

**SERMON FOR CORPUS CHRISTI** 11<sup>th</sup> June, which is also the Feast of our patron,  
though he doesn't get a look-in in this sermon!!

Today is the feast of Corpus Christi or – to use the title it is given in Church of England calendars, which is an explanation as much as a title – the Feast of Thanksgiving for the Institution of Holy Communion. Today is the day on which we give thanks for the Body and Blood of the Lord. And as I have said before, Corpus Christi is a chance to remember the Last Supper simply as triumph and celebration. When we remember the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday in Holy Week, it is inevitably only a part of that wider and more tragic series of events that are the Passion of the Lord. We know that Good Friday is just around the corner, and therefore Maundy Thursday is a day of many conflicting emotions. It is a Feast day, when white vestments are worn and the Gloria is sung; but it ends in the Garden of Gethsemane, with pain and grief and tragedy; with abandonment and arrest.

And so today we go back to that Last Supper again, and we do so solely in gratitude and thanksgiving, remembering only the triumph, only the joy that, “the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”<sup>1</sup>

And of course, this year, our giving thanks for Holy Communion, has itself a somewhat tragic flavour, because we are giving thanks for that which we cannot in fact enjoy, or at least not in its fullness. An integral aspect of celebrating our Holy Communion with God has been that together we share in the one bread and the one cup, embodying as we do so our fellowship together in the One Body that is Christ. We are members in Him, and so members of each other. We have a physical and spiritual unity that is underpinned and strengthened by our shared communion, which the current Lockdown prevents us from participating in fully.

There is of course a strong parallel here with many of those other restrictions which this Lockdown imposes. We can no longer visit friends and family in their houses. We can, at time of writing, see up to six people outdoors, provided we stay six feet away from each other. And of course, we use can Video calling of various sorts on computers, or even just the plain old telephone. But we cannot hug one another; we cannot hold hands, or kiss. We cannot physically express our love for each other; and, while we understand why this is necessary, it remains a great deprivation.

We can be present, over the phone, down computer wires, on a screen: we can even be present six feet apart in the outdoors, or in a garden: and all those sorts of ‘presence’ are important, and valuable. But they are not the same as a hug, or a kiss – not the same as physical contact. Studies have demonstrated how important touch is to us: perhaps of all the senses it is the least glamorous, the most taken for granted. But to touch and to be touched: oh how we miss that, when it is gone!

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

And that reminds us of a very important truth behind this sacrament – this mysterious revealing of a part of God’s Divine plan – for which we give thanks today. Which is that this holy communion is a kind of recapitulation of the incarnation itself. God became human, for a very limited period, about two thousand years ago. For that brief moment in human history, it was possible to touch – to hold and kiss – God Himself. And people did, though they often didn’t realise how precious this was, when they did it.

And since that time, God has given us a substitute, as it were: a replacement. A physical, real, alternative, to that human body that was crucified, and entombed, and which has ascended, and is now in the highest heaven, bringing creation to be deified in the presence of God Himself.

Holy Communion is now the means by which God gives Himself to us, so that we can hug Him, kiss Him and embrace Him; so that we can have a physical relationship with Him as His disciples did. And of course, it is not quite the same thing, in practice. We don’t, for all sorts of reasons, hug or kiss the Eucharistic elements: they aren’t the same as a human body would be. We can’t treat even consecrated bread and wine in precisely the same way that we would treat Jesus of Nazareth. But nonetheless Communion is a way in which we share something of that ordinary intimacy that the disciples enjoyed, and that God sanctifies and blesses.

We cannot hug or kiss the elements, but we can digest them, and we can know ourselves to be in the presence of God in an intimate, personal, physical and also spiritual manner. There is an important, and real, physical aspect to the presence of Jesus in this sacrament of the Last Supper, just as there is when we baptise in His name. When we are baptised, we actually enter into the Body of the Lord, and are enveloped in His love; likewise, when we are in the presence of the consecrated elements, we are existing with Jesus in this same physical plane, and He Himself enters into us in Communion with us. We commune with Jesus: and this means *all* of us; physical, spiritual, mental; and both good and bad! The bits of ourselves we don’t like, as well as the bits we do!

So today, when we give thanks for Jesus’ instituting of Holy Communion at the Last Supper; when we give thanks for the fact that Jesus took bread and wine and gave thanks over them: we are giving thanks for the fact that God gives Himself over to us to be physically present with us and for us, because He loves us so much. We give thanks that God repeatedly, every day, shows how much He values these ordinary everyday earthly human realities of presence – of touch and taste. We give thanks that these things – hugs and kisses and physical relationships – are important to Him, and to His plan for us. We give thanks that these sensations and aspects of our humanity, are all a part of His ultimate Divine plan.

And of course, in 2020, we mourn that just as we can for the time being not hug loved ones who live apart from us; so also, for the time being, we can no longer hug, and let ourselves be hugged, by God: we can no longer physically receive Him into ourselves in this way. But, just as we can still keep in touch by telephone with friends, so also we can through this Eucharist commune spiritually with God. As the service is celebrated in St Barnabas or elsewhere; as bread and wine are taken, and we give thanks over them as Jesus told us to do, and as He did Himself; as these actions are performed, so we can enter into these actions

and become a part of them, by bringing ourselves prayerfully into that presence, into that act that we do in Jesus' name, and that we believe He does through us and with us. Though apart, we are still members of one another: though apart, we are still one Body, just as we are one family, even in different households, under different roofs.

And this enforced separation reminds us of the world in which we always live; reminds us of the world in which all our services of thanksgiving – all our Eucharists – are celebrated. God has willingly demeaned Himself, by coming so far down to us, by coming to be absolutely present physically in this world of grief and pain and sin, that has abused Him so badly. This is a world of grief and pain and loss for us and for Him: His very gift of Himself to us, is the gift of a body that was broken and abused and underappreciated and ignored. We ourselves, and the world of which we are a part, are flawed and bruised and broken. We struggle in world beset by evil and loss: and Jesus Himself entered fully into all of the horror of death and rejection.

And yet, even all of that darkness and grief are somehow embraced in His victory. The bread that is our participation – our sharing – in that victory, is His Body, broken and buried. And yet also glorious. The body that died is the body that rose again, and that ascended into the heavens where He is glorified and triumphant: the same Body, bearing its scars, now sits at the right hand of God: at the place of highest honour we can imagine. The bread that is broken for us, is the bread that unites us together in Him, whether we are present in church or not. The bread that is consecrated here on earth, across time and continents, is the same as the Body that reigns in glory, the great High Priest in heaven, in whom we are all deified and transformed.

So it is that at the end of this service, Jesus Himself will bless us, present as He is in the bread of the Lord's Supper. The bread over which we will give thanks, that will become for us His Body: that bread is Him, with us and in us; with us in the darkness and loss, in us in our pain and confusion, lifting us up in His arms into the undying light of heaven. And that bread will be the means in which Jesus lifts His hands over us, blessing us in His name: blessing us as His hands in the world: blessing us as the vessels of His light and love.

Just as though Jesus the man were here, in His human form, He will hold out His love and life over us, filling us with His peace and joy, enfolding us in His love. He is always with us: we are never apart from Him. We do not always recognise that: here and now He thrusts Himself before us, in this mundane-seeming fashion.

And we should remember: what looks like papery wafer to us, *is* the bread of angels: just as was the manna that the Jews ate in their own wilderness. It didn't look like much to them, and they took it rather for granted. But this is the bread of heaven, the bread we are given in our wilderness, and it tells us two things. Firstly, that God will sustain us in whatever wildernesses may entrap us, for however long they may last: it may be thirteen weeks, it may be forty years or more, but He will not abandon us!

Secondly, it is this reality of ours that is really paper-thin. Though it doesn't look like much, this bread of angels will outlast the stars and galaxies: it is the only really *real* thing that there is, because God dwells fully and purely in it, as He will one day dwell in us. And then we too will be really *real*: really ourselves. We will be completely ourselves in God, and we

will shine like stars. And this bread is a kind of gateway or icon, just as Jesus of Nazareth was Himself; just as we will one day be also. In the words of Austin Farrer: "feeding on Christ's body, we draw our Christendom from him, as a thing illuminated draws its splendour from the sun. We receive what we become; our heavenly embodiment is the overflow of his heavenly body made sacramentally present to us."<sup>2</sup>

Or as the World Council of Churches declares, in its agreed statement on Baptism, the Eucharist and Ministry, usually called the Lima document: "The eucharist is essentially the sacrament of the gift which God makes to us in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Every Christian receives this gift of salvation through communion in the body and blood of Christ. In the eucharistic meal, in the eating and drinking of the bread and wine, Christ grants communion with himself. God himself acts, giving life to the body of Christ and renewing each member."<sup>3</sup>

Or as Jesus Himself declares: "I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh. ... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me. This is the bread which came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live for ever."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> From the essay "The Body of Christ" in "The Crown of the year".

<sup>3</sup> From The Lima Document of The World Council of Churches on Baptism, Eucharist And Ministry.

<sup>4</sup> John 6:48-51, 53-58.