

Corpus Christi: Body, Matter, Violence

Sermon for Corpus Christi, Sunday 14 June 2020

St Philip' Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

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Exodus 24: 3-8; Psalm 116; 1 Corinthians 10: 14-21; Mark 4: 12-26

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Today as we celebrate Corpus Christi we reflect on God's gift of the Eucharist and on Jesus' presence in the bread and wine we receive—how Jesus' glorified body is given to us week by week as his Eucharistic body, which strengthens the Church to be his body in the world. Now, of course there are historical controversies around Christ's real presence in this sacrament—militant Protestants reject it as much as militant Roman Catholics insist on it, and we might wonder whether Christ would recognize his presence in either extreme. As for Anglicans, we're characteristically ambivalent. Not many of us identify strongly as Anglo-Catholic, as Fr Martin and I do, reflecting the influence of churches where our faith was nurtured from childhood. But even your more typically Protestant-minded Anglican recognizes that the Eucharist is special, that there's a proper reverence in its celebration, that receiving communion is significant,

and that the elements of bread and wine are to be treated respectfully. Mainstream Anglicans might not quite know why they have these instincts, but they do.

However, the Eucharist is too important for me to leave it at that, rehearsing historical controversies and defending Anglo-Catholic practices. The whole point of the Eucharist is bigger than Church traditions. It's about God's investment in all the heights and depths of human life, following the logic of the incarnation, and this has implications for Christian life in the real world. I'm going to mention three aspects: the Eucharist and today's widespread alienation from the human body; the Eucharist and our modern alienation from the material world, which lies behind the climate crisis; and, finally, the Eucharist in today's world of spiralling violence.

First, our body, the basis of whatever else we are as humans, is something that so many find themselves strangely alienated from. The body is displayed more than ever today, worshipped for its youth and beauty, eroticised like never before, sculpted by obsessive exercise; it's pierced and tattooed as a matter of course, too, so that our shifting identities across a lifetime are inked and punctured into it, making our body the museum of our memories and aspirations. Our bodies become curated objects, posed on Instagram in response to Instagram role models. Or else they become physical wrecks

through the harmful things we do to them and put into them—the alienation of spirit that we inflict on them.

But wait, there's more! Those gripped by today's rising tide of gender dysphoria experience their bodies as a hateful prison of alienation, a place of exile. Likewise, the demand of new life given through the body becomes an unbearable burden, with some women concluding that their pregnant body has turned into the enemy of their freedom, of their identity. And so, at a time when you might conclude that the body has come into its own, instead it has widely become an object of estrangement, and on the basis of that alienation we form alienated relationships with other bodies.

But then, friends, one of us humans steps forward with enough self-possession to be able to offer his body to God and to us in the last supper and on the cross: "this is my body, given for you". In the face of Jesus we see humanity come right, and in the sacrament of Jesus' body and blood our own embodied life with all its physicality, all its potential, all its joys and its pains, its strange and persistent animality—all of that is embraced by God and drawn by the Holy Spirit to its fulfilment. Friends, the Eucharist shows just how seriously God wants to love and heal us in our bodies, at a time when we seem especially bad as a civilization at doing that ourselves.

Now to my second point. What's true of the body in particular is true of material reality in general. Modern people can't imagine that Christ would or could come to us veiled in the forms of bread and wine, just as they can't imagine that the dead Jesus might be raised up by God from the brutal verdict of history on Good Friday to world-transforming life in the Holy Spirit on Easter Sunday. And this unimaginative, theological impoverishment spawns real-world consequences. As these doubts about the Eucharist grew in the early modern West, so we became progressively more alienated from the material world; more dominating and exploitative in our science, technology and industry; more prone to regard a world of things as merely resources and commodities. And with this came our continuing insensitivity to indigenous people and their integral belonging to country, to land and water and plants and wildlife. I suggest that our colonial era excesses, and nowadays our obsession with resource extraction and the maximization of profits for the already rich, show a profound corruption of the sacramental imagination. Instead of being able to see Christ in the material world—in the faces of saints, in the holiness of sacred places, and pre-eminently in the bread and wine of the Eucharist—the only sacrament anyone believes in today is money, which offers the only real presence worth celebrating.

And, my third point, this anti-sacramental world is a dog-eat-dog world, a violent world, as ego and rivalry destroy community in country after country. But, friends, our Gospel today gives us an alternative. Notice that Jesus gathers his disciples for their last supper in the context of imminent betrayal from Judas. And notice, too, how Paul in our epistle today sets Christians and their Eucharist against the world of pagan idolatry, which of course is a world of violent blood sacrifice. The Eucharist does not mean spiritual escape from a world of human ugliness and sinfulness, but instead it constitutes Christ's continuing self-giving in the midst of that world. The Eucharist isn't a pious denial of the Church's crimes and failures, either—remember, Judas was a communicant at that first Eucharist, and Jesus didn't refuse him. Because only Jesus' loving self-giving, over and over again, has a chance of challenging and breaking and hence changing human hearts—of defeating the pagan violence of our world with the force of love.

So, friends, for a humanity weakened in its resolve and its hope, in the grip of violence and alienation, the Eucharist is like a blood transfusion—the real presence of a healthier body is taken into our unhealthy bodies to enable their healing, their transformation. And not just our individual bodies, but Christ's body, the Church, too, and through Christ's abiding in his Church, so his influence passes on to the body politic, and to better treatment of the natural world.

Friends, you can call this mystical, you can call it political, but above all it's personal: Christ in person, given for us and to us—not hocus pocus, but God's continuing self-investment in the world God loves, with Christ taken not just into our hearts and minds, but into our hands, our mouths, our bodies.

The Lord be with you ...