

## SERMON CORPUS CHRISTI YEAR C 2022

### ALL SAINTS BIRKENHEAD

Queen Elizabeth I is reputed to have replied when questioned about Christ's presence in the Sacrament:

“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.”

Very Anglican, isn't it? Slightly poetic and just vague enough to not be controversial. Something I will try to do as we celebrate the Feast of Corpus Christi today.

Corpus Christi, the tradition of giving thanks for the institution of the Eucharist (in the story of Jesus' life on a Thursday) has long been celebrated on the first “free” Thursday outside of Lent/Easter. The Feast fell on Thursday this week, the first Thursday after Trinity and I have transferred it to today so that we may celebrate it. People connect this Feast with Juliana of Liège who was a 13<sup>th</sup> century medieval canoness regular and mystic in what is now Belgium. This was then further developed by Saint Thomas Aquinas, at the request of Pope

Urban IV in the year 1264, who produced the Mass and the Offices for the feast.

The feast in fact has an interesting history in the Anglican Church.

It was omitted in the Common Prayer Books of 1549, 1552, 1559, and 1662, only returning in 1928 – but without a date in the Calendar. With its return in the 1928 version of the Common book of Prayer it was then added to the New Zealand prayer book of 1989, and thus it has now once again become part of our liturgical cycle.

So why should we have a day to celebrate Holy Communion? Well of course it has been the central act of worship for most Christians since the early Church. And as you perhaps picked up on, the Anglican church has always had an interesting if not at times fraught relationship with Holy Communion. I believe it is a good thing that since the 20<sup>th</sup> Century we have moved to making Holy Communion once again our central act of worship.

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For instances of Jesus' Body and Blood being connected to Bread and Wine are of course throughout the scriptures. Today's Gospel though not as avert as the last supper narrative later in Luke's Gospel, nonetheless, speaks to us of this connection. In our reading from Luke today we have Jesus with the crowds, preaching about the Kingdom of God and healing

those who were sick. And we are told that they were in a deserted place. As night fall approached the disciples realized that this crowd would most likely need food. Nothing worse than a hungry mob they thought. We don't know exactly what was the make up of that crowd that day but one thing we do know is that they were hungry. But they weren't just physically hungry of course. Wherever Jesus went he did two things, he cared for the material **and** the spiritual well-being of those he encountered. These people needed bread, food for the body as well as food for the soul.

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And we know that in our world, that same desire remains. Though the specific context here in Birkenhead may be different. Recognizing that we live in a reasonably affluent part of Auckland. Though I am sure there are some who struggle to make ends meet, made worse by the cost-of-living crisis, it would be safe to say the majority who live in our neighborhoods perhaps have their daily needs met. But what about spiritual nourishment? It is quite clear that many in our community often feel a sense of disorientation. We see this in the break down of our society and the disconnection that many feel with each other. This has been made worse by the recent pandemic. And you yourself maybe feeling slightly

disconnected today, perhaps you have struggled with your faith in recent times due to everything that has been going on. Like that crowd that needed feeding, perhaps you also need the bread of life today.

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And that is exactly what those who gathered on that day with Jesus were about to receive. Though perhaps they did not realize it. What then is the writer of Luke trying to tell us about bread? We know bread in Jesus' time was one of the most important items of food. The issue then that faced Jesus was if he just gave the people what they wanted, i.e., the physical bread, would that really solve their true hunger?

The Russian writer Dostoevsky, in his famous novel *The Brothers Karamazov* touches on this issue. He has a magnificent chapter called "The Grand Inquisitor". I wonder if you have read it? The Grand Inquisitor is a story recited by the character Ivan Karamazov, who questions his brother Alexei, a novice monk, about the possibility of a personal and benevolent God. In this story the character of the Grand Inquisitor ties the matter of bread and hunger to the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written,

"One does not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

On this challenge by the devil to Jesus regarding the stones the Grand Inquisitor character explains: “Turn them into bread, and mankind will run after Thee like a flock of sheep, grateful and obedient, though forever trembling, lest Thou withdraw Thy hand and deny them Thy bread.” It is the Inquisitor’s contention that people will not think about virtue unless they are fed, and that for the sake of bread, people are willing to become slaves. So is bread the end all? The Inquisitor continues, “In bread there was offered Thee an invincible banner; give bread, and man will worship thee, for nothing is more certain than bread. But if someone else gains possession of his conscience — Oh! then he will cast away Thy bread and follow after him who has ensnared his conscience.”

History repeatedly bears this out. People will riot when they can’t get enough daily bread to live. Yet history has also shown that those same people are willing to die to fight the perceived injustice. Jesus was right, therefore many times in the Gospels to fear that the people just wanted to turn him into a ‘bread king’, and he was also right to move the discussion from physical food so that it became a matter of the “food that endures for eternal life.”

Returning then to today’s story of the five thousand from Luke’s Gospel It is now clearer why this isn’t a typical miracle story. It’s not really about the earthly bread and how many

people were fed. That isn’t the Gospel anyway. We still of course want to highlight the compassion of Jesus to the crowd. We still want to insist that as Jesus’ disciples we be faithful in seeking to provide daily bread to all in need. Most importantly however as we reflect on the gift of Holy Communion today, we want to make them hungry for something more.

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And we believe that deeper hunger can only be satisfied by the food that endures for eternal life. The Bread of Holy Communion. We have therefore determined that feeding the body is important but there is something else as equally important. For us as Anglicans as I mentioned at the start, this has always been a contentious issue. What do we receive when we have the Eucharistic?

Well, there are some Anglicans whose position on Holy Communion could be caricatured as “Jesus is present everywhere except in the bread and the wine of Holy Communion.” But most Anglicans should hold to some theory of transubstantiation, consubstantiation, or transignification — in other words a treating with special respect of the consecrated bread and wine and Jesus as present there.

When Jesus shared the bread with his friends at the start of his last meal with the words “this is my body, do this in remembrance of me” and when did similarly with the cup of

wine as the meal was ending, he was not commanding them to do a new thing. There has been some scholarly debate whether his last meal was historically a Passover meal or a chaburah meal – for our purposes this makes no difference. Every formal Jewish meal began with blessing, breaking, and sharing bread and concluded with giving thanks over a cup of wine to share. Jesus was not instructing his friends to do a new thing. Jesus was instructing them that whenever they now did this they do it with a new meaning.

We regularly bring to our reading of the scriptures a Greek philosophical concept of a person being a “soul” – and “having” a body. Hebrew and Aramaic language regularly used “body” for “person” and similarly, as evidenced in much Old Testament material, identified “blood” with “life”. Jesus breaking bread and offering a cup of wine was saying: “this is me – my self and my life – I am giving you my self and my life – do this in remembrance of me.”

And so we believe we receive Jesus in this bread and wine. We believe he is present because he says he is. However, the call of the Gospel is not just to receive this sacrament but in fact through receiving it we too may become a sacrament. Jesus says this is me – my self and my life – I am giving you my self and my life. So in turn he calls us to give ourselves and our lives away – in remembrance of him.

So may this morning as we celebrate Corpus Christi, we allow God to take us, give thanks for and over us, thereby blessing us, breaking, and remaking us, and giving us to others that we may be a blessing to the world, and each other.