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The Supper of *The Servant of God*

by W. Royce Clark

The Lord's Supper takes its meaning from Jesus' death. Jesus' death, in turn, derives its meaning from who he was, what he claimed about himself, what he wanted for the world, and what ultimately happened to him. The church depicts him speaking of himself rather strangely, combining the supranatural "Son of Man" of certain Jewish apocalyptic writings with the "Servant of God" in Isaiah, insisting that the "Son of Man" was destined to serve rather than be served, and to give his life as a ransom for many. He predicted this role of serving even to the point of self-sacrifice also for his disciples (Mark 10:42-45). Therefore, those who participate in the Lord's Supper pledge themselves to a life of service to others, even to the point of death.

But why a life of service to others? There is more to it. His primary concern was no privatistic, otherworldly redemption in the hereafter. Instead, the church painted its picture of Jesus as one who championed the cause of the marginalized, the poor, the outcasts, the people who appeared not to care about spiritual things such as the Torah. He regarded the treatment they experienced in life at the hands of others as unjust, so as he befriended them, he continually insisted that God requires not sacrifice so much as *love, mercy, and justice*. At his baptism he was identified as God's "servant" (Mark 1:11; Matt 3:17; Luke 3:22). His role was to establish "*justice in the earth*."

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,

my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him,
he will bring forth justice to the
nations.

He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not
quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not fail or be discouraged
till he has established justice in the
earth,
and the coastlands wait for his law.
(Isaiah 42:1-4)

Emerging from the tests he encountered in the wilderness subsequent to his baptism, Jesus identified himself in the Nazareth synagogue as the same servant of God who, in preaching good news to the poor, would set free the captives and liberate those who were oppressed (Luke 4:18-19; Isa 61:1-2). He adopted this vision of his service to others for the sake of *justice*.

Not only do the texts portray Jesus as stating that his unselfish and divinely appointed service was in pursuit of *justice on earth*, and not a merely internal or spiritualized salvation or rescue out of this world, but notably he is only the paradigm servant. That is, in both the servant of God in Isaiah

as well as the son of man in Daniel, the internal textual understanding is that these figures represent the whole people of God, not just one individual. So the group itself is the servant and son of man, the group itself is therefore to replicate the paradigm of morality and justice found in this Jesus. This is the reason Jesus was not stretching the passage when he told them that they too would have to serve rather than be served; it could not be otherwise if they were his followers.

This means that the Lord's Supper is not primarily a means of mere spiritual introspection of so many isolated individual Christians. It is rather a *pledging to serve as a community to bring about justice in this world*. Otherwise, it has nothing to do with Jesus' self-image, his mission, nor the resurrection power by which he commissioned his disciples to continue the precise work that he began. This is not reading a "social gospel" into the text. There is simply no other possible interpretation of the text and life of Jesus but this *gospel of justice on the earth*.

Once we see this, it is not strange that the Fourth Gospel also has Jesus insisting that the "servant" will have the same fate as the "master," that is, his community of disciples may well be required to serve to the point of suffering as he. They have the same mission of propagating justice on the earth, and that may well bring the "suffering" on their heads depicted even in Isaiah. Injustice, after all, is not easily overthrown! And it would probably be expecting far too much to think it would be actually abolished by the death of this one exceptional Jesus as exemplar! Injustice is so deeply entrenched, in fact, that Jesus predicted that people might even think they were on the side of justice and God by killing Jesus' own disciples who themselves were emulating his love and concern for justice (John 15:20; 16:2-3)! What an irony!

So the work of the servant is the work of his community, just as the "body" of Christ is also the church. The servant and his "body" are as inseparable in the reality of their common pursuit of *justice on the earth* as they are in the holy communion.

Had Jesus' call been merely for everyone to find his or her own individual salvation, he would not have needed to enlist others in his mission, to ask them to endanger their own lives. Had the vocation assigned to the servant been merely to suffer for his own sins, injustice would never have been addressed since the servant himself was not unjust, especially in comparison with the world at large. But God's intention in Isaiah, understood and followed by Jesus, was to bring a frontal attack against injustice—not through compromise of principles, nor through some formalized and bureaucratic strategic program, nor

certainly by meeting sin with more sin or fire with more fire—but *to attack injustice with innocence, service, love, and non-violent protest*. That was precisely what he did on the cross.

However, this prophetic protest and "servant of God" protest against the injustice of the world is often stifled by a Lord's Supper or eucharist that focuses on Christology-for-Christology's-sake or for the sake merely of worship. Worship is a legitimate part of the supper. But it is only the beginning point, not the goal. Jesus' goal was "justice on the earth." God, through the servant, is in fact worthy of worship by us *only because* the servant stands for justice and the servant's representation of God is of a God of justice. And this focus on justice of the servant and justice of God differs radically from a merely christological observance of the supper in which the focus is on the mystery of the servant being of the "same substance" as the Father or the mystery of the capacity in which Christ is "present" today in the supper.¹ As a matter of fact, the Fourth Gospel does emphasize a "sameness" or likeness between God and Jesus, but it is not a Nicene focus on "same substance." Rather, it uniquely sees a "sameness" that is shared not only by God and Jesus, but also by the *church*. Jesus' concern in describing this is not to awaken us to the fact that we are of the "same substance" with God or share some divine attributes;² instead, he understands love to be the quality shared by God himself and all his disciples—a love that directs one through mercy to serve others for justice—"love, mercy, and justice."

Therefore the servant—both Jesus and his church—realizes its unity with God in its pursuit of justice on earth through love—through a moral life dictated by an ethic of mutual concern. And no more obvious manifestation of that realization occurs than in the observance of the supper.

It is there, in the observance of the supper, that we recall that Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem to die for that cause, that the "kingdom of God" would initiate God's will being "done on earth as in heaven," even as he taught his disciples to pray. It is there that we hear ourselves, as those disciples of old, even when lacking in full understanding of his consciousness or mission, agree to go along with him wherever he goes, even if it means dying with him. It is there that we realize that only those who are willing to forfeit their lives for his cause are those who truly find life. It is there that we come to grasp that the most potent force for justice in the world is the relinquishing of one's rights and privileges, even the right to live, if necessary, in order that others get justice.

For what credit is it, if when you do wrong and are beaten for it you take it patiently? But if when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (I Peter 2:20-24)

It is much less disconcerting, of course, to engage in the supper or communion as merely a meal of spiritual introspection in which I devote the whole of it to contemplating the divine mystery of God in Christ, or my own unworthiness and salvation by God's grace, or my individual public and private sins. But this kind of meal was unknown to Jesus!

Even in the quotation from I Peter above, the author cannot separate the Redeemer Christ from the Ethical Exemplar Christ.³ Despite the fact that Jesus, as servant, propounded no formalized explicit social reform programs, he nevertheless addressed real structures and authorities of injustice.⁴ He lost his life in the process. He stood for the marginalized people of his society over against even the religious authorities, and was nailed to the cross by the religious leaders' view of the Torah. In his concern for other people and their real lives and justice, he dared to get mixed up in actual life rather than mere theory, which always contains ambiguities rather than absolute principles buttressed with crystal-clear directions for implementation. So his piety was questioned, his spiritual insights were ridiculed, his relation with God was doubted, his character was assassinated, his morality was belittled. He was a glutton and drunkard, a Samaritan and even demon-possessed by their assessments. Better to kill him than he not bother any more people!

Perhaps there's the real rub. Perhaps to

what he calls his disciples is too hard, too demanding. Certainly the difficulty is not that we have no true notion of what "justice" entails! Were we to plead that kind of ignorance, we would be admitting to not being able to recognize what Jesus was all about, nor what we thought was fair in life. But we are called to apply that justice within the terribly complex and ambiguous intricacies of actual human life, and that may well cause people to question our motives, our dedication, our ideals, our relation with God, and our morals. And we are so attached to whatever advantages we enjoy in this life, so long as the status quo is retained, that we find it almost incredulous to believe that Jesus really wants us on the firing line for "justice" if it could cost us and our reputation so much! Better to stay entrenched with the brethren, to speak religious clichés among those who appreciate them, to talk to ourselves about our hope of heaven. Better to be satisfied with the relative justice that has prospered our lives; better to think of greater, more eternal missions such as getting people ready for heaven. Better to spiritualize away all the this-worldly implications of those quotations Jesus used from the Jewish Bible. But have we forgotten the gospels? It was Jesus who promised that only those who are willing to identify with him in his cause—to *bring justice on earth*—even to the extent of losing their lives, will thereby preserve or find their lives—and, conversely, those who are so concerned to preserve their lives as to dissociate themselves to a degree from his cause of justice for the world will surely lose their very being, their true selves, in the process (Mark 8:31-9:1).

The supper is our participation with Christ in his servant mission. We are not forced to share in that service for *justice on the earth*. But there is no way we can truly share his mission without sharing his fate. Any other kind of observance of the Lord's Supper would be our denial of him. However, his *ultimate* "fate" is symbolized not merely by the cross but by his "resurrection," and for us that kind of "fate" would be "to die for." It may well be!

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