

Corpus Christi 2017

This day called Corpus Christi or 'Thanksgiving for Holy Communion' in the Common Worship lectionary comes at an interesting time for me personally. I have just finished preparing three of our gathering to receive communion and I am preparing myself to preside at my first Eucharist in 17 days time.

The word 'preparing' is of interest. I wonder how you prepared for this Eucharist. There was a time when preparation to receive communion was taken very seriously and is often cited as why Protestants don't receive communion more than twice a year in many churches. Fasting, perhaps personal confession, weeks of prayer or mortification of the body have all been part of preparation to receive, for many differing churches.

In the Spanish city of Seville the Corpus Christi festival is known as, 'the Thursday that shines greater than the sun.'

What could possibly be the reason for such a statement? And how does all of this tie in with a service to give thanks for and to celebrate the sacrament of the Eucharist? What has a thirteenth century festival got to say to us today? A feast that was abolished in Anglicanism in 1548 but which over the last one hundred years has seen its importance rise in the catholic churches in our Anglican tradition. A feast begun and prayed for by St Juliana of Liege in Belgium and which spread world wide when the Pope, Urban the 4th made it official. If as Fr David said on Sunday we are a Eucharistic community what does communion mean to us who gather each week in this place to take part in a ritual that has gone on for nearly two thousand years?

What a lot of questions - but as yet no answers. Perhaps this is because we are thinking here of a great mystery. A mystery that has concerned humans for years and is still the creator of division and bitterness. But it shouldn't be - for the greatest act of love that ever took place, should not be the reason for bitterness and hatred - it should bring love and truth, light and understanding.

Our readings tonight focus on food, a High priest who brings out food to Abraham and blesses him. St Paul's institution of the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians where the word 'often' jumps out at me - "Do this as **often** as you drink it, and, for as **often** as you eat and drink ."

Often doesn't resonate with communion being twice a year! And of course our gospel passage from John, where Jesus says he is the bread of life - the living bread - come down from heaven - that all who eat it will live forever.

Tonight's gospel passage comes near the end of a whole long chapter about eating and understanding. It begins with the feeding of the 5000 and centres on faith, searching, eating and drinking and finishes with St Peter's declaration to Jesus, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." So this man standing before them was living bread and had words of eternal life.

The middle of the chapter focuses on the horror of the Jewish religious authorities in a man talking about eating flesh and drinking blood. Jewish law absolutely forbid the drinking or eating of blood or blood products - still does today - what Jesus was saying was shocking, but Jesus came to turn things upside down. He told his followers to eat and drink him, to remember him, to make him present in memory and action and by doing so unite ourselves with him.

If we are the body of Christ on earth then how much more are we just that - when we gather, listen, give thanks, make offering and share this special meal.

We gather, all of us different in looks, in likes, in loves - and we are united by being the Body of Christ in a specific place and God's power is therefore at work in us and therefore in the world through our acts of love.

We listen to God in scripture, to Jesus in the Gospel (which is why we stand), and we hear the words Jesus used at the last supper making him present with us - a precious moment!

We offer the bread and wine which represents our life and our work and reminds us of God's promise that when two or three are gathered he will be there - He is 'present' - all of this reminding us that we are all important to God and so is the world which we inhabit.

We share, share bread and drink from one cup, having communion with God, a share with God - sharing in the life of Christ and in his death. For God comes to us in crushed grain and grape just as Jesus was crushed on the cross to show that ultimate act of love - where crushing becomes new life, and for us brings eternal life.

In the Eucharist Jesus is present with us, then inside us as we eat and drink, making us truly the Body of Christ. Now some of this food we store, to give to those who cannot be with us due to infirmity - we store Jesus, his presence with us on earth in a wafer and a drop of wine - and if we stand for the Gospel as an act of reverence and worship, how much more should we reverence bread and wine and indeed be blessed by it. Rather than the priest acting as a vessel a means of conveying God's blessing, tonight the host (Jesus), blesses us in the form of bread made possible by the priest taking the host (Jesus), into his covered hands and allowing Christ to bless us.

This is an act of celebration. Tonight is a celebration of the church's offering, our offering to the world, the host is '*Processed*' to enact the bringing of all people into communion with Christ, Christ going out into the world. A celebration of Christ's presence in the Eucharist in words and elements, 'the body of Christ in essence and efficacy. A thanksgiving for the church's continuing communion with Christ.

When Jesus had left the disciples, they had to begin to take his place. We take his place today, making him present in the world through love and when fed by him, so that we can continue to be him in the world. Jesus remains with us today in sacraments, and this is what I am preparing for - to make Jesus present in the sacrament and in the Body of Christ - you and me. It is in the actions of the Eucharist - gathering, hearing one another, listening to God, breaking the bread and sharing the cup that we truly encounter the body of Christ.

Amen.

efficacious = intended to produce - appropriate

essence = existence (spiritual), absolute being, totality of a thing, an indispensable thing