

Sermon for 18th June 2017 (Corpus Christ - Sung Eucharist)
1 Cor. 11. 23 - 26; John 6. 51 - 58

Corpus Christi - the Body of Christ. Tonight we celebrate and give thanks for our belief in Jesus Christ, that he is the Son of God who came from heaven, and was made man to live among us and to give his life for us on the cross, in order that we might be saved from our wickedness and and so be able to live for ever with the Triune God. It is not a celebration of the institution of the Eucharist, which we mark on Holy Thursday when Jesus met with his disciples for the last time to have supper with them before his death and resurrection. On that occasion our thoughts are directed towards the events of the next couple of days, to our Lord's trial before Pontius Pilate, his suffering and death upon the cross, and his time spent among those who had already died; which is why at the end of the evening Eucharist we depart in silence, the cross is covered and the altar is stripped. But tonight we rejoice in the fact that we have been fed with the true bread of God which came from heaven and gave life to the world.

In our epistle reading tonight, Paul was reminding the congregation of the significance of the regular celebration of the Last Supper, to point out that the Lord Jesus instructed that the sharing of bread and wine was to be done in remembrance of him, of his life and death. Apparently the practice had developed in that congregation in Corinth whereby some at least brought their own food and wine to enjoy by themselves and not to share the one bread and one cup with everyone else. This seems incomprehensible to us today, but clearly in the early days of the Christian church it took time for members to get used to meeting together as a body and to follow a set format to worship this new God and to celebrate their new-found faith in his Son Jesus Christ. Paul in the following verses advises the Corinthians, and us too that, before we partake in a communion service, we should examine ourselves before we eat the bread and drink the cup, to ensure that we do so worthily.

It is interesting to note that in John's gospel this passage of teaching about the bread of life comes at an early stage in his ministry and well before Holy Thursday. It may have seemed a natural progression following the miraculous feeding of the five thousand on the previous day and the questioning by the Jews as to what sign Jesus was going to give them, in comparison with Moses giving their ancestors manna from heaven to eat in the wilderness. But it must have been extremely difficult for any of Jesus's listeners to understand what he meant when he said: ***"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and i will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink."*** And indeed, not only were the general run of people listening to him flummoxed, but John records that many of Jesus's disciples found this teaching too difficult to accept and turned back from following him. Even Peter, when Jesus asked the twelve ***"Do you also wish to go away?"***, answered ***"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."*** Even that inner circle of twelve, it seems, were a bit puzzled, but they had had their faith in Jesus confirmed through their close association with him as he travelled around proclaiming his mission. They had the confidence that from their experiences so far Jesus really was the one whom their scriptures told them would be sent by God.

We too, with our benefit of hindsight through the medium of the New Testament writings and particularly the four gospels, have our confidence built up through our knowledge of what happened not only on Holy Thursday and Good Friday but more importantly on Easter Day, when Jesus rose from the dead. These events all gave meaning to Jesus's words about eating his flesh and drinking

his blood. He was anticipating his death on the cross, where his body would be broken and his blood shed. As Christians we have come to Jesus - that is metaphorically eaten his flesh - and have believed in him - that is drunk his blood - as the Saviour of the world. By participating in the Eucharist we remember that sacrifice that he made for us and are renewed in body, mind and spirit to go out and show our commitment to him in the way we live our lives. As followers of Jesus, we have come to understand something of his identity, mission and relationship with God the Father; we need to remain with Jesus in discipleship; there is no turning back, for to whom can we go?

We remember too, in this Eucharist celebration, that Jesus brings us to eternal life. Our time as mortals is temporary as we wend our pilgrim way towards God's eternal kingdom - another concept that is difficult for us to grasp, limited as we are by God's creation of time and space. The temptations of our modern high-tech world may obscure our hope and dull our joy in the anticipation of the life of the world to come, when our Lord returns and there will be a new heaven and a new earth. This living hope, which was so real to Peter who **had** personally seen and lived with Jesus on earth, is confirmed in the words of Jesus as recorded by John a little earlier in chapter 6: ***"This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day."*** It is our Christian faith and hope that we, who have seen the Son not as a living human being, but through the witness borne by the first apostles and maintained down the centuries, **will** be counted worthy in God's judgement to be numbered among those to be raised up by Jesus. We should be constant therefore in our prayer to the Father that He will hasten that day when He will send again our Lord Jesus Christ in resurrection life, as He has promised, so that our hope may be fulfilled. This, I believe, is even more necessary as we witness the terrible tragedies being experienced all over the globe. Only the personal presence of our Lord, the Prince of Peace and Son of the God of love, will bring us everlasting peace and joy. Come, Lord Jesu. Amen.