

Corpus Christi 2008

A friend of mine who is now a Dean of chapel in Cambridge was recently telling her congregation of her first experience worshipping in this church. She was a student at St John's, and sought out her parish church like a good Anglican. She enjoyed the liturgy, but she had never seen anything like it, and on her way out she said something along those lines as she shook the hand of the then Vicar – Fr Richard Holloway. He smiled and said to her “It's outrageous, but it's fun”.

That phrase might be a motto for the celebration of Corpus Christi and the devotion of blessing with the sacrament which we call Benediction. At the end of this mass we shall concentrate our worship on the presence of Christ among us in the eucharist, and receive a blessing with the Eucharistic host displayed for all to see in what we call a monstrance. Much modern catholic thinking is hesitant about such behaviour. As the late great Fr Herbert McCabe used to say, “the sacrament is for eating, not for waving around” and, as all well brought up children know, it is not polite to play with one's food. It is certainly food with which we are dealing. But it's no ordinary food. The words of Jesus which we heard from John's sixth chapter are themselves outrageous: he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him. Our familiarity

with our own texts has rendered this extraordinary saying rather ordinary. Benediction allows us to remind ourselves just how far from ordinary, just how outrageous, those words actually are.

Greek teachers enjoy reminding students that the word Jesus uses does not mean “eats” so much as “munches”. He who munches on my flesh. The material reality of the eucharist, something physical which is something spiritual, could hardly be more clearly stated. But the point of the word is not an emphasis on realism so much as an emphasis on life. The word really belongs in the context of animals feeding, or grazing. For livestock to graze on something is continually to be digesting it, to be sustained by that process of chewing and eating which is the basis of their life.

John's sixth chapter tells us that the eucharist is the source of true life. What is present to us in the Eucharistic elements is the personal presence of the one who is always and perfectly interceding for all of humanity. The Eucharistic celebration sees us present to God our unworthy offering in order that it be taken by Christ and transformed into his perfect offering. Having been transformed, it is given back to the worshipper as the food by which the life of the church, the Body of Christ, is sustained, the food which is indeed our daily bread.

The presence of Christ, if it is real, is the presence of that dynamic giving and receiving. Eucharistic worship is about body language, the language of offering and self-giving: both the physical body language of the kneeling participant and the theological body language of humanity redeemed by identification with the self-giving of the Trinity. Adoration of Christ in the eucharist enables us to offer ourselves in worship to the God whose very life is self-offering, of self-sacrifice, the act of self-giving love which is the eternal action of the Trinity.

To be sure Benediction is over the top. It points to things that no action of ours can comprehend. Proper study of the catholic doctrine of the eucharist will remind us that the presence of Christ in the sacrament is not a physical, local presence – we are no nearer to Christ at the altar than we are to the north pole, and the body of Christ is not moved as we carry it around. The body of Christ cannot be physically contained, limited or constrained. But that is precisely the point. Christ's body has no physical limitation, but my body does. My body is all I have with which to worship my redeemer, and so if I do not use that body, that physical thing, to acknowledge the saving presence of Christ, then I might as well not have a body at all. My body language must be the language of worship.

Corpus Christi, and Benediction generally, allow us to focus our selves, our souls and bodies, on the miracle of the eucharist. The eucharist, the mass, holy communion - it doesn't matter what you call it - the eucharist is the Christian story acted out in miniature. The offering of the sinless Son of God for the sinful children of men is not a past event. To be sure, the crucifixion is a historical event long past in the human scheme of things, but God knows no such bounds of time. The incarnate humanity of Christ, offered, sacrificed, risen and ascended, is always part of the Godhead, real humanity drawn up into God and eternally representing humanity to God - re-presenting it, offering it again in its perfection so that our imperfections can be overlooked. That representing, that presence, that salvation, is the gift we celebrate every time we come to this altar. And occasionally, we do well to remind ourselves just how outrageous that is.