

Sermon: The Sacraments

This is my body...this is my blood...Do this in remembrance of me...

God's authority over us is declared in The Bible and in the Sacraments. Last week, in our Christian basics series, we thought a bit about the Bible. Today I'd like to say something about the Sacraments. Scripture and Sacrament belong together of course – because Our Lord's institution of the Sacrament is recorded in the Bible.

For the first three-quarters of the church's history, the celebration of the Sacraments was the daily business of the church: it was what the church *did* and what the church was *for*. There was no English Bible, and Scripture was literally a closed book to the lay-folk. Religion was hearing Mass and very occasionally receiving the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ or – as this is delicately put by consumerist nonconformists – *taking Communion*.

The Christian faith was before the Reformation the context for daily living. Everyone in Europe went by the church's calendar of feasts and fasts. There were many parades and processions, days out in the fields with as much eating and drinking as praying. *Dauncing signifying matrimonie*. Rogation when they would beat the bounds and engage in agreeable scuffles with those from the next parish. Corpus Christi, white and gold, incense and bells. And the many feasts of the Virgin Mary with *Ave's* blue vestments and young girls in white veils; statues of the Virgin with her Son in her arms processed through the towns and villages. Many cakes and much ale.

There came towards the end of the 15th century a crisis in civilisation. As it often happens, a crisis of civilisation is partly precipitated by technological innovation. Five hundred years ago, this was the invention of the printing press. Good and bad alike come out of technological innovation. The train that takes you to Brighton can transport Jews to Auschwitz. The Internet brings into my home all the writings of the church Fathers, the illustrated catalogue of the Louvre – *and*, all unbidden, lurid moving pictures of men (and even sometimes women) doing things in public that ought not to be done even in private. So mass printing gave us the rapid exchange of ideas; Aristotle, medieval science and theology; the works of Bacon, Marlowe and Shakespeare; most wonderful of all the English Bible and *The Book of Common Prayer*.

The Reformation also produced a catastrophic intellectual and cultural shift in which spiritual *things* were displaced by spiritual and existential *ideas*. Hamlet is oppressed by what? – by his *thoughts*. And *There's nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so*. The philosophers of the period made the fact of human conjecture the basis of epistemology and metaphysical speculation. *Things* were being replaced by what could be *said* about them. And if you read Cranmer's Prayer Book of 1552 you will find the Sacraments themselves reduced to the status of visual aids to Scripture.

All those lovely processions of vivid colours and exalted hearts, the Blessed Sacrament carried through the streets not just of Rome and Seville, but also through sordid and desultory places such as Oldham, Lancashire and Barnoldswick; the secluded villages and hamlets of medieval England – Thomas Cranmer and his

fellow-reformers would have them all done away. Perhaps these days we are more wary when we hear mention of *reformation*? We have after all seen the *reform* of all our institutions from the House of Lords to the schools and universities.

What happened – among all the good things that happened, such as a Prayer Book in the clearest, freshest English and an exalted translation of the Bible – was the near abolition of the tangible presence of religion. And the mysterious sacramental depth, *the deep down holiness of things* was *sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought*. It's an odd thing to have a theology which will allow you holy *words* but won't allow you holy *things*. It's as if your marriage is only what you and your wife *say* to each other. Or as if a good dinner were just sitting there reading the menu card. It is very odd indeed – especially since the Christian faith has at its very centre the Incarnation: the word made flesh; thoughts made things.

Please don't run away with the idea that The Rector hates the Bible or Cranmer's Prayer Book. You detected, I hope, my lifelong love of the Bible in last week's sermon, available on the St Michael's website. And I have campaigned for thirty years for *The Book of Common Prayer* – one might almost say in spite of the Prayer Book Society. But Book and Sacraments go together. And when either is neglected there occurs a hiatus which is historically and theologically traumatic. When the Bible is neglected, there is the danger of a lapse into idolatry and sympathetic magic. But where there is idolatrous word-worship, consequences follow which are just as bad – or even worse.

For this, or something very much like it, is what has happened these last five hundred years. The church taught that you need a church and a priest and rituals, sacraments and sacred objects. Then some Reformers said you don't need a church or a priest: all you need is to read the Bible. The heirs to the reformers were the Enlightenment thinkers who said you don't need to read the Bible: you simply need to believe in a distant God and in his grand design of the universe. And then the 19th century critics said you don't need to believe in God or design. So we got the 20th century, atheistic Logical Positivism, atheistic Existentialism, metaphysical and moral nihilism, Samuel Beckett and Jean Paul Sartre. And now the prevailing philosophy of Deconstruction says that even words themselves have no fixed meanings. This is what happens when we lose hold of *things* and imagine that *words* contain all.

It's a funny thing, but it's as if deep down we know that words of themselves are not the whole truth. For whenever we search for a *concept* our language itself keeps hankering after *things*. So we don't just say *the clergy* we talk about *the collar*. Nor *episcopacy* but *the mitre*. Nor the monarch only but *the crown*. Lawyers are *silks* and the Lord Chancellor has his *woolsack*. These things are not only emblems, they are something more. They are not signs in the sense that a road sign is a sign – just something on a post by the motorway. They are not just signs like the notice *beware of the bull*. *The crown, the mitre* and *the collar* are signs that partake of the reality to which they point. And that is what Sacraments do. They reveal God because they are given by God. And in the Blessed Sacrament of the altar, the sacred elements are the being of God himself. Because the Saviour said so.

And cheer up! By the grace of God the Sacraments are still as true as ever, and they are available. Our Lord promised to be really present with us when we break bread

and drink wine in remembrance of him. And his is a *real* presence. Don't get bogged down in theories of how and why – transubstantiation, consubstantiation or whatever – just believe the promise of Our Lord. And if you do believe him, you will find in this Blessed Sacrament comfort, encouragement, strength and help in your *daily* life; and you will begin the first day of your *eternal* life.

Queen Elizabeth herself, asked her opinion on Christ's presence in the Sacrament, said:

*T'was God the Word that spake it,
He took the bread and brake it;
And what the Word did make it,
That I believe and take it.*