

Feast of Corpus Christi June 3rd, 2010.

Blessed be Jesus in the most holy Sacrament of the altar

Sermon preached at Sts Peter and Paul Wisbech on June 3rd and on June 6th at St James Hockwold and St Andrew's Northwold

Readings:

Gen 14:18-20

1 Cor 11:23-26

John 6:51-58

For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. 1 Cor 11:26

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. Jn 6:51

+In Nomine

I still feel a tingle of anticipation on my birthday. Despite the reality of my far too rapid progress through middle age, there is still a sense of celebratory joy in unwrapping a surprise gift or two from my daughters. The element here is quite often on surprise – the younger one is 'imaginative' shall we say...this year it was a gollywog...how un-pc is that! All part of the fun of giving and receiving. And those of us who were married before the days of wedding lists at John Lewis' will no doubt empathise with my story about the 'mystery' wedding gift which my husband and I received – a brass ornament – a curious object – we never did work out which way was 'up' and we felt too embarrassed to ask!

Giving and receiving gifts is an integral part of what it means to be human – of living in relationship. Couples on their wedding day express their love and commitment through the giving and receiving of rings. But the most significant gifts are, very often, not material at all. The gift of a hug when you're feeling down, the gift of time – of a listening ear and the kettle on, the gift of encouragement, the gift of self. Only yesterday when praying the

morning office I came across a fragile slip of paper in my prayer book with a poem typed up by my mother and annotated in her handwriting, which she gave to me at a time when I needed encouragement to stick with a difficult situation. Gifts such as these are so precious because they are icons of love freely given and gratefully received. Indeed at the deepest level, gift requires great sacrifice...people gift their lives to ensure the safety and freedom of those they love.

Human gifting and human love reflects God's love towards us. In the OT, God gifted His people with liberation through the Exodus, with life's essentials - food and drink - in the desert wilderness, with fertile land and many descendants and with the intimacy of covenant relationship.

Then He gave us the greatest gift of all...Jesus, Emmanuel...God with us...

The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us...full of grace and truth.

This print of Fra Angelico's Annunciation shows the moment when Jesus was 'enfleshed' within Mary's womb. Her 'yes' to God, her openness to God's purposes for humankind, released the Holy Spirit's power to enable the miracle of conception...*for nothing is impossible with God.*

The Icon of the Trinity by Anton Rublev extends the theme of love and gift which is at the heart of the Godhead. In the centre of the Icon the three persons sit around an altar inclined towards each other in perfect harmony. Upon the altar, directly in front of the central figure of Jesus, stands a full chalice. Jesus' costly sacrifice, the gift of His life poured out on the Cross points to the sacrificial love which is at the heart of the Godhead. Jesus gave His life for us, that we might have eternal life in His name.

Every time we celebrate the Holy Eucharist, we make present the gift of Christ's eternal and life-giving sacrifice. The letter to the Hebrews points

towards that enigmatic OT character Melchizidek, King and Priest who offered his sacrifice of bread and wine, as an emblem of Jesus who on the night before He died, took bread in His sacred hands and blessed it with the words – *take, eat, this is my body broken for you*. Then, taking a cup of wine he said *this is my blood of the new and eternal covenant which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins*.

In 1 Corinthians 11, St Paul makes the authenticity of Jesus' words and actions at the Last Supper absolutely clear:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you...

Here, St Paul does not merely interpret Jesus' words but faithfully transmits them. At the Last Supper Jesus took ordinary staples of life – bread and wine – and transformed them to be the means by which His presence is made known and His life giving sacrifice is enacted *and* proclaimed, as St Paul says *until He comes*.

One of the key Reformation debates on the Eucharist centred on the meaning of 'is' in Jesus' words of institution. The radical reformer Ulrich Zwingli claimed a 'direct line' to Jesus by claiming to know something not revealed to St Paul - that Jesus didn't actually mean 'is' but meant 'represents'!

Unfortunately for dear Ulrich the Scriptural texts don't substantiate his hypothesis. All three Gospels *and* St Paul report Jesus' words as this *is* my body ...this *is* my blood whilst this evening's Gospel from St John Chapter 6 is even more explicit:

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. Jn 6:51

The association between Jesus' gift of His life for our salvation and His Sacramental Presence in bread and wine could not be clearer in Holy

Scripture. It's very dangerous indeed to claim to know the mind of Christ as Zwingli did. Jesus actually DID mean what He said...everything He said...

But yes, it *is* hard theology. It was hard for the Jews of Jesus' day [John 6 verse 52], even for his disciples - many turned away from him [verses 60 and 66] - it was hard for the reformer Ulrich Zwingli and it's not easy for us to comprehend either. It's beyond human reason. This is why some people simply could not and can never accept it. However, it *is* the great Mystery at the heart of our Faith. At the end of John chapter 6, Jesus asks the twelve: *Do you also wish to go away?* And Peter replies: *Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.*

I can't explain to you how the miracle occurs but I *know*, without a shadow of doubt, through faith, that by the power of the Holy Spirit and through the words that Jesus himself spoke - **at the altar, Jesus Christ is present** - in bread and wine... just as by the power of the same Spirit, Jesus was conceived and enfleshed in Mary's womb... *for nothing is impossible with God.*

When Jesus becomes our food and drink in this way he does not adopt a disguise or pretend to be what he is not. He shows himself most clearly for what he really is: the source of our new life in God. And by eating the body of Christ, by drinking his blood in this holy sacrament, we accept his gift in a way that most clearly reveals our dependence on God, our hunger for his love.

Indeed, Jesus knew how essential it would be for us to be nourished by His presence on our journey through this life. He *is* the Bread of Life who sustains and sanctifies us through the gift of His sacramental presence. The words of today's Gospel are neither empty nor trite but contain nothing less than the promise of the gift of eternal life in Christ through taking His very life into ourselves:

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them. Jn 6:56

In Christ, God makes us a holy people, a royal priesthood. To celebrate the feast of Corpus Christi is not only to celebrate the reality of the body and blood we receive at communion, but to acknowledge that through this gift we become ourselves members of that body of Christ in the world. By receiving communion and taking Christ into our bodies we exist collectively in a new way – as the Body of Christ, renewed and empowered to carry His saving love into our communities. The Word is enfleshed for many – Jesus who feeds us with His presence releases our gifts for mission so that *He* is the gift *we* carry. That changes how we think about and relate to the world. It sharpens our appetite for the truth, and to live out our baptismal calling in the service of God's kingdom.

The traditional 14th century antiphon for the Feast of Corpus Christi goes like this:

O sacred banquet, in which Christ is received, the memory of his Passion is renewed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given us!

In the Holy Eucharist our hearts and minds are filled with grace. We don't leave Eucharist unchanged. The real presence of Jesus is a fact. There is a meeting of hearts; and in that, from that, a real sanctification transforms us. Below any spiritual level we can adequately gauge or sense, God is powerfully at work to make us holy, to fit us for the glory we are called to share.

That is why the Holy Eucharist remains the central act of Christian worship and why it is Christ's most precious gift to us His people – through His sacramental presence we are transformed, renewed and sustained to become His Presence and to gift His love in a world longing for His peace.

Blessed be Jesus in the most Holy Sacrament of the altar.

Amen.