

Corpus Christi 2021

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We normally celebrate the Festival of Corpus Christi with considerable ceremonial – a High Mass, many of our favourite Eucharistic hymns, and the full rite of Benediction. This year covid-related restrictions make that impossible. Many people may lament this – here and further afield in the Catholic world. However, simplicity can be a positive help in matters to do with our faith, if that simplicity draws us back to essentials. Those few of us who came to the very simplified Stations of the Cross in Lent this year can attest to that.

The formal name for this day in our Anglican Common Worship can help us here. It is called “The Day of Thanksgiving for the Institution of Holy Communion” and in brackets Corpus Christi. The Day of Thanksgiving of course takes us back to the word Eucharist – from the Greek word for thanksgiving, *eucharistia*. The related verb, to give thanks, is one of the words used in the accounts of the Last Supper in the synoptic gospels to describe what Jesus said at the supper table when he offered his disciples bread and wine as his body and blood.

But on this day in our place and time, what are we giving thanks for? Or what should we give thanks for?

In the first instance the particular thanksgiving for the institution of the Holy Communion, the Eucharist, the Mass, takes us into a broader thanksgiving for all the sacraments of the church as profound means of grace. We believe that Almighty God, in his great mercy, takes ordinary things in our human lives – bread, wine, water, oil; and human words and actions – the laying on of hands, the giving and receiving of rings, the sign of the cross. He sanctifies them and makes them, and us, holy. No part of our human experience is beyond his reach and grace. In a very real sense he inhabits them all and in so doing reaches into our human lives and changes us. I sometimes think it is a pity we don't at the High or Solemn Mass hear the words the priest says at the preparation of the altar, though we do at the simpler said Masses during the week. We say over the bread for example, “Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation: through your goodness we have this bread to set before you, which earth has

given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life.” I think of the farmers who have planted and nurtured and harvested the grain, and those who have made the altar breads: in our case the wafers come from the Franciscan sisters at Freeland just a few miles away. All this ordinary labour becomes the means of grace.

But we must remember that behind the human actions and words of the sacraments the host is God himself. He uses men and women for the sacramental work; but it is essentially his own. Many of our great eucharistic hymns make this point. ‘Alleluia, sing to Jesus’ addresses Christ in its final verse as “robed in flesh our great High Priest”: another begins, “We hail thy presence glorious, O Christ our great High Priest, o’er sin and death victorious, at thy thanksgiving feast”.

The great Russian Orthodox Bishop in the later 20th century, Anthony Bloom, wrote of the sacrament of Reconciliation as a doorway through which we walk to meet Christ. This image of the doorway is another way of understanding all sacraments. When we speak of doorways in a religious context we in England might quite naturally think of Holman Hunt’s great painting, *The Light of the World*, one variant of which hangs in Keble College chapel. Christ stands outside a locked door, which has to be opened from the inside. The painter had in mind the door as the human heart. But the sacraments show us that the door of Christ’s heart, if I can put it that way, is always open. Christ stands at the doorway with open arms, inviting us to walk through into his embrace – whether we are being baptised, or are penitent sinners, sick, or just ordinary Christians who need to be sustained and healed on our journey. If this pandemic has taught us anything about the practice of our faith perhaps it is just this. As we have longed to embrace those close to us, but live outside our households, so for us in the early stages of lockdown, and for many even now, we have deeply missed the sacramental embrace of God. As we shall hear during the rite of Benediction, words of George Herbert who wrote that Love bids us welcome – to feast at his table.

The sacrament whose institution we give thanks for today is at heart the simplest of actions – the offering of bread and wine, the remembering of the Last Supper and the repetition of Our Lord’s words, and the giving of the bread and wine back to God’s people. But it has layers of meaning and mystery which perhaps defy theological

formulae and exposition: layers which we go on realising and experiencing as we grow in grace.

At the Last Supper the disciples gathered round the table at the time of Passover would have understood the words and actions of Christ – in as much as they did understand it – in the context of the surrounding celebrations, and the sacrifice of the Passover lambs. The authors of the synoptic gospels make it clear that the backdrop to the supper table was the remembering of God's rescue of his chosen people and the creation of a covenant relationship between them and their Creator. In Jewish sacrificial worship before the destruction of the Temple, one of the most powerful themes was the offering of something of great value, even life itself, to re-establish, renew, the covenant relationship. Now Christ offers himself in love to the Father, making a new covenant, a new holy people called by his name. His life and his forthcoming death reflect back to the Father God's own love.

By uniting his friends in that offering and reflecting, in that life and death, he makes them - and us - a new, holy people. In the baptismal service the priest marks the forehead of the candidate with oil and says, "Christ claims you for his own". In the Eucharist Christ welcomes and empowers with his own life those he has claimed for his own.

Our own understanding of this sacrament is powerfully influenced by the meditations in John's gospel which replace any account of the Last Supper. We read of the symbolism of Christ as the true vine and ourselves as branches deriving their life and their sustenance from him. And one of the great "I am" sayings is of course, "I am the bread of life." These reinforce the image of the Eucharist as a meal, where we physically eat and drink. A real meal was of course the early Christian reality of the remembering of the Last Supper before it became more ritualised – and we know what St. Paul thought of those whose behaviour desecrated those early Christian meals of remembrance, cutting at the heart of Christ's welcome to all.

Food and drink are necessary for the sustaining of all life. They are also vital for the proper growth of life. Without them we do not grow to our full stature, to adulthood and maturity. In the idiom of modern child care "we fail to thrive". This is as true for

our growth as Christians as much as for our normal human life. But our growth as Christians is perhaps even more astounding and mysterious than the growth of the human body and mind. For as we grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ, to use a phrase from 2 Peter, it is the life of Christ himself which takes root and grows in us. Christ gives himself in sacramental signs to be our food and drink, our nourishment for growth into his likeness. Or as St. Paul put it to the Ephesians, the gifts given to different Christians are all for this one goal: that we may come to maturity in Christ, “to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” (Ephesians, 4, 13)

At the heart of our Christian life, and of this sacrament, is this Christ-making deep within us. So it is right that we celebrate this feast day with deep solemnity. We may not fully understand what we do as we celebrate this blessed sacrament of our redemption and our sanctification. But we trust that just as Our Lord gave himself to his first disciples, so he gives himself to us in his great mercy and love – to make us like him, to make us holy and part of his body on earth. I close with some words of the great Anglican Archbishop of the 20th century, Michael Ramsey. He wrote, “Ask not what you make of the Blessed Sacrament, but what the Blessed Sacrament makes of you.”