

Corpus et Sanguinis Christi

Genesis 14. 18-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 6:51-58 (KJV)

A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, on 8 June 2023 (The Feast of Corpus Christi), by Father Guy Willis, Vicar of St Benet's, Kentish Town, London

Go down Moses / Way down in Egypt land / Tell all Pharaohs to / Let My People Go!

IN the spiritual Go Down Moses, most famously recorded by the great Louis Armstrong, the cry of the Israelites to be released from their slavery under Pharaoh is recalled again and again: Let my people go. It is a song which is intimately connected with the experience of African-American slaves, who drew a powerful parallel between the repeated calls of Moses to release the people of Israel from slavery and their own experience of bondage. Finally, in the thirteenth chapter of the Book of Exodus, after God has visited ten plagues upon the Egyptians, Pharaoh relents – as indeed the Federal Government finally did.

At that moment in Exodus, several other things occur, all of which are intimately connected to the feast of Corpus Christi which we are celebrating today. First, the ordinance of the Passover and the ensuing feast of Unleavened Bread is instituted as a perpetual memorial of the night on which freedom was obtained from the Egyptians. Second, the Lord leads the people of Israel towards the Promised Land by showing his presence and direction in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

The mass, which is instituted by Our Lord Jesus Christ on the night of the feast of Passover, is both the recapitulation and fulfilment of that feast. In this Eucharistic feast of the New Passover, the one true sinless Lamb is slain and rises again, namely Christ. In anticipation of this perfect sacrifice which will take away the sins of the world, He Himself gives to us his disciples His blessed body and blood under the form of bread and wine. In the annual feast of Passover, the Israelites were brought back both in heart and mind to that moment of joy when their freedom was won by God

from the clutches of wicked Pharaoh. In a similar way through the daily offering of the Eucharist, and at the hands of the priests of the New Covenant instituted by Jesus Christ, we are brought to that moment of freedom won by the Sacrifice of the Cross.

But do not be fooled; we are not merely engaged in reminiscence, in telling stories to remember the good times. The action at the altar with all its sacred ceremonies and music, all its words both loud and soft – all the smells, sights and sounds of the sacred liturgy: all proclaim one thing. We are there. When the priest pronounces the words of Jesus over the bread and the wine, he speaks not as himself. We are there in the upper room, listening to the words for the first time with the other disciples. And when he raises that little disc of unleavened bread, the priest holds up for us all to see not just flour and water. We see the body, soul and divinity of Christ himself: crucified, buried, risen, ascended and glorified, and we are there. We are there at the divine and eternal liturgy which is perpetually offered in heaven.

Recall that, having instituted the Passover, God leads his people into freedom from Pharaoh by showing his presence with them in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. They are on a journey to the Promised Land – one which will be arduous and long, with many mistakes along the way – but that will eventually get them to where they must be going. The Procession of the Blessed Sacrament which concludes today's feast is the mystical fulfilment of this revelation of God's love for His people. Our literal destination is St Barnabas Church in Jericho, but our spiritual and true destination is Heaven itself. This is why the ceremony will end with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament in which the bread, which has become by the power and will of God the Blessed Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, will be used to make the Sign of the Cross over all of us in blessing. In that moment we taste heaven once again, where we will receive perpetual blessing from the throne of heavenly grace and see God not by means of the sacraments of his Church, but face to face.

With the reality of God's presence amongst us, we travel as the people of Israel did out of slavery and into freedom. Of course, if you read on in Exodus, the freedom

that they win under the leadership of Moses is far from perfect. It is a long road to the Promised Land, and even then, human imperfection and weakness means this is not without complication. Those enslaved people who sang in the cotton fields of America, 'Let my people go', and who prayed in faith for their release, they too saw a far from perfect freedom: Armstrong was singing in 1958, and with good reason. Yet it was nearly one hundred years after Congress had outlawed slavery. And we are still slaves too, though of a different kind, of course. We are slaves not to earthly masters. Rather, though we possess our writ of freedom given to us in Baptism, we have not followed wholeheartedly the way of freedom. Still we sin, and still we follow our own desires. Still we seek to be our masters. We are slaves to ourselves. And so we plead: *Let my people go.* And He answers: *This is my body, this is my blood. Do this in remembrance of me. Then come, follow me.*