

## SERMON/REFLECTION FOR CORPUS CHRISTI 11 JUNE 2020

Jesus gave thanks over bread and wine at the last supper. He told the disciples with him the bread was his body and the wine was his blood, given and shed for them and for many. They were to do this in remembrance of him. This is recorded, with words that vary to some extent, in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is also described by S. Paul (1 Corinthians 11), writing before the gospels came to their final form. We call it the institution of the eucharist – a word which means thanksgiving. Other names are familiar to us: communion, mass, breaking of bread. Christians have obeyed Jesus' command from the earliest days.

We recall all this at every eucharist, and particularly on Thursday in Holy Week, Maundy Thursday, as our services re-enact the events at the end of Jesus' life on earth. The Maundy Thursday liturgy includes washing of feet, the procession of the sacrament to the altar of repose, recalling Jesus going to the Garden of Gethsemane, and the watch in prayer before the sacrament. In common parlance, there's a lot going on. It was natural that a desire grew, within the church, for some occasion to be devoted to celebrating Jesus' gift of the eucharist in the ongoing life of the church without these other things demanding attention as well. A feast for this purpose began to be celebrated in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and came to be called Corpus Christi, which means the body of Christ.

Today's gospel reading comes from the sixth chapter of S. John, which begins with the feeding of the five thousand: a suitable starting point for Jesus to teach about the bread of life. In the first part of his teaching the emphasis is on believing in him. By the time we reach the passage that is today's gospel the reference is clearly to the eucharist: eating his flesh and drinking his blood. But we must hold the two emphases together: what is important is receiving the sacrament with faith, believing in Jesus, following him in the whole of life, not just in worship.

We are so used to hearing these words (well, I hope we are) that we overlook how shocking they were to his hearers. Eating someone's flesh and drinking someone's blood is barbaric. It was against the Jewish law. Jesus pulls no punches. Sometimes he uses the normal Greek word for eating. But several times in this passage he uses a word closer to chewing or munching. Jesus' teaching warns us against over-spiritualising the eucharist: thinking of it merely as a reminder.

This is part of a bigger picture. Many people divide the human person into body, mind and spirit, or perhaps body, mind and soul – though it can be difficult to say what the difference is between spirit, soul and mind. A common idea of death is the soul leaving the body and going into the next

world. We pray for the souls of the departed. The church, influenced by Greek philosophy, has gone along with this way of thinking about humans. But it's not the authentic view of the original Jewish and Christian tradition. That regards the human person as a unity. Flesh, body, spirit, mind, soul, are different ways of looking at the person, rather than different parts of the person. In the original creation mankind, the rest of nature, and God were in harmony. Sin damaged that harmony, but both Jewish and Christian thinking set forth the hope, the expectation, that God will restore the harmony. Redemption extends not just to humanity, or to the part of the human person that we call soul or spirit, but to the whole of creation of which we are part. The next life is going to be a restoration, a perfecting, a redeeming, of our present life. The immortality of the soul is not a Christian doctrine; the resurrection of the body is, by which is meant the whole person as part of the created order.

Jesus' words, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life," make sense of this bigger picture. Material things – bread and wine, flesh and blood – bring God's life to us. The whole person is redeemed, physical and spiritual aspects not separated. When we celebrate the eucharist, the mass, in this world, we are participating in the heavenly banquet. We look forward to the day when the kingdom comes and we eat the passover and drink the fruit of the vine with our Lord. At Corpus Christi we celebrate the fullness of our redemption.