

Corpus Christi 2020

During my training for Ordination, I went on a one-week 'Summer School' based in a theological college where full-time students were also training for Ordination in the Church of England- I was on a Diocesan part-time course. The full time students were 'down' so we (all three years groups) had the place to ourselves - and the main focus of our study that week was the history and development of the celebration of Holy Communion in the English Church, beginning at the Reformation - so no Latin Mass, which was just as well as I had failed GCE O level Latin miserably! One of the students in my group had been sent ahead to see what we would need to bring with us and what the College could supply for our daily Celebration, as we worked our way through the various forms of the liturgy approved over the centuries. To her amazement - and or horror - she was told 'no incense, no bells and no candles'. I think we might have coped without incense and bells (although that would not have been historically correct) - but no candles!!!!!! After a lot of negotiation, it was agreed we could have, and indeed light, candles, if we celebrated Communion in the Students' Common Room, but definitely not in the Chapel,

which in the end we only used for Compline. Who would have thought that in the 20th century the celebration of Communion could have been so divisive?

It is inevitable, of course, that over 20 centuries the way that we 'do this' has changed. The earliest acts of bread breaking would have been in Aramaic or Greek, and would have been in peoples' houses; as the church spread across the Roman Empire Latin began to be used, until Latin was the only language used - it became the sacral language of the Western church - the language of services, the language of the Bible, the language of Liturgical music. In Western Europe the use of the vernacular for liturgical worship has become almost ubiquitous only within my lifetime - and still there is much debate about how we should 'do this', or even if we should do it at all! Here in Scotland, within living memory, Christmas Day was not a holiday - or a Holy Day - and there was only a Christian service of any sort if Christmas happened to fall on a Sunday (except of course for those pesky Piskies).

Today, as we give thanks for the Institution of Holy Communion, we read from St Paul the earliest record of that meal, written before the Gospels were written, and from St John's Gospel, the

nearest John gets to a theological understanding of the last Supper (remember, in John we get the foot washing, but not the meal).

At some point, in the very early days of what we now call 'church' the stories of those who had been with Jesus on the night before he died began to be interpreted not just as a 'memorial' - 'do this in remembrance of me', - not solely as a way of remembering Jesus and what he had said and done, how he had died and rose again - their accounts and the actions which flowed out of them began to be seen as spiritual food, enabling believers to dwell in Christ and Christ in them, an in-dwelling which leads to everlasting life. That first generation of Christians found that in this supper there was something which convinced them that they were not alone - Jesus would not leave them orphans. His death was not the end of their relationship with him.

At the heart of every Christian community which celebrates the Eucharist is Christ, alive and active, and we all celebrate that fact - which is why I prefer to say, that as a priest, I preside at the Eucharist, not that I 'Celebrate'; surely we all celebrate, we celebrate the presence of Christ in our midst. This is a celebration which nourishes us, sustains us, empowers us,

restores us. And this is what makes the present situation so painful. No matter how we try to worship together on line, we are not physically together. We cannot eat the bread together; we cannot drink from the cup of salvation together. And yet, and yet, we are together, because we know that His life, His body, was given for us (given, not taken away) and that from that flows all that we believe, all that we do. Every time you drop something off into Fr Mel's food bank box, you do it 'in remembrance of me'. Every time you pick up the phone to speak to someone who is self-isolating alone, you do it 'in remembrance of me'. And Jesus gives us not only his body as food, he feeds us with his words. The whole of Chapter 6 of John's Gospel is about bread. You could make a meal of that. You could drink with delight the beauty of today's Psalm. No, it is not the same but we have not been left comfortless. There is plenty to get our teeth into. The Old Testament reading for today resonates not simply because it describes the gift of bread to hungry wanderers in the desert, but because it speaks to the desert situation in which we find ourselves. The desert, the wilderness, is not the place in which we want to be, just the opposite. But read verse 10, 'they turned towards the desert and there the glory of the

Lord appeared'. Not behind them, on the road back to Egypt, but ahead, in the unknown. We look ahead to hard times, recession, unemployment, hunger and disorder - and discover the grace of God. A new sense of community, a growing hope that the new normal will be better than the old, a greater awareness of the need to protect our precious environment, that Black Lives Matter, that children's mental health and educational needs must be met. The hope offered by Exodus 10.16 is realistic and deep. God is with us in places of danger, need, despair.

When Jesus tells us we can live in him and he is us he is not offering Disneyland's Magic Kingdom or the fanciful Camelot of stage and screen. He is offering to be with us in the dark places as well as the bright ones. The wilderness is not a pleasant place - we would all like to avoid it, but life isn't like that. Just as the Father showed his glory to those Israelites who turned to face east, to face the wilderness, in their darkest hour, so Jesus promised 'I will not leave you comfortless'.

In this most holy of sacraments he gives himself to us, food for our spiritual journey, the promise of freedom and life, life in all its abundance.