

Jesus Bread of Life
Stations and Benediction, 8 March 2006

Benediction is not for everyone. That's not to say it shouldn't be for everyone, it should, but we in the Catholic tradition of Anglicanism would be fools if we didn't recognise that it's a form of worship which is strange to many. Of course, that might be no bad thing. The words of Jesus which I read from John's sixth chapter are nothing if not strange: 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 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, and in particular of grazing. We now use that term somewhat differently - when we graze on something we pick at it to stave off our appetites. But for livestock to graze on something is

continually to be digesting it, to be sustained by that process of chewing and eating.

Here we are not, literally, eating. We are worshipping as we do in the mass, but here the emphasis is adoration and rather than receiving. 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 at which the host was consecrated saw 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. In this context, outside that celebration, that principal dramatic action of taking, offering, and feeding is not played out, but the presence of Christ, if it is real, is the presence of that dynamic giving and receiving. Benediction 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. Participation in Benediction enables us to offer ourselves in worship to the God whose very life is self-offering, of self-sacrifice.

Some of you will be tired of hearing me say that the word sacrifice is used too frequently simply to mean 'give something up' and the sense of 'make something holy' is forgotten. The self-giving of God the Son in the incarnation is the sacrifice of humanity, the making holy, setting apart, of the created human race in order that it be offered – in Christ, in the eucharist – to the Father. By the eucharist, Christ makes holy not just bread and wine, but every member of his body, by drawing them into the life of God, the life of perfect offering, the presence which is always being given – to the Father in perfect love, to humanity in the initiative of grace. In its bizarre, extraordinary and wonderful way, this little service of benediction reminds us of a bizarre, extraordinary and wonderful truth: God feeds our life with his own.