

Sermon Evensong Feast of Corpus Christi 2024

There is perhaps no cause for greater controversy in Anglican circles in matters liturgical and devotional than what we observe in this place today. Both this morning following our solemn mass, and in a few moments time following this address, we will pray the devotional office of Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. For those with a catholic disposition, especially appropriate for this feast of Corpus Christi. But it has – and continues – to expose those who participate in such acts of worship to charges of being outrageous idolaters! A close second for cause of controversy would be Anglican devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Controversy for a moment to one side, but we could agree with one recent commentator who has noted that one thing we could say about Benediction is that it is ‘weird’. But Benediction - as a logical extension of what we believe about the Eucharist - draws attention to the fact that what Jesus commanded about the Sacrament is *also* extremely weird. Consider John 6. At every instance when Jesus had a chance to turn his opponents toward mere symbol and away from real presence, he demurred. In fact, he intensified the emphasis.

At first - as we heard in the reading tonight - Jesus declared quite simply, *I am the bread of life*. But later in the chapter, *The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” So Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day”*. “Eating” is far from a metaphor. The Greek is not simply ‘to eat’ but ‘to gnaw’. Graphic and physical and hardly symbolic. Weird indeed!

Devout and faithful Anglicans should be able to unambiguously affirm faith in the Real Presence of Jesus simply on the basis of Christ’s own word, and according to his true promise. Now, devout and faithful Anglicans might well assent to this, but then ask does hoisting Jesus up in a brass contraption and waving him over his people add to this faith? In other words, does what we do tonight in Benediction do us any good? To which as Catholic Anglicans we should answer ‘yes’. What we do *is not* simply weird. But it is also for our good. It does us good because it invites us to share more closely in Christ’s saving work. Jesus says, *“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself”*. The evangelist adds: *“He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die”*. In Benediction, this is dramatically presented to us.

The death that Jesus died is the death we re-enact every Sunday and at every mass. We lift Jesus up from the altar and - in obedience to John 6 - we eat his flesh and drink his blood. But Jesus is a feast for the eyes as well as the belly: "*Whoever sees me sees him who sent me*". The very sight of Jesus reminds us that this is the ultimate hope of all believers. Our ultimate hope is *to see him*.

In the Old Testament, the problem of *not seeing* God accompanied by the promise of *seeing God* looms large in the imagination of the people. There are many near-misses, close approximations, or dream-like experiences. Among them, God *appeared* in pillars of cloud and fire; Moses *saw* God's "back," and *not* his face; Isaiah *saw* the Lord in a vision with "the train of his robe" filling the temple. Yet there is hope for a *fuller view*. Psalm. 27: "*Hide not your face from me*"; Psalm 121: "I will lift up *my eyes* to the hills"; and perhaps most significantly in Job, whose hope is echoed in our Anglican burial liturgy: "And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh *I shall see God*, whom I shall *see for myself*, and *my eyes shall behold*, and not another". Old Simeon declares in the presence of infant Jesus, "*Mine eyes have seen thy salvation*". Mary Magdalene declares to the disciples, "*I have seen the Lord*".

For us not among the privileged band of first-century disciples, seeing is slightly different. Jesus tells Thomas, "Blessed are those who *have not seen* and yet believe". Likewise, St. Paul reminds us, "For now *we see in a mirror dimly*, but then face to face". And again, "we walk by faith *and not by sight*".

St. Augustine simply argued, eternity is seeing God. We have not seen as the disciples did. And yet we are not left in the dark; nor is eternity outside our experience in the present age. In Jesus really present in bread and wine, *eternity has begun* in the worship of the Church. Our worship in the church is a foretaste of what is to come. When – in a few moments time the consecrated bread is laid upon the altar for all to see, and then from it a blessing is imparted - we are meant to see that *forever is now*. Christ, our hope and our destiny, reaches out to us, and is present to us even now. In a few moments, *our eyes will see him* whom every eye will see when he comes with the clouds.

Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament is weird and wonderful. But more than that, it reminds us of the means of our salvation. In the lowly form of bread, we see the Saving Christ. And in seeing, may we long to enjoy that vision forever. Amen.