

My theology is a bit rusty nowadays, but I remember a maxim which went vaguely like this: *the Church makes the eucharist and the eucharist makes the Church* – or was it the other way round? And does it matter? I've always taken this to mean that the Eucharist is central to who we are as Church which ever comes first. It's what the Church *is* or *does*, or what God does for the Church to make it what it is. But the word 'Church' itself is problematic – the ecclesia, the gathering of the people – partly because we are gathered in so many places each doing our eucharist, (or non-eucharist) as Christians, in a bewildering number of ways; dispersed fragments yet to be gathered up; broken bread left over. But what then are the twelve baskets? A symbol of legitimate diversity or of further eating to come? Twelve tribes yet to form a unity? Perhaps Mr Gradgrind can help – one of the more frightening characters in Charles Dickens 's novel 'Hard Times'.

Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who is not to be talked in to allowing for anything over. Thomas Gradgrind, sir...with a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to.

There was a distant echo of this in a recent statement by the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. 'One of the recent trends in western democracies that most worried her, Merkel said, was a social media -fuelled 'mixing of feelings and facts: These are two separate categories: feelings are feelings and facts are facts.' It's a moot point whether we are hearing Merkel as the politician speaking here or Merkel as the quantum Chemist, the scientist, but at least, unlike Mr Gradgrind, she does allow for the existence of feelings and this, I think, is where theology, too, has to allow room for manoeuvre, for there's another maxim too that has something of this problem of circularity about it: and that is that theology is a reflection on experience – it comes *after*, and not *before*, the practice of the people, including their feelings and the way they want to worship. This is very dangerous ground, of course, and many words and blood have been spilt over it in the past and this continues to be so. It's a forever tension. And I'm wondering whether those twelve baskets are deliberately left over, not only as an example of God's superabundant generosity, providing for all our needs, but as a symbol of work yet to be completed, so that it's the process of seeking unity, of seeking reconciliation, of seeking God, of seeking love which is what matters rather than any completion of this process within this world itself or, in the words of the 2nd century Didache (or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles) which we recite after supper everyday in the monastery:

As this bread, once dispersed over the hills, was brought together to become one loaf, so may your Church be brought together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.

And this is just as much a matter of feelings as of fact, and we give God thanks for both. That is, for facts that evoke feelings, and for feelings that evoke facts.

Br John Mayhead
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour