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Tens of thousands of people were brought here to be interrogated and killed. The walls are lined with thousands of photographs of those whose lives ended here. Some of them look at the camera with fear, some sullenly: some smile hesitantly, as if they hoped that a smile might earn a few more days of life. Those who ran the centre kept meticulous records, which they had no time to destroy when the Pol Pot regime finally fell. There are signs, which command silence. And everyone was silenced. This is what happens when one tries to force humanity to conform to a road map. The road leads to the Killing Fields. In July 2004, I visited Auschwitz for the first time. At the entrance there is a map with railway lines that covered the whole of Europe, from Vichy France to the Ukraine, from Norway to Greece. All the lines converged at the gas chambers. These were literally the end of the line. Human technological efficiency devoured the lives of millions, as it tried to force its Paradise on humanity.

As we begin this third millennium, we Christians have a story that does give us hope and which we re-enact every year. But it does not do this by presenting us with a road map. This is as well, since after the most destructive century in human history, we are naturally distrustful of anyone who proposes a plan for the future. How then does our story offer hope?

The nuclear seed of the Christian story, from which the whole story germinated, is that of the last three days of the life of Jesus. On the night before he died, he gathered his disciples together for the Last Supper. Already his death was plotted, and was on the way to being accomplished. As he celebrated the Last Supper, the soldiers were on their way. But at the table he made a sign. He took bread, blessed it, shared it with the disciples and said, 'This is my body, given for you.' And so with the wine, poured out for many.

The Last Supper is the time when the disciples lost any story to tell of the future. They had been sustained on their way to Jerusalem by stories of military victory, of Jesus being installed as Messiah, and no doubt they hoped that they would all get top jobs in the new regime. But on that night it was clear that all that they could see ahead of them was disaster, failure, or dead end. At that moment Jesus did not offer an alternative story of the future. He did not appeal to Plan B. He did not say, 'Well, crucifixion is just a temporary setback. On Easter Sunday, I will rise from the dead and we shall carry on as before.' He grasped this moment of defeat and made of it a sign of hope. The paradox at the heart of Christianity is that its founding story looks back to when there was no story to tell of the future. Its hope looks back to the moment when there was no hope. All we were given was a sign.

The Last Supper is the clash between two sorts of power. There is the power of the political and religious authorities. These are the strong and brutal powers of money and armies, which will take Jesus captive and destroy him. In the face of their threat, Jesus does not reply with brutal force. He is the lamb who is taken away to be slaughtered. Instead he replies with a sign. He takes the Jewish sign of the Passover, of the exodus from bondage in Egypt, and makes of it a sign of our liberation from all that can imprison us and destroy us. This is a sign offered in the face of death. It does not tell us the story of what will happen afterwards, but it speaks of hope. When everything is falling apart, it speaks of our coming home.

I was in Rwanda during the early years leading up to the genocide when violence was beginning to break out all over the country. One day four of us decided to go north to visit the Dominican sisters who were serving the refugees caught up in the midst of war. The soldiers had barricaded the road going north and warned us not to go any further because the country was on fire, but we did not realise how serious it was and set off. We were frequently stopped, hauled out of the car by groups of masked and armed rebels, and had to talk our way through. We visited a refugee camp with tens of thousands of people living in squalor under plastic sheets. We went to a hospital filled with young children whose limbs had been blown off. I shall forever remember one young lad who had lost his legs, an arm and an eye, and his father who was sitting by the bed weeping. That evening we went back to the simple hut where our sisters lived. We celebrated the Eucharist. After the gospel, I was sure I was supposed to speak some encouraging words of hope. But what was there to say? But there was a sign that we had been given. This sign spoke of that for which we had no words. We had a memory of what Jesus had done in the face of death, when all had seemed without purpose.

The Christian year grows out of the seed of the story of those last three days. As I wrote above, it was extended backwards, to the birth of Jesus, to our waiting for that birth, and ultimately to the beginning of creation. It also reached forward to Pentecost, and ultimately to the coming of the Kingdom. The story was stretched backward and forward so that we could all find ourselves within its hope. The story was extended from those compact and dramatic last three days to take in all sorts of events. It made it a roomy

story, with lots of space. We see Jesus meeting prostitutes, calling disciples, telling parables, healing the sick, arguing with Pharisees. We are taken back to Christ's birth and the expectant pregnancy of his mother. And it reaches forward to include our own time as we await the Kingdom. This was so that we can find all the dramas of our lives inside it, as children, as expectant parents, as sick and hurt, as curious and challenged by the words of this man. And our time too is embraced in the time between Pentecost and the end. Whatever pain or suffering or joy we may experience, it is somewhere there in that story. Whatever experiences we may have, they have their place in the drama of the Christian year. They are embraced and we are carried by the surge of the narrative onwards. For the now generation, any moment is absolute. If we are sorrowful, then the sorrow is absolute, because this is the only moment that there is. To live within this story is to find ourselves, whatever happens, moving towards the Kingdom. This story opens up a future in which things need not be as they are.

In *Animal Dreams* by Barbara Kingsolver, we are told how to live in hope:

'Codi, here's what I have decided: the very least that you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most that you can do is to live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof ... right now I am living in that hope, running down its hallway and touching the walls on both sides. I can't tell you how good it feels.'

The Christian story is one inside which we can live, and run down its passages, touching the walls on both sides. Hope is not just for what is in the future. Our story makes it the atmosphere we breathe now. It remains a story that does not give us the false and dangerous assurance of the road map. It gives us hope but it does not tell us how that hope will be fulfilled. When we discuss debt relief, aid programmes, different economic theories, then as Christians we have no privileged information. We have to join in the debate with everyone else, arguing our corner. There is no special Christian political programme or economic theory. There are politics and economics that we can reject as unchristian, but none which can claim our exclusive allegiance. We have to struggle with the facts and the argument, just like everyone else.

This Christian story embodies what is fundamental to our identity. We are citizens of the Kingdom. This is a more fundamental identity than any we could ever receive from any nation or city or ethnic group. But the gospel does not tell us how we are to bring about a society which realises that promised unity. The annual cycle of the liturgical year is a sign but not a manifesto. I can tell the story of England, which makes sense of what it means for me to be English. I cannot yet tell the story of humanity and know the fullness of what it means to be human. The story of the Christian year is a sort of sign of that. Its full meaning lies ahead.

We live that cycle every year. We triumphantly arrive at the end with the Feast of Christ the King, awaiting Christ's coming at the end of time. But then we are taken right back to the beginning, and once again we are in Advent, waiting for Christ to come as a child. And we might be forgiven if sometimes we wonder whether it gets us anywhere. It may seem like a sort of liturgical snakes and ladders. Just when we are attaining the goal, then we slide back down to the beginning again. Might we not be tempted to think that this endless repetition means that we are going around in circles, wandering around in the desert for year after year, like the Israelites after the escape from Egypt? What is the point of beginning yet again?

We celebrate the Christian year. And celebration is more than just attending meetings or fulfilling rituals. Celebration implies song and joy; these look beyond the present moment to give us a tiny glimpse of the Kingdom already. I was in Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, when the rebels surrounded the city. It looked as if the city might fall at any moment. The tension was terrible. And then we went to celebrate the Eucharist, and in Africa one sees what celebration really means. Before we even arrived at the altar everyone was dancing. We might have been in the midst of war but for a moment there was a glimpse of God's promise, the joy of the Kingdom. Celebration gives us hope.

The earliest prayers in our tradition are the Psalms and these are songs. In these songs the Israelites recounted everything: their victories and their defeats, their anguish and fear, their sorrow and their joys. Everything that is human can be found in these songs, even violence and neurosis, and yet nearly every psalm makes its way beyond the darkness into the light. And this is right because song and music are perhaps the ultimate expression of hope. Music is strong enough to carry within itself even despair, and transcend it. Karl Barth said of Mozart's music that it was a great 'no' embraced by the resounding 'yes'. The Psalms reach beyond all that is destructive in human beings towards a hope, which is beyond words, and sustained only by music and metaphor. In Psalm 57, for example, the psalmist is obviously having a tough time. Everyone is out to get him or her: 'I lie in the midst of lions that greedily devour the sons of men; their teeth are spears and arrows, their tongues sharp swords.' But all this pain is transformed into music that overcomes the night: 'I will sing and make melody.

Awake my soul! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn.'

Faced with the suffering and injustice of this world, we are sustained in our hope by songs that speak a hope, which is beyond words. It is a hope that, as Zechariah sings, gives 'light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death' (Luke 1:79). We celebrate the Christian year, rather than just recounting it, because it is a celebration that embodies hope. And so this book contains songs too, for every season, to carry us onwards through its narrative of liberation, even when no future is in sight. It is to help you celebrate.

The cycle of the Christian year has sometimes in the past been a source of division between Christians. Some denominations at the time of the Reformation banned the celebration of even Christmas and Easter because they were considered to be superstitious. During the centuries, we can give thanks that these hostilities have been largely overcome. And it is a sign of hope that this book brings together, for the celebration of the liturgical seasons, Christians from every Church. If we can hear each other's hope and love, each other's songs, then we shall be drawn together and Christianity will better fulfil its vocation, to be a sign of the unity of all humanity in the Kingdom.

2. "Deep Listening", by John Fox

When someone deeply listens to you

It is like holding out a dented cup you have had since childhood

And watching it fill up with cold fresh water.

When it balances on the top of the rim

You are understood.

When it overflows and touches your skin

You are loved.

When someone deeply listens to you

The room where you stay starts a new life
And the place where you wrote your first poem
Begins to blow in your mind's eye.
It's as if gold has been discovered.
When someone deeply listens to you
Your bare feet are on the earth
And the beloved land that seemed distant
Is now at home within you.

3. Light a Candle

I light a candle
I say a prayer
I light a candle in Your Name.
For the tender moments of teaching
For the energy for deep new learning
For the fire of vocation's calling
I light a candle in Your Name.
Against the chill of the world's dark troubles
In the face of sadness here among us
For my heart's longing in the night
I light a candle in Your Name.
To signal hope for all that might be
To whisper thanks for all that is
To reflect the Love I'll carry with me
I light a candle in Your Name.
I light a candle
I say a prayer
I light a candle in Your Name.