

Homily: Corpus Christi 2021

Last week we celebrated Trinity Sunday, a difficult feast to preach on because it's such a deep mystery. This week is also a tricky task for a preacher, partly because the Eucharist too is a mystery which demands a lot of reflection, but also because in speaking of this sacrament, we're spoiled for choice. There is really no aspect of our faith which doesn't, in some way, connect with this gift of the Body and Blood of Christ, this sacrament which is at the heart of our spiritual lives.

If we want to think of God coming to earth in the person of Jesus, we see that gift renewed each time we celebrate Mass. If we think of Jesus' death and resurrection, we know that this mystery is celebrated at the altar. As we hear Jesus say in the Gospel today: "This is my Body, given for you; this is my Blood, shed for you." As His sacrifice is made present here, He invites us to unite our lives to His: we bring our sufferings to the altar to be united with the cross, and we bring our joys in thanksgiving – the very meaning of the word 'Eucharist'. Here, too, we are called into an ever deeper communion with God, a living relationship, a covenant of love sealed in the Blood of Christ, which is such a central theme of our readings today. And the Eucharist is also a sign of the heavenly banquet, the eternal marriage feast of God and His people – in other words, heaven. All of these things are revealed and celebrated at each Mass, and we could reflect on any of them today. But I'd like to concentrate on one simple aspect of this sacrament, which I think means something to all of us: and that is *presence*.

So many times in Scripture we hear phrases like "I am with you" or "the Lord is in your midst". The people of Israel carried the Ark of the Covenant through the wilderness because they understood that, in some way, the presence of God was carried with it. There were even loaves known as the 'Bread of the Presence', which in a way foreshadowed the Bread of the Real Presence of Jesus. And when they reached their own land, the Temple became the definitive dwelling place of God. But Jesus described Himself as the Temple: He is the real, final, permanent dwelling place of God on earth, a gift given when He came to live amongst us; a gift renewed in the sacrament of His Body and Blood. Last week at Mass we heard the end of St Matthew's Gospel; he records these as the very final words of our Lord on earth: "Know that I am with you always, yes, until the end of time." So today's feast follows beautifully from this: He is with us always, especially in the Eucharist, which renews all His gifts, and in particular the gift of His Real Presence among us.

I recently came across a remarkable story about two twin sisters born prematurely in Massachusetts in 1995. They each weighed only around 2lbs and they were admitted to the neonatal intensive care unit and placed in incubators. One sister did very well, but the other was struggling and doctors were concerned that she wouldn't survive. A nurse on the unit, against the protocols of the time, took the healthy twin and placed her in the same incubator as her sister. She placed her arm her sick twin, whose vital signs immediately began to stabilise – her heart rate lowered and her oxygen level rose. The moment was caught on camera – it's a very beautiful photo. The two sisters are both now grown up, and both in good health. This remarkable story says something wonderful about the healing power of presence. The healthy twin didn't say any kind words, didn't administer any

medicine, didn't even understand her sister's illness: she was simply there. She was present, and her presence brought healing.

In the Eucharist we encounter the healing power of the Real Presence of Christ. I can't remember how many times I have come to pray in the Lord's presence feeling dismayed, worried or sad, and have left feeling consoled, restored and healed. If we come before Him in faith, knowing who is really and truly present in our midst, we receive His healing. His Presence truly has that power.

In the last 15 months we've all realised more deeply the importance of presence. Our enforced separation has made us better appreciate what we receive simply from being in the same space as another. Imagine for a moment: you are in the presence of a loved one – a friend, a family member, wife or husband, and they are fast asleep. There is still something consoling about them being there: it's better than being alone. Presence matters, even when there are no words or action.

Jesus knows this, and so gives us the Eucharist so that we can be in the same space as Him. He is present to us, and this Presence brings consolation and healing. And we can extend this a little: St Augustine says that we should "be what we receive": in other words, that in receiving the Body of Christ we, the Church, become the Body of Christ, and so His presence is shared more widely – His healing presence is carried out into the world, if we allow ourselves to be vessels of His presence and His grace.

At this point I'd like to say a few words of encouragement to those who join us very faithfully on the livestream but do not yet feel able to attend Mass. Some are physically unable to come because they are housebound; others are still shielding or lack confidence to come to a public gathering. I understand this completely, and I wouldn't want anyone to come to Mass feeling uncomfortable. But I encourage everyone in this situation to plan for when you will be able to return. It may be a hard judgement. I suppose the simplest test is this: as and when you begin to go out, to mix freely with others, to visit places for leisure, to resume something like normal life, it's time to return to Mass too. We've all realised in the last year that seeing family and friends on a screen is very different to seeing them in person. It is the same with Jesus! Don't settle for second best, and please don't deprive us of your real presence either. Every person who comes to Mass contributes to the gathering by their presence. To be clear: I don't want anyone to feel pressured into coming if they are uncomfortable, and I know that there are some who have no other choice than to participate online instead of in person. But if that's the case, let it be out of necessity, and never out of preference. Presence really matters: Jesus' presence to you, and your presence to Him and to us.

How many times in our lives we are grateful for someone 'just being there'. Maybe they could say nothing or do nothing to help. Maybe when we come to pray before the Lord we don't hear any words from Him, or feel that He is doing anything to help. Maybe He seems asleep to us! But He is present. Let's not let this unique gift pass us by, but let's find consolation and healing in the Lord who is with us in this great sacrament.

Fr Andrew

