

## Corpus Christi The Face of God

14 6 09

Lord Jesus Christ  
grant us so to reverence the sacred mysteries  
of your holy body and blood  
that we may know within ourselves  
and show forth in our lives  
the fruits of your redemption.

My text this morning may be found in John's gospel chapter 6 and verse 51, 'I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

Last Thursday was the feast of Corpus Christi or if you prefer the modern designation in our Common Worship Lectionary, it was the Day of Thanksgiving for the Institution of Holy Communion. Corpus Christi is the last of four festivals – Ascension, Pentecost and Trinity – each an important insight into the Christian faith whose date changes annually being determined by the variable date of Easter. Corpus Christi, as its new name suggests, is an opportunity to give thanks for the Institution of Holy Communion. Strictly speaking, Maundy Thursday is the date on which we should be giving thanks for the meal that unites and divides Christians but the Church in its wisdom thought to separate this joyful occasion

from the necessary solemnity of Easter week so instead chose a day towards Midsummer when people could have a holiday and our joy could overflow without the shadow of the cross on the following day, Good Friday, overshadowing the celebrations.

Our weekly Eucharist or Holy Communion is a re-enactment of the Last Supper in which Jesus predicts his death on the Cross. As a Passover meal, it is full of Jewish symbolism and resonance making allusion to the sacrificial lamb whose shed blood allows the angel of death to pass over. It takes two common features of that meal, red wine and unleavened bread – matzah or pain azyme which you can buy in Intermarché – and gives them new significance.

The act of communion like everything we do is open to interpretation and our Church, the Anglican Church being a Church which embraces a broad spectrum of Christian understanding, allows us to interpret what we do literally or symbolically. At the heart of the ceremony is the notion of the presence of God. Of course, God is present – he is by definition everywhere and where better to find God than in a church whose architecture and ceremonies are meant to make us more God-aware, more conscious of his presence among us?

The nub of the controversy is whether the bread and wine are actually the body and blood of Christ – Le Présence Réel. The words Christ uses suggests they are. In Luke's account of the Last Supper, he records these familiar words, the words of consecration: that Jesus took bread and 'after blessing it, he broke it, gave it to them and said "Take, eat this is my body." Then he took a cup; and after giving

thanks he gave it to them saying, "Drink from it all of you for this is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins". The words are literal enough but since Jesus was still present with his disciples very much flesh and blood, the bread and the wine themselves were symbols of what is to come. So the Anglican Church is right to allow two interpretations of what we do: a symbolic or real presence and its up to each one of us to decide for ourselves what we believe to be the more accurate reflection of what is happening in this service of communion with God.

Communion, therefore, is an essential part of our worship in which, symbolically or actually, we are reminded of the presence of Christ among us. It is an essential part of Christ's continuing ministry to all people in all places and at all times: to make God known. Judaism is about the unknowable God making himself known to his Chosen People first by the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, then through Moses and the Torah or the Law and lastly through the prophets from Isaiah to Malachi. Where Christianity differs from Judaism is our understanding that God's manifestation of himself receives its fullest epiphany in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. One clear expression of this article of faith is the voice of God at Jesus' Baptism: 'This is my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased.' No man has seen the face of God not even Moses or Elijah but Jesus is the face of God which we can all see. We believe that we are all made in the image of God but as the Son of God that Jesus is the human face of God and that in Jesus' life and teaching, we can see God face-to-face.

Corpus Christi, then, is an important festival because it reminds us of the institution of the Eucharist, a ritual meal which reminds us of the presence of Christ with us. Jesus Christ is important because he makes imminent the transcendent, makes known the unknown, makes knowable the unknowable, Jesus Christ is the person who most fully shows us the face of God. And so as Christians it is our duty to be, as far as we can, mirrors of Christ to other people so that we in our turn may make God real to those he knows and loves.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist*

*St Bartholomew's Dinard*

*14<sup>th</sup> June, 2009*

H: Sermon 20: Corpus Christi

