

*Trinity 1 evensong, Cirencester 3rd June 2018: Sunday in the
octave of Corpus Christi*

If you have travelled to the heart of the Burgundy wine-making country, the Côte d'Or, you may have visited the *Hôtel-Dieu* in the centre of the small city of Beaune, otherwise known as the Hospice de Beaune. The Hospice was founded in the 15th century as an almshouse and hospital for the poor, and the splendid building continued as such, served by a nursing order of nuns, until the late 1970s.

What is particular about the arrangement of the beds is that they are contained in cubicles along the side walls of the vast *Salle des Pôvres*, facing towards the chapel at the east end, separated only by an open screen. From where they lay, the elderly and infirm, if too weak to move, could at least see the host elevated at the consecration of the mass, and witness the effectual means of grace communicated by the presence of Christ in the sacrament.

But you don't need to go all the way to Beaune to see something comparable. Taking the road from Corsham to Bradford-on-Avon, one passes through a hamlet called Chapel Plaister. Blink, and you are through the place before realising it. But the tiny chapel, dating back to the 14th century, is a Hospice de Beaune in miniature, that gave shelter and tended the sick on the pilgrims' route to the shrine of Saint Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury. The plain exterior promises little, yet stepping inside is like entering a time warp. Nowhere I know in this country is more redolent of the atmosphere of the late middle ages. The beds are gone, but here as at Beaune the infirm, from where they lay, could watch the elevation of the host at the altar.

The reason that I'm telling you all this is because today is the Sunday in the octave of the feast of Corpus Christi when the institution of the Holy Communion is celebrated □ Maundy Thursday and Passiontide being considered too solemn and silent a time to appreciate the joyful mysteries of the Eucharist and its expression of divine love.

Corpus Christi is one of the major feast days of the Catholic Church, dating back to the 13th century when the visions and conviction of that redoubtable nun, Blessed Juliana of Liège, carried pope and all before her in the call to venerate the real presence of Jesus in the sacraments. Of course this can call into question what we mean by 'the real presence' □ transubstantiation,

con-substantiation, sacramental union, or whatever other theological term you wish to use in this doctrinal minefield.

While it became a totem of popish idolatry for Protestant reformers □ Martin Luther railed ‘I am to no festival more hostile’ □ the Church of England came to take a more moderate line. Richard Hooker, pre-eminent among Elizabethan theologians who argued against the Puritans and worked hard to establish the Anglican *via media*, wrote concerning the real presence of Christ in consecrated bread and wine,

A thing which no way can either further or hinder us howsoever it stand, because our participation of Christ in this sacrament dependeth on the co-operation of his omnipotent power which maketh it his body and blood to us, whether with change or without alteration of the element such as they imagine, we need not greatly to care nor inquire. [Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie book V, ch. lxvii, 6.]

This splendidly English spirit of pragmatic compromise has by and large served its purpose in maintaining a broad church, in keeping with the Book of Common Prayer and the Thirty Nine articles which with the Ordinal are effectively the constitution of the Church of England, and the traditional compass of Anglican spirituality. But there are also potential dangers in taking this line, especially in this age of secular ethos in which we live. One is of vagueness which weakens and risks rendering ineffectual the practice and understanding of the significance of the Eucharist, to the point where people may ask does it really matter.

Perhaps as a reaction to this, some seek to demystify the holy mysteries. In the search for relevance over reverence, novel liturgies have been devised to cater for a perceived need to involve and to empathise, so that people can relate to what they understand rather than what they do not. This surely misses the point that God is greater than the sum of all we understand and of all we do not understand, which is precisely what the Christian faith addresses : the great mysteries of life and death. I would suggest that replacing the mystery of the Word made flesh in the sacrament with an emphasis on participation mystique, subject to group emotion, may reasonably be considered as a contemporary equivalent to the medieval misconceptions responsible for superstition and related abuses.

On the other hand there is the remoteness of symbolism in an age of literal-mindedness, when people believe that only fact or fiction are to be found □ the former true, the latter false □ and myth has become synonymous with fallacy rather than a vessel for an inner truth. A religious symbol can too easily become like a book that one takes down from the shelf, and puts back when finished, rather than an urgent and compelling reality which enlightens and has a real effect. How then do we get back to realising the Eucharist as a way of life, meaning just that: the integration of the way we live with Jesus himself who is the way, the truth, and the life?

Let us start, as Jesus did, with bread and wine. I shall tell you a reassuringly factual story in two parts. Nearly fifty years ago, when sliced Mother's Pride reigned supreme and freshly baked bread seemed a thing of the past, I happened to be at Salisbury station to catch an early train. A local bakery opened as I was thinking of breakfast. Looking at the iced buns in the window, I asked the assistant whether they were fresh. 'Oh yes,' she said brightly, 'fresh in from Southampton this morning.' Oh dear.

Some years later, I was buying ingredients for lunch in the village of St.-Germain-de-Salembre in south-west France, and walking out of the shop realised that I had forgotten the bread. Going back in, the woman there laughed and said simply, 'Le plus important' □ 'the most important thing.' That bread came from the neighbouring hamlet of Marty, little more than a forest clearing, where in the traditional way the baker would rise each morning in the early hours to stoke the wood oven and bake the kind of bread that has to be eaten freshly within hours before it goes stale, but is delicious enough to relish for its own sake, and is sadly hard to find these days even in *la France profonde*.

Bread as a way of life. In a similar vein, I was struck by a modern altar in the gaunt old cathedral of Albi north-east of Toulouse. Beautifully crafted of inlaid stones of various hues, the altar depicts the True Vine and bears the gospel words in French for *I am the vine, you are the branches*. But instead of the words one might expect, similar to the English □ *Je suis la vigne* □ the inscription reads *Je suis le cep, vous êtes les sarments*, the terms that a local winegrower would use for the vine-stock and shoots in the tending, pruning and harvesting of his vineyard. Wine as a way of life.

Both bread and wine are in themselves a transformation, resulting from the action of yeasts, as of the Holy Spirit, on the primary matter, together with the creativity of the human hand which is but the agency of the Divine

Hand. What could be more suitable to serve as an embodiment of the Word made flesh in our midst?

The Eucharistic elements which Jesus chose, both bread and wine, are still central to everyday living in traditional Mediterranean cultures, not only in their consumption, but also in their daily or seasonal preparation and making □ fundamental to a way of life, and to the rhythms of nature and our human dependency upon them. So it is that we may better apprehend the real presence of our Lord Jesus Christ in the bread and wine of Communion as something we depend on for our spiritual sustenance, and around which our way of life is meant to revolve.

Trinity 1, Book of Common Prayer Communion, Cirencester 3rd

June 2018

The first Sunday after Trinity always falls within the octave of the feast of Corpus Christi, celebrating the institution and mysteries of the Holy Communion. As it happened, this year the Thursday following Trinity Sunday fell on the 31st May, the date of the feast of the Visitation when Mary, after the departure of the angel Gabriel at the Annunciation, *arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste* to visit her elderly cousin Elizabeth, soon to give birth to Saint John Baptist. The baby leaps in her womb and Elizabeth, *filled with the Holy Ghost*, greets Mary with the words, *Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.*

This perspective on the Holy Communion has set me thinking as to the prevailing image we might hold of Jesus as we receive him spiritually, body and blood, in the sacraments of bread and wine. It might be the Jesus of the

Last Supper speaking the gospel words of institution ; or it might be the figure of Jesus on the Cross, emblem both of his atoning sacrifice, and of his Resurrection □ the Cross as sign of the triumph over death and instrument of eternal life. But it might equally be the image of his incarnation, the Mother and Child □ Mary, the figure of our mother the Church, offering the infant Jesus to us, God conceived and born in the flesh.

Central to the Christian faith is the recognition that God not only acts through history by his Holy Spirit, but that in Jesus he has entered into human life. The only-begotten Son is more than close to our condition : for all our faults and frailties he was born one of us, so that through him we may be at one with the Father. The mystery of the Word made flesh is central to our Holy Communion. The Catholic poet Roy Campbell beautifully encapsulated the significance of the Incarnation as it relates to the bread and wine of the Eucharist in a poem entitled *Nativity* :

*Love filled with fierce delight the humblest creature
As heaven fills the eye, or as the holy
Infinitude the wafer and the cup.*

For as God has entered into the greater destiny of human history, so he has ordained the elements of bread and wine to embody the sacrifice of love offered for us in the Crucifixion, and communicated to us through the Resurrection, in order that we may live his risen life. It is the generally received doctrine of the Anglican Church that this is not a transformation of material substance but of spiritual essence □ of a real state of being, from the Latin *esse*, to be.

The formularies of the Church of England may be of some guidance here. The catechism in the Book of Common Prayer, quoting Saint Augustine, describes the sacraments, or holy mysteries, as *an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace*. It teaches that the inward part signifies *the Body and Blood of Christ, which are verily and indeed taken and received by the faithful in the Lord's Supper*. Article XXVIII of The Thirty Nine Articles states *that to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith, receive the same, the Bread which we break is a partaking of the Body of Christ ; and likewise the Cup of Blessing is a partaking of the Blood of Christ*.

The sacrament does more than represent, it embodies its significance. As a thought is contained by the word that not only expresses but conceives it, so symbol and meaning are one, integral and inseparable. The bread and wine become more than a simile of Christ's body and blood □ a mere *as if*. Rather, their very being is made sacred because they are ordained by his words and endowed with his life, given for us upon the cross and raised again on the third day, by which he now sustains us both personally and as a unity to be his body, the Church. After speaking Jesus' words at the Last Supper, when the priest lifts up the consecrated bread and wine before the cross, the spiritual condition of our mortality touches the hem of the eternal and is healed.

Jesus took bread, and blessed, and brake it, and gave to them, and said, Take, eat: this is my body. And he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them: and they all drank of it. And he said to them, This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many [Mark 14. 22-24].

The words of the Gospel indicate that Jesus did not ordain this gift of the Holy Communion as a mere similitude, but as a real imparting of himself, in order that his being may be our life, and that his relationship with the Father may be ours also. A mystery such as this may be beyond our comprehension, but not our apprehension: we partake of the Body of Christ by faith which is itself a gift of God's grace. Whatever we understand, ultimately we trust in the faith of Christ. Our faith is limited, inadequate and fallible, and easily distracted. The faith of Christ is perfect, and he says to us, the Bridegroom to his spouse the Church, *Set me as a seal upon thy heart, as a seal upon thy arm: for love is strong as death* [Song of Songs 8. 6]. Let us pray:

O God, who in this wonderful Sacrament hast left unto us a memorial of thy Passion, grant us so to venerate the sacred mysteries of thy Body and Blood, that we may evermore perceive within ourselves the fruit of thy redemption; who livest and reignest with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

