

**Until The Lord Comes
Corpus Christi, Year C
Luke 9: 11-17
6 June 2010**

How do actors do it! Memorise all those lines I mean. I have trouble remembering people's names, but they have to get hours of dialogue word perfect. Not to mention all the actions, postures, entrances and exits that correspond to the words. What is more if they are successful then they may well be appearing in different plays and films simultaneously. It could get confusing, and it certainly would require a memory like an elephant.

Then there is the business of immersing yourself in a character different to your own. Sometimes it can be hard for actors to come back inside themselves afterwards. And if you are playing someone who is morally and spiritually better than you are does that change you as a person over time?

I have noticed that when an actor gives a performance that impresses me, or moves me, or entrances me I become reluctant to read or hear gossip or news of difficulties or failures in their personal lives. I want to go on believing in that persona that they projected on screen or on stage.

Last Sunday our 9.30 liturgy began with a procession around the Church with banners and incense. The family of our visiting guest preacher were present, and they aren't used to that sort of thing. I could hear one of the children asking, "Mummy, where are they going?"

In this Church we go in for moving in ritual patterns of action, for elaborate costumes, in a building whose every feature is designed to create a suitable ambience and atmosphere for worship. There are considerable elements of theatre in what we do here. That is because we have set up our weekly encounter with God as a dramatic event. By its very nature and structure Liturgy requires that. What is more we have got a script. You may have noticed that I try and put down the book and to speak my lines with direct eye contact as much as possible. It is a help if we can all try and do that.

So if this is a play what are we playing at? What are the plot lines, and where is the story going? Often Church drama critics have been inclined to say that this is a piece of theatre that concerns itself with past events in such a way as to make them dramatically real in the present. That is true, but it is not the whole story.

Other critics have pointed out that this is a play that conjures up a powerful and invisible presence who makes himself available in a

variety of ways both tangible and intangible. This also is a true insight, but again it is not the whole story.

“Until the Lord comes, therefore, every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are proclaiming his death.”

It is what is expected, what is looked forward to and is anticipated that really counts here. This is a play whose action is not merely anchored in the past, nor contained in the present. There is openness to another dimension that sets the tone, and orientates the story that is told in another direction. We are playing at the future, rehearsing what it will be like when Jesus has returned. That will be the time when one world will come to an end, and another will be born. This new world is what Jesus spoke of as the Kingdom of God. In a way our hour of worship is an imaginative reconstruction of what it will be like to live in the Kingdom. We use the Scriptures that are read aloud as our way in to unpacking a particular aspect of life in heaven with Jesus. The praise we offer in song and prayer is an anticipation of what our main activity will be when we are always in the presence of God. The turning to one another in greeting and welcome in Christ's name is a first pale reflection of the style and quality of relationships in that wonderful future world. And the point of the costumes, and the processions, and the stylised ritual actions, and the heavenly smell of incense is that we celebrate the Eucharist in a style that reflects this weight of future glory.

But if all this amounts to is a display of amateur dramatics then it is rather pathetic. No amount of skilled stagecraft, clever lighting, and attention getting acting can make the Kingdom of heaven present. The content of the Eucharist has to add up to more than just human creativity and imaginative skill.

A gift is given in this transaction between heaven and earth. The eye of faith can log it happening when we request the Holy Spirit to come down on the gifts of bread and wine, and on us. Whenever and wherever the Holy Spirit comes among us time dimensions shift - the powers of the age to come become active among us - the last days enter the present days of Sunday morning Avonside. A first taste of God's future world is in our midst.

And that does something to the Church assembled for worship. The Church becomes for a brief time what it will be in the future. It becomes its real self by anticipation. It moves closer to its essential nature the more it rehearses what it was really meant to be. And the more it does this the more the Church reveals that it has its centre of gravity in the future. Its roots and its lines of communication are located there. It is built up the more it anchors itself in this regular rhythm of Eucharistically infused end time energies.

So what we are celebrating on the feast of Corpus Christi is the life giving truth that the Eucharist makes the Church. For in its rather provisional state of existence right now it tends often to be an association, a voluntary society of the Jesus movement. What the Eucharist does in its orientation towards the last days of future glory is to draw the Church into its true trajectory of becoming a community of believers deeply rooted in their sense of Christian belonging. When the Eucharist has this end time focus it does what it is most essentially intended to do – build up the unity of the Church. It binds that group of worshippers together as people united by a participation in the deep things of Christ. It vividly acquaints them with their ultimate destiny as inhabitants of the life of the world to come. It reminds them that what we are in the midst of now is not all that there is. The half has not been told of where we are heading, and what we are intended for. And that story of future glory strikes home to us as we celebrate the Eucharist. For it reminds us that what matters right now is who we will become and not who we were. The Eucharist can make us better people, as we become for that hour of worship who we will be in the Kingdom.