

Homily for Corpus Christi 2009

The Feast of Corpus Christi is not always very easy to celebrate well. When we celebrate Easter, or Christmas, it is relatively easy to feel involved in the celebration: we are recalling concrete events, we can visualise the birth of Jesus, we can visualise the appearance of the risen Lord among his disciples. The same is true of other feasts celebrating the life of Jesus, or even the feasts of the saints; we know what their lives were like, we know what their deaths were like, and we know that there is much about them that we would like to celebrate, and to copy in our own lives. We feel involved in those celebrations. But there is another type of feast, like Corpus Christi, and Christ the King, which seems less connected to particular events, more like a celebration of an idea, and celebrations of ideas are very difficult to feel involved with. From time to time our political masters invent feasts to try and enshrine ideas in the national mind, usually with little success. The problem is, people don't feel it has much to do with them. It is not ideas that the human being likes to celebrate, but events, most especially shared experiences. The Jewish people do not have a 'Festival of Freedom', they have Passover, a festival in which they celebrate, and in fact in which they experience, their people's escape from slavery in Egypt.

So, as long as we think of Corpus Christi as a celebration of the idea that Jesus is with us in the form of bread and wine, we will never be able to get very excited about it. This is made clear in the Opening Prayer at today's mass 'help us to experience the salvation you won for us'. If we are going to make real sense of Corpus Christi, we have to be able to see it as a celebration of some shared experience, not just of an idea. Any celebration requires a shared joy; we cannot have a festival without rejoicing. The philosopher Josef Pieper once wrote, and these words are very important:

'[T]he reason for joy, although it may be encountered in a thousand concrete forms, is always the same: possessing or receiving what one loves, whether actually in the present, hoped for in the future, or remembered in the past. Joy is an expression of love. One who loves nothing and nobody cannot possibly rejoice, no matter how desperately he craves joy. Joy is the response of a lover receiving what he loves.'

Josef Pieper 'In Tune with the World; A Theory of Festivity'

So, when we celebrate Easter, we are rejoicing because of what has happened to Jesus in the past, and because of what we hope will happen to us too. But what is the event, the experience, that brings joy to our celebration of Corpus Christi? Well, the feast of Corpus Christi is rooted in the Upper Room where Jesus and his friends celebrate the Last Supper. Outside, the city is in turmoil; it is heaving with crowds of people there for the Passover, and there is a hint of revolution in the air; the Romans are edgy, the priests are frightened and insecure, the people saw Jesus arrive on Palm Sunday, they saw what he did in the Temple and heard what he said. No-one knows quite what will happen now. What Jesus does is to withdraw his disciples from this hectic, frantic, confusing world, so that they can spend some time alone with him. Around that table they experience the deepest love, and total acceptance. Jesus shows how much he loves them by washing their feet and offering himself to them and for them. He shows all of them complete acceptance, all of them are welcome there, none is made to feel an outsider or that he doesn't really belong, and remember that within hours one of them will have betrayed him, another will have denied him, and almost all of them will have run away when he needed them most. In spite of all this, for a little while they are completely united, and they have the great privilege of being alone with the Lord; he gives them his complete and undivided attention. For just a little while the clamour of the crowd, the threats of the priests, the power of the soldiers, can all be forgotten. For the last moments of his freedom, Jesus gives himself completely to his friends.

This is the key to celebrating Corpus Christi well, and in fact to celebrating mass well. At the Last Supper Jesus withdraws his disciples from the world of sense, from the mundane and everyday, he withdraws them from the false idols set up by people's pride and lust for power, he withdraws them from the fake gods and the sham ideas that are so tarnished by sin and selfishness, and for just a little while he lets them bask in the light of reality and truth. It is not enough to prevent them being led astray; it is not enough to make them proof against temptation, it will not magically make them perfect but this withdrawal is what gives them the strength to survive what will come in the following hours and years.

So, why do we celebrate Corpus Christi? It is a source of joy and pleasure because every week (and every day) the Lord invites us to withdraw for a while from the hustle and the bustle, from all the business, and the fears and worries, from the decisions that are waiting, to leave it all behind. He invites us to join him, and for a little while to open our eyes to the deep truth and the profound realities of human existence. So many things call out to us for attention, so many things claim to be important, but at mass we can leave them all at the door, and open our eyes to the only things that really matter: to beauty, to goodness and to truth. At mass we are all welcome, whoever we are, the great and the small, the old and the young, the wise and the foolish; all we need to do is open our eyes and our ears to the living God. In Corpus Christi we celebrate the fact that God has called us individually, one by one, called us by name, to leave behind the workaday world and to be with the one who loves us perfectly. Nothing is more important than mass, because this is where we see the world as it really is. The more time we spend away from mass, the more we become tricked and fooled into thinking that the idols of the world outside are real. People sometimes say they are too busy to go to mass, but the truth is they are too busy not to. If anyone says they are too busy to go to mass they have already succumbed, the things which in the long run do not really matter have seduced them, and they desperately need to withdraw and look for a while at the world as it really is. So, as the questions what should I do, where should my priorities lie, what should I hope for, what really matters, how should I live crowd in on me, the answers are to be found by withdrawing for a while and spending time with the Lord. In the long run it doesn't matter if the mass is modern or old-fashioned, if the priest is a good speaker or not, if the music is good, or not; I am here to leave behind the world outside and be with Jesus. As the host and chalice are held before me I see the one thing that matters, the thing I must keep in mind throughout the week.

The preface for this mass ends with the words 'we come to this wonderful sacrament to be fed at your table and grow into the likeness of the risen Christ'; this might more poetically be translated 'To your table and to this great sacrament we come, to be enfolded in the sweetness of your gift and transformed into the likeness of Heaven' [Alan Griffiths 'We Give You Thanks and Praise']. That's it; we are celebrating our longed for experience of being wrapped in the beauty of reality which will allow us to make sense of life for another seven days. Thank God we can experience the world as it truly is, the world of reality which otherwise remains unseen, and even unvalued. May we always treasure such a wonderful gift.