

‘Shut up and Eat’
A Sermon for Thanksgiving for Holy Communion, Corpus Christi
Given at St Davids Cathedral by the Dean on 31 May 2018

‘Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you’ (Jn 6:53)

These are familiar words to most of us. We know how to decode them. But imagine you heard them for the first time, knowing nothing of Christian practices – it’s no wonder the early Church was accused of cannibalism!

Yet it is rather wonderful that God – immortal, invisible, ineffable, infinite and incomprehensible God – is not only born, in Jesus Christ, into time and space, to share utterly in our humanity, but then leaves us with two instructions, ‘do this’, that are both wholly rooted in what it means to be human and embodied, with physical flesh and blood, and, at the same time signify something mysteriously transcendent. They join and unite us, in our earthly, earthy, lives, with Christ’s holy, heavenly, life.

Being human means that, more than anything else, we need water; and we need food; and also fellowship or family, human connectedness. Baptism and Eucharist address these necessities. We often call these the dominical Sacraments, ‘the sacraments ordained of Christ our Lord in the Gospel’. Those of us who were taught our catechisms will readily recall that the sacraments are ‘an outward and visible sign and an inward invisible grace’

In Baptism, the outward and visible sign of the water, poured on us as we are baptised ‘in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit’, points to the inner grace of union with Christ: in death and resurrection, in the forgiveness of sins, in new birth as a child of God and member of the family of God’s people, the Church.

This evening, our focus is on the Eucharist, which means Thanksgiving, though we might also like to call it the Lord’s Supper, the Breaking of the Bread, the Holy Communion, the Mass ... Here, the bread and wine are taken, blessed, broken, and shared, while we repeat the words of Jesus Christ. And through these tiny morsels, of minimal nutritional value, we are spiritually fed; we are strengthened in our union with Christ and with one another; and we are assured of the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting, as we gain a foretaste of the eternal banquet of heaven.

This sacrament, this sign that is more than a sign, connects with us in every one of our senses: hearing, sight, touch, smell, taste. At the Eucharist God in Jesus Christ addresses us, here and now, in meat space, in every dimension of our humanity.

Hearing: We listen to the words – to Jesus’ own words, spoken to his closest friends, and to us so we should also know ourselves his friends

Sight: We watch the actions of the priest – lifting the bread, the wine, as Jesus would have done in giving thanks; we see the gestures of taking, blessing, breaking, sharing. We respond, with our whole bodies, as we come forwards, and put out our hands. As well as being ready to receive, it is a gesture of our self-offering, so we too may be taken, blessed, broken if need be so we may be remade and remoulded to conform more closely to Christ, and then we too must share Christ with the world.

Touch: We feel the wafer in our palm, or on our tongue. Have you noticed that sometimes the person administering the bread puts it quite firmly into your hand? We want you to know the presence of Jesus, the solidity of his promises, are as firm, as tangible, as this!

Smell: We smell the wine in the chalice, offering the intimation of holy aroma, a sense of presence of God in Christ comes to us. We've rather lost the place of the sense of smell in Western tradition, apart from the use of incense, with which, for example, we remind ourselves of the description in Revelation, of our prayers rising like the incense before the throne of God, to mingle with the prayers of the Saints in heaven (Rev 8:4). Yet St Paul writes to the Corinthians of a fragrance that comes from knowing Christ, which spreads through God's people – through all of us – to every place, (2 Cor 2:14). We too are a holy aroma, before the Lord, and in his world.

Finally, taste: We savour the bread, the wine, in our mouths, in ways that go far beyond their actual taste. We should recall the invitation, even instruction, of the Psalmist, 'Taste and see that the Lord is good!' (Ps 34:8). Whatever the hunger of our lives, we are to know that Jesus, the living bread, is the ultimate answer.

We do all this together. We all eat of the same bread, we all share the same cup, and not only through sharing the five senses common to each individual, but also in that other dimension of our humanity, that we exist in relation to one another, and especially so within the body of Christ. (This is 'very human' also in that our common life can be both joy and burden, for while Jean-Paul Sartre said that hell is other people, so too is heaven!)

Thus, in every dimension of our lives, the Eucharist can connect with us, and connect us with God, through Jesus Christ, the only mediator between earth and heaven. In the words of Pope Francis, 'The Eucharist contains all the flavour of Jesus' words and deeds; the taste of His death and resurrection; the fragrance of his Spirit.'

Of course, millions of words, and alas much blood, have been spilt over the centuries in trying to analyse what exactly happens in the Eucharist. I'm not going to go there. What Elizabeth I said is good enough for me:

"'Twas GOD the Word that spake it,
He took the Bread and brake it,
And what the Word did make it,
That I believe and take it."

But I do believe in the possibility, indeed the necessity, of being open to, even persistently seeking – genuine mystery without magic, and true sacrament without superstition.

Last Sunday morning, as we celebrated the Feast of the Holy Trinity, I said that ultimately we needed to recognise that though we believe that God reveals God's own self to humanity in ways we best understand as Three in One and One in Three, there comes a point where we must cease theologising, and just surrender and submit ourselves to God. The same is true today, though instead of last Sunday's call to 'Shut up and worship', today's message is 'Shut up and eat!'

Genesis 14, 18-20, 1 Corinthians 11, 23-29, 31-34, Psalm 116, 11-16, John 6, 47-58

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