

14 June 2020

The Body and Blood of Christ



Gospel *John 6.51-58*

Jesus said to them, 'I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' So Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.'

Homily

This weekend the doors of our churches are allowed to open for the first time since late March. Only for private prayer, it's true, but nonetheless it's a moment pregnant with promise and hope. Why? Well, cast your minds back. It's remarkable that the lockdown in our country, has (so far as Christians are concerned) covered almost exactly that part of the Christian year that runs from the feast of the Annunciation on 25 March (two days after the lockdown was announced) until today, the feast of Corpus Christi (when church doors can open again). Our long springtime retreat, so full of prayer for those who have suffered and died, has come to an end with what feels like precision timing.

It's a moment, of course, when we gladly acknowledge our debt to all those who have worked throughout that time, some of them tirelessly, to serve the shared needs of our society. Only because *they* have borne the heat of the day can the rest of us now begin to re-emerge and play our part in rebuilding our common life.

But there it is: while church doors have been firmly locked, Christians have celebrated what the liturgical calendar simply gave us – the whole story of Jesus Christ, from the first stirrings of the Word becoming flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary through to today’s contemplation of his permanent ascended presence in and through his Church, the living Eucharist. The Word became *flesh* in Jesus (*Jn* 1.14); that flesh became *bread* at his command (cf. *Jn* 6.51), and that bread gives us *eternal life* (cf. *Jn* 6.58).

2

Today’s gospel passage is one of the most shocking in the New Testament. It is part of a whole chapter that St John dedicates to the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves, the explanation that Jesus gives the miracle, and his answers to the questions of his listeners. It is a dense passage, because it is dominated by five words: eat or eating (which appears seven times), drinking (four times), flesh (six times), blood (four times), life or living (nine times) – all in a mere seven verses. The passage is the climax of the chapter. The whole discussion has been moving to this point; and the scene finally ends in confusion.

As the argument intensifies Jesus makes a three-part solemn revelation about himself.

- First, ‘I am the living bread, come down from heaven’ (v.51a): that is, ‘I am the living food that *contains* the very life of God himself’.
- Second, ‘If any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever’ (v.51b): that is, this food not only contains but also *communicates* God’s life to those who eat it.
- And third, ‘The bread which I shall give is my own flesh’ (v.51c). In other words, Jesus *commits* himself, literally gives himself away (*Jn* 13.1), ‘for the life of the world’.

These three statements from Jesus seem to his listeners to be unfathomable even scandalous. He uses raw and realistic language, which had the effect of shocking his hearers either into greater belief, or (most of them) greater disbelief. In the heated argument that follows they ask each other, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’ (v.52); and ever since the world has debated Jesus’s reply, that ‘Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you’ (v.53). So perhaps we too should reflect on whether we have really understood his message.

There’s no time to go into much depth in a short homily like this. But I want to point to one line in the final part of the chapter (a bit we didn’t hear read) that gives us a clue.

It turns out that what we heard as our gospel was part of a sermon in the synagogue in Capernaum, and it’s now over. Jesus turns to his disciples and checks with them privately, ‘Have my words offended you as well?’ Well they plainly have, and so he gives them a pointer as to how they should understand his words. ‘What if’, he says, ‘you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? Would that help?’ In other words, it’s no *ordinary* man that can say he will give his flesh to eat. And it’s no *ordinary* flesh that contains and communicates God’s own life and commits itself to the limit. Jesus is the Son of Man: he is that man who belongs both to earth *and* heaven. He is the one that ‘comes down from heaven’, and whose home is the realm of the Spirit.

3

Over the years Pope Benedict has been very fond of quoting St Augustine describing an incident when, during prayer, he heard a voice saying, ‘I am the bread of the strong, eat me! But *you* will not transform *me*, and make *me* part of *you* [as happens with normal food]; rather, *I* will transform *you*, and make *you* part of *me*’ (*Confessions* Bk 7, 10, 16). This is the crucial point. This is the mystery, the mystery of *faith* that we proclaim after the words of Christ in the midst of the Eucharistic Prayer. In today’s gospel St John has put together the Resurrection and the Eucharist, which the Fathers call the ‘medicine of immortality’ (St Ignatius, *Ephesians* 20.2).

The body and blood of the Lord are not ordinary bread or wine, which commemorate or signify something meaningful. They are not ordinary, because they really *contain, communicate* and

commit to the world God's own love and life! They are not ordinary, because they have been transformed by Christ, and when they are given to us they transform *us*, we do not transform *them*. They are not ordinary, because they make us missionaries of charity. That is how our individuality and uniqueness is liberated from itself, united to Christ, immersed in the life of the Trinity, and opened up to communion with brothers and sisters, whether they are near or far, whether I *like* them or not, or whether I *am* like them or not. As the Lord's body and blood change *us* into *him*, we become members of one another. No longer divided, we are one body one spirit in Christ. The Lord's body and blood *unites me* and *you* not only to the people whom we long to sit beside once more in church, but also to distant brothers and sisters in every part of the world.

Dear Friends, in this new moment, as our church doors begin silently to swing open again, let us (wherever we can) *visit* our churches, and standing, sitting or kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament of the Lord's body and blood, let us prepare ourselves for that day when we will be able to celebrate the Eucharist together again, and let us offer *our* souls and bodies to him who transforms us, and makes us able to be missionaries of his charity by giving us *his* soul and body.

Two prayers

Soul of Christ, sanctify me.
Body of Christ, save me.
Blood of Christ, inebriate me.
Water from the side of Christ, wash me.

Passion of Christ, strengthen me.
O good Jesus, hear me.
Within your wounds conceal me.
Do not be parted from me.

From the evil foe protect me.
At the hour of my death call me.
And bid me come to you,
to praise you with your saints for ever.

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.