

## Homily for The Solemnity of Corpus Christi 2010

*This is my body, which is for you*

These words of Jesus, which S. Paul quotes in his brief account of the Last Supper, form the heart of our Christian faith. Without this phrase we would be lost; we would have so many stories, so many words, but somehow the key that makes sense of them all, the crucial piece of the puzzle, would be missing. Over the early years of the Church, as the apostles went over again and again in their minds all that Jesus had said and done, it must have been these words that floated to the surface time and time again. This phrase seems to take on a life of its own, and it bounces around the world for 2000 years, and more than that until the end of time. It appears again and again in the lives of Christ's followers, and it helps us to see into the deepest mystery of all, the mystery of the meaning of human existence.

The phrase begins simply enough, in a meal which Jesus shares with his friends. At the time they can hardly have begun to understand how significant it would turn out to be. They would have understood that this sharing of bread and wine was some sort of ritual action that was to be repeated, and which in the repeating would make Jesus present. But then the speed of events begins to escalate. Just a few hours later Jesus is arrested, jeered at, spat at, beaten and lifted high on a cross. Suddenly, on a hill outside the city, the body of Jesus is on display. Just for a moment the world becomes an altar, and at the very top of the world, crowning this sphere, is a cross and a crucified man. And as the body is displayed for all to see, looking out over Jerusalem, over Palestine, over all the world, it might almost have had written above it not 'Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews' but 'This is my body, which is for you'.

The words of Jesus at the Last Supper, and his actions both then and on the following day, make it clear that human bodies are, in some way, for giving. As S. Paul wrote these words he might have remembered the death of S. Stephen, the first martyr, which he had watched with such approval. S. Stephen, whose last words had been 'Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit', might just as easily have said 'This is my body, which is for you'. The deaths of the martyrs, deaths which proclaim that the truth must sometimes be spoken and upheld at any cost, form a part of that great flood of self-giving which springs from the deep wells of the Lord's Passion.

This does not, however, by any means exhaust the depths of that phrase from the Last Supper. It is going to go on cropping up again and again. Every time a priest lies on the floor at his ordination, waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit, that extraordinary posture (who else lies on the floor in front of a crowd of people) simply says, in actions rather than in words, 'This is my body, which is for you'. So once again this phrase from the Last Supper finds new meaning, new life. And every time a man and a woman stand before the altar and promise to give themselves totally to one another in marriage, the same words spring into our minds once more: 'This is my body, which is for you'. That is precisely the meaning of the marriage covenant. So, if we were to ask ourselves why it is that we keep a special day to celebrate Corpus Christi, the answer is found in these words. The words that Jesus speaks over the bread at the Last Supper become, in a way, the central words of the Christian mystery: words of gift, words of love, words of life.

I mentioned earlier that these words become a sort of key that unlocks the meaning of our faith. Two examples from today's mass help us to understand this. One occurs at the end of the Preface: 'Earth unites with Heaven to sing the new song of creation'. What could that new song be? They are the words that introduce the Sanctus, the song we join in singing with the angels, so this new song of creation must in some sense be a song of holiness. In fact, of course, the song of creation renewed, the song which is first possible because of the life and death of Jesus, is a song of the holiness of the given body. The body which is totally given, totally shared, the body which is totally 'for you' is the greatest and highest example of holiness. What is a saint? It is a person who can say to God, say to the people around them, 'This is my body, which is for you'.

Then there are the rather puzzling words that end the second reading: 'Until the Lord comes, therefore, every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are proclaiming his death'. What does 'proclaiming his death' mean, and how can eating proclaim it? Once again, this little phrase provides the answer. Every time we come to communion, every time we eat his body, drink his blood, we are recipients of his gift. Time and again 'This is my body, which is for you' comes to life afresh. When we accept the gift, we make concrete the giving. If no one comes to communion, the gift lies hidden. But as we queue up to receive the Blessed Sacrament the giving is endlessly made concrete, endlessly prolonged, endlessly repeated. The gift of himself is always present in the heart of Jesus, but as we come to receive it that gift is made visible for all to see, it is proclaimed for all to see. This is what St. Paul is getting at.

Christianity is not at all a static, immobile faith. It is dynamic, active, on the move. And the fundamental movement, the essential dynamic of the Christian life, is the movement 'from me to you', the dynamic of gift, of self-offering. For the first time in years this week I went to the Corpus Christi mass and procession at Arundel, and of course once again this phrase explains what that is all about. As the Blessed Sacrament is carried through the streets of the town, the Lord speaks. Through that drama he says to the watchers, to the passers-by, to the people of Arundel, 'This is my body, which is for you'.

Today's feast makes very clear to us what was the fundamental driving force of Christ's life. But it also puts a question to us. How deeply have these words become a part of my way of living. They are deeply etched into the heart of the Saviour, but how deeply have they penetrated into our hearts?