

## Corpus Christi 2021



I was talking to a Methodist friend at the Chaplaincy in Lancaster one day as we were planning a joint service which we held alternately in each other's chapels on occasions. He asked me one day why when we were in the Catholic chapel it always had to be Mass. Could we not do something different? (Sr. Ella, who worked with me, once said to me (jokingly I might add), 'The Methodist chaplain really has to work at his sermons, all you have to do is say Mass.' But getting back to our discussion, I explained to him that for Catholics Mass was more than just a service, or even a memorial as we say at the consecration. We believe we are taking a very real part in the event of the cross, of the sacrifice, that Jesus made himself. At each Mass we join him in this offering of himself and ourselves together to the Father.

And this is something I think we fail to grasp ourselves at times. There have been long debates over what we mean by Jesus being 'truly present' in the bread and wine, 'the Real Presence,' and many ways are used to explain that, many very close to what some other Christians might believe too. But I think that what was lost to Christianity as a whole at the Reformation was this invitation by Christ at the Last Supper for us to join him in the saving event of the Cross.

The words of the Consecration at the Mass are taken from the Last Supper and we close with Jesus saying, as we translate it, 'Do this in memory of me.' To us in modern day English that sounds like just looking back to something that happened many years ago, nostalgia for a past event. But the Israelite/Jewish understanding of this is very different. At the prayers of the Passover which commemorate the Exodus from Egypt, they make it clear that they are then, though many years later, actually participating in the event of the Exodus itself. This is Jesus' tradition, and the Last Supper is a Passover meal. So when he says 'do this in memory of me' he is

drawing us into a continuing event, not just asking us to remember something that will come to be of the past.

So again we are faced with more of the mystery as we were last week.

I think the language of 'sacrifice' is also a problem for us today. All our readings today refer to it in some way. The images that come to mind seem primitive to us, as of a different age or culture. The repeated references to blood, the pouring out of blood, turn us off. The calling of the Mass as a sacrifice doesn't help us. But one of our problems today is that we pay too little attention to our heritage, and we will not understand the meaning of the Mass unless we know something of Jesus' heritage. He is a Jew. The sacrificing of animals in Jerusalem was at the heart of his religion. That first reading was one of the most famous. So what is happening in it?

After the Exodus, and then the Sinai covenant between the people and God (what we often call The Ten Commandments), Moses knew that there had to be a service to keep the people connected to those events. So what is happening here is the first of those services, a bit like the Last Supper. Moses tells the people to do this to keep them bound to God. How can they show this dramatically? Firstly by marking it with the offering of a prized animal, something precious to a nomadic people. Then we have to accept that the medical understanding of life was simpler than ours, but they knew that blood was what kept us alive. So blood equals life. Blood is precious. We know this when we give blood, which is an offering in itself in some ways from our own life. In Rome the students used to give blood as families in Italy had to buy blood for an operation. It was a life gift they could use. When the blood of the animal given to God is sprinkled on the altar, that represents God, and the people, then it is a human way of showing that the people are now bound together in this covenant, this agreement.

Jesus also picks up a strain that has been running through the Old Testament in Jeremiah and elsewhere, that sacrifice is more than the offering animals, it is about offering our hearts and our lives. He

puts this together with the old tradition and tells his disciples that he is about to offer his life for all of humanity, and sharing in this meal of his last Passover, is how we too will take part in this event always. The references to blood in the Mass are about being bound to God, the 'Amen' we say at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer is our 'Yes' to our covenant with him, our agreement to him, that we want to be part of this and we want to offer our lives with his.

This is what I think marks out this feast. It celebrates the fact that Jesus did what he did not just on our behalf, but to involve us in our own salvation. Not by encouraging us to work for it, which we alone can never do, but saying to us, this is the way, join me in this event.

Why do we have the cross hanging over the altar? Because what he has done for us flows into our Mass today, not as a past event but as a present reality. Yes, the crucifixion took place at one time in history, but the reality of it continues to invite us in each Mass to share the offering of oneself with Jesus. Our life is united with his in a single offering to the Father.