

**Corpus Christi / Body & Blood of Christ (Year A): With Jesus intimately.**

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Deuteronomy 8:2-3+14-16: Remember God's past great works**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: 1 Corinthians 10:16-17: Our 'Communion' with Jesus;**

**Gospel: John 6:51-58: Jesus' own teaching on what the Eucharist means.**

My most memorable feast-day of Corpus Christi was in June, 1966. Aged 18, I was in the first year of Ushaw's senior seminary (called 'Divines'). For some reason, I was told to do one of the readings at the service of Matins (now renamed *The Office of Readings*). In those days, lay people did not read at Mass or at any other big event; the readings were sung in Latin; the whole college, about 350 students, aged 11-24, would be there. The result: I have never been so nervous – before or since. The service (all in Latin) involved many psalms, and 3 long readings, each divided into 3 smaller sections. Mine was the middle bit of the middle reading. For students like me, the waiting for my moment to arrive was sheer torture. Then I had to go to the lectern, sing my piece as best I could, then return to my place. The relief afterwards was fantastic! When the breviary was revised in the 1970's, that middle reading was kept; it now forms the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading in the Office of Readings for Corpus Christi.

I promise to have less nostalgia in future homilies, but I included this Ushaw memory not to fill space (honest!), but to show how we were trained to take Corpus Christi seriously. The day was full of special services, because, as future Catholic priests, the Holy Eucharist would be at the centre of our lives. To be honest, in that old-style RC Church, it was also vital to the lives of many practising Catholics, like my parents. Simple people of deep faith, Mass & Communion was one of the spiritual 'props' on which their lives were based. Whatever the rights & wrongs of the modern Church & today's society, that deep attachment to the Mass seems to have disappeared from most people aged under 60 – and from many older people, too.

Does it matter? Yes, I think so. On that day of nerves 57 years ago, the text I had to sing was from a sermon of St Thomas Aquinas, which was (in English): *'How wonderful is this banquet, which brings us salvation and is full of delight! What could be more precious? It is not the meat of animals that is offered, as happened in the Old Testament; at this meal Christ, the true God, is set before us to eat. No sacrament contributes more to our salvation than this, for it purges away our sins, increases our virtues and fills our minds with all the spiritual gifts. It is offered in the Church for the living and the dead, so that it may be beneficial to all, as it was instituted for the salvation of all.'*

Despite the formal language of that medieval sermon (imagine it in Latin!), you can get the gist. If Baptism is the most important and basic of the sacraments, the Holy Eucharist is the most intimate, because it lets you and me, as earth-bound and morally weak human beings, share Jesus' divine life with his Father and the Holy Spirit. It has the shape & format of a meal (it came from the Last Supper) but it also has the purpose of a sacrifice, as it is linked with Jesus' offering of himself on the cross. At Communion, we "eat" the Body of Christ - not in a crude, cannibalistic sense, but spiritually. In this Sunday's gospel, Jesus promises : "My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink". Our Church (like St Paul in 1 Cor 11:27) interprets this as meaning a true, but not physical, presence of Jesus.

However, sacraments do have a physical side – things we hear, touch, smell, eat/drink – and they use our senses as well as our minds to help us experience Jesus' unseen presence. As humans, we need this 'tactile' bit as well as the spiritual, especially if we wish to keep alive memories of past events – ours, or other people's. (Before digital-photography, refugees fleeing their homes were advised to take family photos with them. This was to remind them of deceased loved-ones – and thus, their own past – wherever they managed to settle.) For us, the 'past event' is Jesus' death on the cross, and the resurrection that followed it. The Mass is seen by the RC Church as a living reminder – both physical and spiritual – of what Jesus went through 2,000 years ago. Even more: when we share it, we are involved in a living, 'present event', rather than a historical souvenir. By receiving Communion, we are joined to Jesus' presence as if we were in the room with him. It is a loving, intimate bond – imagine sitting on a settee with him – but also sacred, and demanding our respect. Yes, faith is needed, but once it is experienced, no other religion can offer us so close a union with the divine.

It is a shame that people have not returned to Mass in the numbers that attended before the pandemic. Our Church is different from what it was just 3 years ago, but not all 'new' things are good. Our use of the internet (through which most of you will be reading this) is a good thing – a tool that the Holy Spirit uses to spread more widely the gospel message (and thus, Jesus Himself). However, it is not the same as a physical sharing in the community worship in our parishes; that is where the sacramental presence of Jesus' Body & Blood is to be enjoyed. *Fr Jim Dunne.*

