

CORPUS CHRISTI 2022

As Vicar of Pershore Abbey in Worcestershire (2003-2014), I presided over an enormous church which had been the worship heart for a Benedictine Monastery. Founded in 689, the Abbey dates from 972. The essence of Benedictine life for the monks was hospitality. People were welcomed and any traveller who called was provided with food and lodging to assist in the travels. There was a graciousness about that hospitality which formed the basis for mission and outreach to the whole community.

For people overall, hospitality is an important part of life. One of the joys of life is being able to invite people for a meal, to 'break bread together' as the saying goes. There's great fulfilment in sitting round the table, talking, eating, drinking, and enjoying time in company with family and friends. As this pandemic has eased, slightly, we hope to enjoy this hospitality more regularly!

The extension of the hospitality in the home is the home of the community of faith — the church. The greatest activity the church community can have is to receive God's hospitality at the Altar. Henry de Candole, a former vicar of my parish in Newcastle in the early 1930s and then Bishop of Knaresborough writes, in A. P. Hebert's book, *THE PARISH COMMUNION*, "*A Parish Mass, as the expression of the corporate family life of a Christian*

community, must be rooted in a real family life. Unless that background is present, a Parish Mass will be but the new patch on an essentially old, individualistic, garment." In addition to worship, the expression of corporate family life is the social time after Mass over coffee, sherries (if we're lucky) — and perhaps a meal — where we celebrate our life together in Our Lord.

As we look at the sixth chapter of John's gospel and encounter the long discourse about the nature of eating and drinking following the feeding of the five thousand, we see Jesus outlining what it means to have eternal life. In verses 53-56, especially, we read, "*Truly, truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.*" Rather than taking these verses literally, we see that Jesus wants us to be fully a part of him, and therefore he gives himself for our sakes so that we might be united with him. Abiding does not mean simply to be good friends, it means to dwell inwardly so that two become one.

In the Mass, we have a four-fold action: taking, blessing, breaking, and sharing. We offer gifts of bread and wine, that they may become for us the Body and Blood of our

Lord Jesus Christ. Do they change substance and become flesh and blood? No — but they do change substance essentially. When we pray the words of institution over these gifts, because of our intention Our Lord imbues them with his presence through the Holy Spirit. The change in substance is that they are no longer simply bread and wine, but take on an added spiritual essence, which means that they are no longer simply bread and wine. The old Roman Catholic belief of *Transubstantiation*, now being debated ecumenically, went further to declare that they actually become body and blood. In Anglo-Catholicism, we believe that the substance changes markedly to make the elements more than bread and wine: they become for us the body and blood of Christ at that moment so that we feed on him. How all this happens for us we must leave to the mystery of faith. As the hymn *Lord, enthroned in Heavenly Splendour* says, at the end of the second verse, ‘Thou art here, we ask not how’.

Trevor Lipscombe, in his 2012 book about St John Henry Newman titled *Loss and Gain: The Story of a Convert*, quotes Newman’s summary of this sacrament: “*A cloud of incense was rising on high; the people suddenly bowed low; what could it mean? The truth flashed on him, fearfully yet sweetly; it was the Blessed Sacrament — it was the Lord Incarnate who was on the Altar, who had come to visit and bless his people. It was the Great Presence, which makes catholic churches different*

from every other place in the world; which makes them, as no other place can be — holy.”

It was the great presence, it was the Lord Incarnate who was on the Altar who had come to visit and bless his people. We have this quote from St John Henry Newman at the top of the Service sheets at my parish in Newcastle every Sunday. This is the reality of this Holy Sacrament. It is far more than simply doing it because the Bible tells us we should!

There are two aspects of these verses 53-56 to which we should pay close attention. The first is that John quotes Jesus as saying that *unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you*. This is the great challenge. It’s not possible to be a Christian and never darken the door of the church. The only way we can be fully and truly Christian is to join with Our Lord in communing in his body and blood. Having no life in us simply means that we have rejected Christ and the fullness of life which he brings, and therefore deaden ourselves to the possibilities of fulfilment which Jesus offers us.

This leads to the second point: *he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day*. Here we have the statement that the work of the cross is not just to give us remission from our sins. That’s one aspect of Jesus’ Passion, that his gift of divine

forgiveness on the cross removes the penalty for sin, but it's not the only aspect of that work of the cross. Jesus' resurrection victory over the powers of death and darkness is made possible for us, also, through the work of the cross. This is the meaning of being raised up at the last day.

But these two aspects of the Blessed Sacrament must go together: they can't be separated because of what we wish to choose. If we want to embrace the resurrection power of eternal life, then it will depend on our choice to immerse ourselves in the Blessed Sacrament. If we choose not to immerse ourselves, then there is no life in us. It's a full circle.

Of course, we understand that Our Lord, in his compassion and abounding love, may well choose to give the gift of eternal life to one who has rejected these words from John's gospel, but that's something about which we cannot judge. The issue is that only God knows the true state of mind of any human being and where any godly allegiance might lie. The risk is taking a chance on God's love and mercy, which might just backfire.

The issue for us, overall, is that through the cross Our Lord offers us the gateway to forgiveness and eternal life. Being saved literally means being brought back into a right relationship with God. It really is an offer that's out of this world!

John's gospel also reminds us that everlasting life is possible for us *now*; not just at a time when we leave this mortal coil and our human existence is done. We can experience everlasting life now by preparing ourselves for that which is to come and by allowing the Holy Spirit to enliven and govern our lives in all things. How? By communicating in the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, given to us as Christ's living presence with us. As St John Henry Newman says, it was the Lord Incarnate who was on the Altar who had come to visit and bless his people.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, Master, carpenter of Nazareth, through nails and wood you worked our redemption on the cross. Wield well your tools in this your workshop that we, who come to you rough-hewn, may be fashioned into instruments for the fulfilment of your purpose; for you live and reign with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.
