

# Michael Sadgrove's Sermons & Addresses

Thursday, 7 June 2012

## Corpus Christi

If the eucharist matters to us, then today matters. If the eucharist is this gift beyond price of 'God's presence and his very self', if it is at the heart of celebrating God's love, if our Gospel [John 6.51–58] speaks the truth when it says 'the one who eats this bread will live for ever', then Corpus Christi is a most precious day.

Corpus Christi is not a day to talk about the eucharist but to offer it. We meet, as we always do, as the people of God at the altar of God: the body of Christ receiving the body and blood of Christ: holy things for the holy common people of God. Today is not different from any other day of the year: the eucharist is given us, as the elder at the Brethren assembly where I worshipped as a boy used to say, 'once more, and also once less', as we show forth the Lord's death until he comes. Today, as every day, we do what others have done for centuries before us and will do long after we are gone. It is not our eucharist and not the church's eucharist. It is God's eucharist, God's feast, God's gift to his world. Here at the altar we enter into the everlasting movement of his love towards us and all creation. And we in turn are part of creation's response of gratitude that we are loved like this. Thankfulness is what the word *eucharist* means.

At Corpus Christi perhaps we are more conscious of this than at other times. Our awareness of what we are participating in is heightened; our feeling for the eternal dimension of the eucharist is made more explicit. We are doing what we always do with bread and wine, because it is what Jesus commanded us to do. But at Corpus Christi there is a special sense that we plead before God the everlasting sacrifice of his dear Son; and that we offer it not only on our own behalf but for others, whether far off and near, living and departed. We know that in this sacrament we touch a presence that is

both universal and particular. In the crucified and risen Christ shown to us in this life-changing way, we touch what belongs to all of time and every place. In ordinary things transformed and given back to us in a new way we glimpse the ultimate renewal of creation when God's purposes are complete. But we also touch what belongs to us personally and intimately, Wesley's converting ordinance that warms our hearts and gathers the fragments of our broken lives like bread scattered on the hillsides.

So Corpus Christi affirms us in the catholic instinct that is in the blood of every Christian, that the most profound words we can ever utter are the words 'thank you'. Once we grasp this, we see life in a new way, a eucharistic way. The transformation of broken bread and poured out wine into heavenly food and drink becomes a symbol of renewed attitudes within us. G.K. Chesterton put it like this.

*You say grace before meals. All right. But I say grace before the play and the opera, and grace before the concert and the pantomime, and grace before I open the book, and grace before sketching and painting, swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing, and grace before I dip pen in the ink.*

And, I want to add, before I face the poor, the deprived, the neglected, my suffering brother or sister in whom the image of Christ is most to be honoured. I am saying that the eucharistic food with which we are nourished changes me into someone capable of forgetting my own needs for a moment in order to find a spark of generosity that will feed and nourish those who cry out for their daily bread. The eucharist makes me *Alter Christus* to my neighbour: I am to be Christ towards everyone, especially those most in need. Bishop Frank Weston of Zanzibar famously spoke at an Anglo-Catholic Congress 90 years ago when the campaign for advanced church ritual was at its fiercest. We should remind ourselves of his words if we are ever tempted to make gorgeous liturgical ceremonial an end in itself, indulge in what a priest I once knew called 'sanctuary mindedness, narcissism and lace'. Indeed, we should remind ourselves of them whenever we hold our hands to receive the sacred bread and wine of the eucharist. He said:

*You have got your Mass, you have got your Altar, you have begun to get your Tabernacle. Now go out into the highways and hedges, where not even the Bishops will try to hinder you. Go out and look for Jesus in the ragged, in the naked, in the oppressed and sweated, in those who have lost hope, in those who are struggling to make good. Look for Jesus. And when you see him, gird yourselves with his towel and try to wash their feet.*

‘Bread for myself is a material matter’ said the Russian thinker Berdyaev, ‘but bread for my neighbour is a spiritual matter.’ Corpus Christi has as its focus not only how God feeds us but how we feed others in the name of the One who speaks of himself as the Living Bread. Alan Ecclestone said: ‘What matters for praying is what we do next.’ What we do next, what we do when we have been nourished at this altar and go back across the Cathedral threshold into our ordinary days: that is the test of how far this eucharistic way is becoming a habit of the heart. What we do next is the test of how far we are being nourished by this living bread so that it becomes not only bread for ourselves but bread for our neighbour. This is what it means truly to become the body of Christ in the world, to become *Corpus Christi*.

Michael Sadgrove

Durham Cathedral

The Feast of Corpus Christi, 7 June 2012

John 6.51–58