

On Corpus Christi: Christ's Thankful, Forward-Looking People

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor, ACT; Sunday 3 June 2018

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Exodus 24: 3-8; Psalm 116; 1 Corinthians 10: 14-21; Mark 14: 12-16, 22-24

+In the name of God: Father, Son & Holy Spirit. AMEN.

We were in Lyon for a language school eight years ago when we encountered our first Corpus Christi procession, through the cobbled streets of the old town. The blessed sacrament was carried by the priest in a gold monstrance (which was an elaborate work of art in itself, with the sacred host displayed visibly at its centre, testifying to Christ at the centre of creation according to the Catholic imagination). There was incense, rank on rank of robed clergy, and many devout laity following along. It wasn't a very Anglican scene, though you will find Corpus Christi processions of the Blessed Sacrament in the major Anglo-Catholic churches found at the heart of large Western cities, like Christ Church, St Laurence in Sydney.

Officially, Anglicanism downplayed medieval Eucharistic devotions like Corpus Christi, and the developing Catholic theology of Christ's real presence in the Blessed Sacrament. Evangelical Anglicans are appalled by the whole idea, insisting that the only thing God wants to transform is the human will, and certainly not the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

During the Elizabethan settlement, in 16th century England, the challenge was to hold these opposing Catholic and Protestant impulses together in the one Church, using the one prayer book. So, the great apologist of the Elizabethan settlement, Richard Hooker, retained Christ's real presence in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, but his emphasis was on Christ being truly *received* in faithful communion, as against his naked presence at the Church's beck and call. As for carrying the sacrament about and publicly venerating it, the 39 Articles strictly forbade all that. Instead, Anglican Reformers insisted that the best way to honour Christ was to faithfully receive Holy Communion.

Elizabeth I addressed this question of Christ's real presence herself, with the Gospel readings of the last supper in mind. Her cheeky formula still provides a good answer to Evangelicals who deny the real presence, though without necessarily signing up for the full medieval doctrine and devotion. As Elizabeth I put it,

Christ's were the words that spake it;
He took the bread and break it;
And what His word doth make it,
I do believe and take it.

And that, friends, is as good an answer to those who overanalyse Christ's presence in the sacrament as it is to those who deny it—those, that is, who insist on being entirely literal about the contents of

scripture, while refusing a literal reading of Jesus' plain words "this is my body", "this is my blood".

As for most normal Anglicans, in parishes like this one—parishes that aren't really Anglo-Catholic but aren't Evangelical Protestant either—the Eucharistic elements are treated with respect, they're consumed reverently, and they're welcomed in the homes and hospital rooms of the sick and dying as an integral part of the Church's pastoral ministry. Most normal Anglicans experience the Eucharist as special, as different from other types of worship service. Our Anglican instincts tend to value an order of priests set apart as celebrants and guardians of the Eucharist, too, and so we resist moves towards lay presidency—or 'lay administration of the Lord's Supper', as they call it in Sydney diocese. Many normal Anglicans can testify to the strength and comfort that Holy Communion brings them, either as a regular habit of worship or on occasions when they're facing a particular trial or difficulty in life.

What worries the Evangelicals about too Catholic a view of Holy Communion is a fear of magical thinking and empty ritual. Yet many modern Catholics, since Vatican II in the 1960s, would agree. Indeed, modern Catholics themselves are eager to recover a sense of the word, and of preaching, in the parish mass. They worry, too, about old-fashioned emphasis on Christ's real presence in the sacrament on the altar while neglecting to emphasise the body of Christ gathered in the pews. So I suggest that Evangelicals needn't worry about a high view of the sacrament if it's accompanied by a high view of the Word of God

and a high view of the dignity and calling of God's people—which is what you'll find in many normal parishes at the middle-to-high end of Anglicanism nowadays, not to mention in typical Roman Catholic parish worship.

Now, with all this in mind, let me highlight a couple of things in today's readings that help make this point about the Eucharist and about Christ's presence here among us.

Exodus gives us a solemn public ritual today, but the focus is on God's people and the renewal of God's covenant. Public ritual, gathering and recommitment fit together in grateful response to God's initiative in the covenant, reaching out to Israel. Here in Exodus today is a foretaste of the Eucharist; here is a ritual that's anything but empty.

The same theme of thankfulness is taken up in our psalm this morning: "How shall I repay the Lord for all his benefits to me? I will take up the cup of salvation ... I will offer you a sacrifice of thanksgiving: and call upon the name of the Lord". And, of course, the Greek word *Eucharistia* means thanksgiving: we take up the joyful thankfulness of Old Testament public worship, where the focus is on God's covenant faithfulness. In the Eucharist, with Christ really present on the altar, in the midst of his body the Church, we bear a new testament to God's age-old love and goodness.

In our epistle reading from 1 Corinthians this morning, St Paul is as strong as any Evangelical in his criticism of idolatry, yet he does it while commending the Eucharist. Paul insists that in a world full of idolatrous rituals, Christians have their own ritual which carries a very different significance—which is anything but the magical thinking or else the empty ritual that Evangelicals are justifiably concerned about.

And finally, in our Gospel today, the literal force of Jesus' words over the bread and wine points us to his self-giving in the Eucharist. Yet this real presence, which for me is the only way to read this Gospel passage, also points to a real absence. Jesus says that he won't drink this cup with his disciples again until he drinks it new in the Kingdom of heaven, which reminds us that the end has not yet come, and hence that the fullness of God's presence is not at the Church's disposal. Friends, this means that Christ's presence in the Eucharistic bread and wine, which are real food and drink for our bodies and souls, is real but also provisional—it's food for the journey, but it's not the journey's end.

So, on this feast day of Corpus Christi, with the best insights of both Catholic and Evangelical traditions in mind, we can rejoice in the presence of Christ among us, both on the altar and in the loving midst of his people, as we also hear and respond to God's word. And this we do with thankfulness, looking forward to that day when sacraments shall cease—when together we will meet Christ face to face in his Kingdom.

The Lord be with you ...