

Sermon: The Real Presence

Last Thursday was the Festival of Corpus Christi or, as the *Common Worship* calendar somewhat long-windedly puts it, *Thanksgiving for the Institution of the Holy Communion*. Corpus Christi means, of course, the Body of Christ, the Eucharist, the Holy Communion, The Lord's Supper which, according to the Prayer Book, is *commonly called the Mass*. How are we to understand these things – the Body of Christ, the Blood of Christ? We are talking about a Sacrament, *an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace*. Another phrase used to refer to the Sacraments is *Holy Mysteries*. But here a mystery is not a riddle: it is the visible means by which we can approach invisible things which pass all understanding.

We have the liturgy of the Body and Blood from Our Lord himself. All four Gospels are unanimous. They all report his saying the same words: *This is my Body....this is my Blood*. Did he mean it was *a sign or a symbol* of his Body and Blood? What would be the point of that? God does not give us tokens and promissory notes. He gives us himself.

The words of this service point to a place beyond words. God is God – not the Regius Professor of Divinity. We are not to suppose that the Holy Communion is a sort of role-play – like the solemn elevation of the collecting plate at High Matins? Is it just a memorial, *Do this in remembrance of me?* It is a memorial, but a memorial of a particular kind: the word used by the Gospel is *anamnesis* which means more than a memorial: it means making real in the present something from the past.

It was planted deeply in our minds from the very beginning of our spiritual awareness. Last week I mentioned how God implanted our early sense of the Trinity in us, in those three mysterious figures who appeared outside Abraham's tent. God does the same with the Sacrament of the Body and Blood. Nearly four thousand years ago, when Abraham returned from his victory over Chedorlaomer, *The Book of Genesis tells us,*

Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the Most High God. Melchizedek means King of Righteousness. He foreshadows Christ the King of Righteousness. He is also King of Salem *shalom*, that is, like Christ, the King of Peace. He is without father or mother or genealogy, and has neither beginning nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he continues a priest for ever.

There are so many ancient events which prepare us for The Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood. There was the Bread of the Presence, in the ancient Jewish Tabernacle in the holy of holies. God commanded Moses, 1250 years before Christ: *Thou shalt set the bread of the Presence on the table before me always.*

The Old Testament sacrifice of a lamb, as opposed to any other animal, was important. The lamb did not resist, run away, or even cry out. Isaiah had foretold that the Lamb of God would do the same.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth.

The sacrifice of the Body and Blood of Christ puts an end to all other forms of sacrifice. He does something new and extraordinary. All earlier sacrifices had been made by men to God. In Christ and in the Holy Communion, we have God sacrificing himself for man. In the Jewish Passover the blood of a lamb caused God's judgement to pass over the people and they were spared. Christ is the true Lamb of God. So the *Prayer Book* says in the Easter Antiphons: *Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us, therefore let us keep the feast.* The Passover of the Jews prefigures the Holy Communion. It goes like this:

The bread of the Passover is unleavened, pure as Jesus was pure. This unleavened bread had dark stripes, as Jesus' back was striped by Pilate's scourging. It is pierced, as he was pierced on the Cross. During the Passover, the head of the family takes three pieces of unleavened bread, reminding us of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He breaks in half the second piece, foreshadowing Christ the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity crucified. He then wraps one of these two pieces, called the *afikomen* in white linen, reminding us of Jesus' linen burial cloth, and buries or hides it, as Jesus was entombed. Later the youngest at table resurrects or finds the *afikomen*, as Jesus rose from the dead. The head of the family then breaks the *afikomen* and passes it around for all to eat, as Jesus did at the Last Supper and commanded us to do the same forever.

Jesus said, *Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.*

St. Paul explained clearly what breaking bread means. *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the Blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the Body of Christ?*

All the Fathers of the early church are agreed that in the Holy Communion we do truly receive the Body and Blood of Christ. St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, who had known St John himself said:

I have no taste for the food that perishes nor for the pleasures of this life. I want the Bread of God which is the Flesh of Christ, who was the seed of David; and for drink I desire His Blood which is love that cannot be destroyed.

St Athanasius said:

So long as the prayers of supplication and entreaties have not been made, there is only bread and wine. But after the great and wonderful prayers have been completed, then the bread is become the Body, and the wine the Blood, of our Lord Jesus Christ.

St. John Chrysostom declared:

I wish to add something that is plainly awe-inspiring, but do not be astonished or upset. This Sacrifice, no matter who offers it, be it Peter or Paul, is always the same as that which Christ gave His disciples and which priests now offer: The offering of today is in no way inferior to that which Christ offered, because it is not men who sanctify the offering of today; it is the same Christ

who sanctified His own. For just as the words which God spoke are the very same as those which the priest now speaks, so too the oblation is the very same.

St Augustine said:

You ought to know what you have received, what you are going to receive, and what you ought to receive daily. That Bread which you see on the altar, having been sanctified by the Word of God, is the Body of Christ. The chalice, or rather, what is in that chalice, having been sanctified by the word of God, is the Blood of Christ.

Elizabeth I Queen of England was asked how she understood the Sacrament and she replied:

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.

You may be surprised to hear that the Protestant reformer, Martin Luther agreed. He got angry with those who wouldn't believe the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist and said:

Who, but the devil, has granted such licence of wresting the words of the holy Scripture? Who ever read in the Scriptures, that my Body is the same as the sign of my Body? What language in the world ever spoke so? It is only then the devil, that imposes upon us by these fanatical men. Not one of the Fathers of the Church, though so numerous, ever spoke like that: not one of them ever said, It is only bread and wine; or, The Body and Blood of Christ is not there present.

But you are not coming to a theological theory at the altar this morning. This is close, intimate and personal. This is your own real meeting with Jesus. You stretch out your hands to him and he gives you his life, his very corporeal self. The Blessed Sacrament is his tenderness and love for you. And the priest only copies his words. It is Jesus himself who says to you:

This is my Body...This is my Blood. Take, eat. For my Flesh is meat indeed, and my Blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my Flesh and drinketh my Blood dwelleth in me, and I in him.