

His Real But Not Static Presence
20th Sunday, Year B
16 August 2009

Earlier this week John Day, the Vicar of Fendalton, was telling me about the parish in Bradford in the north of England, where he was a curate. It was advanced Anglo Catholic in its style of religion, with a rather unusual kind of Sunday evening Service called Evensong and Benediction. What that amounted to was that after the third collect the priest advanced to the altar, put a consecrated priest's wafer in a cylindrical object that looked like a radiating sun, and made a sign of blessing with it over the congregation, who knelt in deep devotion at that point.

This practice generated intense controversy in late 19th and early 20th century Anglicanism. As Anglo Catholics pressed their demands for a more Eucharist centred style of piety they were allowed by Bishops to reserve the sacrament in a discrete place in the Church for the purpose of taking communion to the house bound sick. That had been a wide spread practice in the early Church, so it was hard to disagree with it. Yet the churches that reserved the sacrament usually did so in a way that encouraged the faithful to pray in its immediate vicinity. That is why there is a red lamp over there in the St Francis chapel, with a number of features in that set aside space designed to bring people to their knees. Speaking for myself I find it very helpful to pray in the presence of the reserved sacrament – it focuses the presence of God in a way that appeals to the senses. I also enjoy Evensong and Benediction – though I am aware as I do so that the underlying theology doesn't bear looking in to

too closely. I will be circling back to that topic later in the sermon.

What is at stake in these kinds of Eucharistic controversies is the sense in which Jesus Christ is present to us in the consecrated bread and wine. We have reached a stage in our thorough investigation of the sixth chapter of John's gospel, that has been going on these last few Sundays, where I can't avoid this subject anymore. What did Jesus mean when he talked about believers munching on his flesh so as to be raised up on the last day?

Christians got hot and bothered about the answer to this question during the Reformation in what came to be called "Supper strife," meaning that the Lord's Supper became a battleground of contending opinions. The reformers were concerned at the amount of credulous and superstitious practices that they saw going on around what seemed to be an exaggerated Eucharistic piety, that appeared to be unrelated to New Testament accounts of what had gone on at the Last Supper. The various possible solutions advanced in this time of Supper strife each had an important grain of truth in them, while at the same time they each lacked a significant dimension of what the Eucharistic gift is about.

On the extreme left of the Reformation Ulrich Zwingli proposed that at the Eucharist we hear from the Bible and the preacher what Christ did for us, and this produces a response of faith in us as we remember with gratitude how he saved and saves us. The emphasis on remembering was welcome, but it was a pretty reduced sense of remembering in which the bread and wine had little significance, except as an enacted parable of what had gone on in

the believer's heart. Today we have come to understand that by memorial the Bible means that powerful act of remembering whereby God's mighty acts in salvation in the past are brought into the present in such a way as to make them alive and active in our faith experience. The Eucharist then doesn't just put us back in the upper room, but also delivers to us all that Christ made available to his contemporaries in words, signs and actions.

In a more centrist Reformation position John Calvin proposed that Christ is present with us in a powerful spiritual presence while we celebrate the Eucharist, though he cannot be located specifically in the consecrated bread and wine. Some of the language of mystical indwelling in the Book of Common Prayer Communion Service reflects this point of view. He was on to an important truth – Christ is present in us and with us as we gather as his body to become his collective presence in this place on Sunday morning. Still, the inability to give much significance to the consecrated bread and wine was a major deficit in this point of view – which is why Presbyterians just pour the consecrated wine down the sink after communion is over.

The Catholics certainly had a very real sense of Christ's real presence in the Eucharistic bread and wine, and they thought they had protected themselves against the cannibalistic sounding overtones of John 6 through a sophisticated use of Aristotelian philosophical terms in their doctrine of transubstantiation. To quote Wikipedia, transubstantiation means the change of the substance of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ occurring in the Eucharist while all that is accessible to the senses remains as before. The trouble is that although I have been reading

definitions of what transubstantiation means for several decades now, I am no closer to understanding what it actually means. This inability to clearly communicate how Christ was really present in the Eucharistic gifts didn't help when it came to developing a healthy and balanced Eucharistic piety with the uneducated Catholic peasantry of Europe.

In its essence Anglicanism is a variety of reformed Catholicism, which believes that it has purified the Catholicism it sprang from with an all-pervading Scripturalness. It believes in the real presence of Christ in Holy Communion, and that the consecrated bread and wine should be treated with great reverence. There has been a considerable reluctance on the part of Anglicans to spell out exactly what they mean by the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but recent oecumenical agreements with other churches have obliged them to do this.

When I try to think through how Christ comes to us in Holy Communion I consider what goes on at birthdays and Christmas when we give each other presents. The box of chocolates I receive from someone who cares about me amounts to much more than just the pleasure I will receive from consuming them – those little brown goodies represent in a sense the positive feelings of the gift giver towards me. As we say, it is the thought that counts.

Of course, we live in a fallen world in which I might be inclined to scoff the chocolates without thinking about the loving intentions that they represent. Or I might give a gift without any sincere feelings of appreciation towards the person on the receiving

end. And in this selfishly orientated world there is a considerable gap between the reality of the object that is the gift, and the intentions of the donor.

But suppose that the giver of the gift was God – that Divine being whose essential nature is that of ecstatic, outward going altruism, in whom there is no gap between loving intention and acts of overflowing generosity. Suppose that the gift was the bread and wine that so often had been at the heart of his Son's many acts of hospitality towards the lost and the estranged. Suppose that the words that were said over this bread and wine recalled in a powerful actualising way all that this obedient Son had done to rescue us. Suppose that the Holy Spirit had been invoked over, and had come down on this bread and wine, to make it alive with the presence of the risen Jesus. Given all this, I feel obliged to reach out my hands with gratitude and devotion to receive what amounts to a concentrated form of the Kingdom of God. For rather than munching on his physical body what I understand I am doing at communion is to take into myself in symbolic form the content of the relationship between the Father and the Son as it was expressed in the earthly life and ministry of Jesus, and as it is now made available in the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is a dynamic thing we are doing at Holy Communion, closely connected to the Eucharistic action, within the context of the Eucharistic community gathered together in praise and worship. So I can understand why it may not be appropriate to take this intensely alive Eucharistic gift out of the tabernacle a few days later, and to wave it around over the heads of an Evensong congregation. Still, I understand why those who love Jesus Christ

present in the most holy sacrament of the altar; get
a kick out of doing just that.