

the body of Christ

a sermon preached on the
feast of corpus christi

23 June 2019

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by father richard wilson

the lections: Exodus 24: 3-8; Ps 116; 1 Corinthians 10: 15-17; Mark 14: 12-16, 22-26.

As you may know, in 2015 I undertook from a pilgrimage to Rome, walking over five weeks from Pavia near Milan, to Rome, following the ancient path of the Via Francigena.

This pilgrim's path took me to Bolsena, a small town on the shores of Lake Bolsena, about 130kms north of Rome. Bolsena is also the site of the church of Santa Christina, where, in the year 1263, a mass was celebrated by an unnamed Bohemian priest who is said to have doubted the doctrine of transubstantiation.

The doctrine of transubstantiation holds that the bread and wine of the Eucharist are changed into the real flesh and real blood of Christ. According to the tradition, during this mass, at the consecration, blood gushed from the bread staining the altar cloths and its marble top. The priest's doubt over the doctrine was clarified, according to the tradition.

The church of Santa Christina preserves the altar on which this miracle was wrought, including the marble altar top with stains from the blood still visible. By co-incidence, Pope Urban IV happened to live in the nearby town of Orvieto at the time of this remarkable event. The priest took the stained altar linen to the pope and confessed his doubt. This miracle, now known as the miracle of Bolsena, led Pope Urban IV to institute the feast of Corpus Christi, which we observe today.

And so, the doctrine of transubstantiation was instituted, holding that at the words:

“Take, eat. This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

And the words, that follow,

“Drink from this, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant...”

the ordinary things of bread and wine become truly Christ's body and truly Christ's blood.

On this feast day, as a Eucharistic community, we affirm the centrality of the Eucharist in our lives and inevitably we must grapple with this idea of transubstantiation, which is difficult because in its usual form it directs us into a belief that goes against our rationality in a particularly confronting way. Unfortunately, this sets up a dispute over the orthodoxy of belief – do we believe the bread and wine become real flesh and real blood, or not? Well, I was trained as a scientist, and I don't. There, I said it.

I believe the doctrine of transubstantiation ... but I don't believe that doctrine of transubstantiation.

I do believe that at the Eucharist transubstantiation does take place, but I want to make some observations about what transubstantiation may mean, and for me, what I can believe in a rational way. I know not everyone will share my point of view.

I am not really convinced that transubstantiation in the traditional, materialistic doctrine is what Jesus had in mind when he uttered those words we use in the Eucharist. It is a stretch, in my view, to create an entire doctrinal edifice out of a few sentences that take less than a minute to say. Rather, I believe that at the last supper Jesus offered his whole life for the world, that the sacrament is not concentrated in a few minutes of ceremony but is the work of an entire life.

My idea of transubstantiation, which I am offering to you, observes that at the point in the Eucharistic prayer when the celebrant says:

“Merciful God, we thank you for these gifts of your creation, this bread and this wine, and we pray that by your Word and Holy Spirit, we who eat and drink them may be partakers of Christ’s body and blood.”

the Holy Spirit is invoked, to do transforming work of the material bread and wine. But, I argue, Roman clericalism has caused this to overshadow a second invocation that says:

“Renew us by your Holy Spirit, unite us in the body of your Son, and bring us with all your people into the joy of your eternal kingdom.”

This to my way of believing is the more pivotal point of transubstantiation.

So, the Eucharist is a liturgy not only of thanksgiving but also of renewal, and I believe that thanksgiving and renewal begins long before we get to the Eucharistic prayer at the altar and continues long after. Just as Jesus’ life began long before the last supper, and in us as the Body of Christ, continues long after.

To my mind, the act of thanksgiving and renewal commences as we prepare ourselves to come to the church. We might prepare in all sorts of different ways. It may be simply carefully dressing, perhaps making this a time of quietness. Others may pray or meditate. Roman Catholics often say the rosary. You might look over the readings for the day. The choir will rehearse, so might the readers, the intercessor, even the preacher.

We must travel, by car or train or tram or on foot. Some people will generously and pastorally pick up other members of the community along the way. We arrive. We greet those we know, and hopefully those we don’t. We may say some preparatory prayers at this point, or sit quietly, maybe in meditation or reading the pewsheet, or lighting a candle.

The liturgy commences. We sing and pray together, we hear the Word, we confess our failings to each other and understand that we are forgiven. We greet each other formally in the sharing of the Peace. We greet visitors and hopefully make them feel welcome.

At the communion – communion is an important word – we become even closer, physically and spiritually, as we assemble at the altar step. We hold out our hands, in what is to me a hopeful sign of acceptance of God, we eat and drink and are nourished.

[Then in that very Anglican ceremony of tea, we continue to affirm and build the relationship that the Eucharist has initiated.]

Then we go out, hopefully renewed, transformed and re-energised for work in the world. Because we are renewed and energised, we can face the problems of the world and do the transforming work of the gospel. But we recognise that this is hard work, exhausting. The world we face, while beautiful and full of potential, is intractably broken in places, places we

are called to go to. And going there exhausts us, depletes us. So, we come back here, and the sacrament of our lives is renewed.

As you can see, my broader view of the Eucharist is the formation of community where the people of the church assemble to become over again the Church, the body of Christ, and his blood. To me this is a real transubstantiation, to take a dispersed people, to bring them together, to feed and equip them for service to each other and in the world. That to me is the miracle of Bolsena, and it takes place here, in us, week in, week out.

We are the Body of Christ.