

Homily: Corpus Christi 2020

There is no doubt we are all being sorely tried and tested in the present crisis. So much is going on both here and all around the world, not just the lockdown, but so many other things coming in its wake. It reminds me of Pope Francis's saying about 'not an era of change, but a change of era.' But God is unchanging, 'Jesus Christ is the same today as he was yesterday, and as he will be for ever.' (*Hebrews 13: 8*)

Moses in our 1st reading from Deuteronomy, reminds the people of Israel how the Lord God led them through the wilderness, to humble them, to test them and to know their inmost heart. He fed them with manna to make them understand that it is not on bread alone but on everything that comes from the mouth of the Lord; a quotation Jesus uses in his temptations, (Matt. 4:4) and later in John's Gospel (6: 48) speaks of manna as a symbol of the True Bread from heaven, Himself, Jesus. The two parts of the Mass: The Word and the Sacrament to feed and nourish us in mind and body. Moses is saying, the Lord was with you in all that was going on, so do not forget the Lord your God.

Lockdown can and does give us time to reflect, to think and to pray to the Lord, ever with us. A fitting opening for Corpus Christi, our celebration of the Body and Blood of the Lord, so muted this year, as we cannot physically be here with the Lord at Mass. The Feast marks the reality of the presence of Our Lord in the Eucharist and all that it means. Vatican II speaks of Mass as the source and summit of the Faith.

It is good to think that the Eucharist is not a luxury, but a necessity, for without it, we would, in the spiritual sense, starve to death. It is the Lord feeding his people physically and spiritually.

Every time we offer Mass all the suffering and agony of humanity is present. Through that offering, love, forgiveness and hope are in some way being given. So the Mass makes present that one complete Sacrifice of Christ, re-enacted through the consecrated bread and wine - the Body and Blood of Christ – transcending time and space: enabling us to be present at the foot of the cross, and close to the empty tomb. It is also our earthly way of being involved in the great heavenly liturgy which is going on all the

time, and in which we join with the angels and saints, and the whole host of heaven: the eternal Sanctus being sung. I remember a wise priest once saying, “Being healthy is singing in tune with the song creation and the angels are eternally singing.”

The Mass is both sacrifice and communion. And the altar, is both the place upon which the sacrifice is offered and the table for the sharing of his Body and his Blood. If we forget either aspect, we fall into error.

You cannot live without food, you cannot live without love. Now you see why Jesus gave himself in the Eucharist. He would not abandon us. He would give us love and give us food. No greater proof of his love for us can there be than the Eucharist. It is a personal gift every time we receive him in Holy Communion.

The Mass is the way of bringing into the present, re-presenting, what took place on Calvary and at the Resurrection, through the consecrated bread and wine: ‘Do this in memory of me.’ The great English Catholic preacher Ronald Knox made the following observation. ‘The vast majority of Jesus’ commands – to love one’s enemies, to turn the other cheek, to forgive seventy times seven times, etc. – have been rather consistently disregarded.

However amid all of these commandments honoured, at best, in the breach, there is one command of Jesus that has, up and down the centuries, been massively obeyed. Throughout the long history of the church, through a whole series of dramatic successes and failures, despite the stupidity and wickedness of so many Christians, the command “do this in memory of me” has been and continues to be obeyed. It is as though Christians, in all of their sin, have realized from the beginning that the spiritual life depends upon the Eucharist the way that physical life depends upon food, oxygen and water.”

You and I could not have devised a way of making the Passion, death and Resurrection present for all people for all time. Only God could devise what he has in fact, devised; for every time the Mass is offered the Sacrifice of Calvary is repeated. Every time you receive Holy Communion the life of the risen Christ is given to you. We witness two things: our gift to God, and the gift of God to us. It is Jesus who gives, offers, himself to

his Father together with ourselves, and it is Jesus who is given to us in Holy Communion.

Cardinal Hume tells a beautiful, and moving story about an experience which enabled him in an extraordinary manner to understand the Eucharist. It is well worth hearing, reading all of it to you now ...

He writes: 'I went to Ethiopia when the famine of the 1980's was at its height. I went because I felt somebody should go from our country, just to be there, and I remember sitting in Archbishop's House watching the evening news, having had a good supper, then seeing those pictures on the television and asking myself: what are you doing sitting here? Into my head flashed the story of Dives and Lazarus. That was what stirred me to go.

Once there one day I was asked to visit a settlement where people were awaiting the arrival of food which was unlikely to come. A military helicopter had been put at my disposal. We had difficulty finding the place but when we landed and I got out, a small boy came up to me and took my hand. He was aged about nine or ten and had nothing on but a loin cloth. The whole of the time I spent there, that child would not let go of my hand. He had two gestures: with one hand he pointed to his mouth to indicate his need for food: the other was a strange gesture, he took my hand and rubbed it on his cheek. I realised slowly that he was lost and totally alone – and starving. I appreciated in quite a new way those two profound and fundamental needs – for food and for love.

It was much later that day that I realised in a new way the secret of the Eucharist; for the Eucharist is food and love. Taught by that small boy, I saw what the heart of the Eucharist is- His Body and his Blood. For indeed there is no life without food, and no life worth living without love. When Jesus said he wanted us to have life and have it more abundantly, then he must give us his love, and the love he gives is pre-eminently through that sign of his love, the Eucharist, his very essence, all divine.

The Mass is the Church's most precious treasure. It must be ours. The Mass meant so much to the English martyrs, they risked so much just to be present. I feel somewhat ashamed when I think how devoted they were. But these great people inspire us to find out more about the Mass, and love it as they did. At the heart of our worship (Mass) must be a

profound faith in the real presence of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, and as a result, an attitude of adoration and reverence. We approach him in sense empty-handed, for we have nothing of our own which is not his gift and we approach very often lost and in need, as that 1st reading reminds us. Conscious of our failures, conscious of not having loved enough, we go to him and ask that he might give us his love and he says ‘here is my body, here is my blood, eat and drink. A voice speaks to us constantly: ‘Come to me all you who labour and are burdened and I will refresh you. If you are hungry for the things of God, if you are lost and in need of love come to me.’ That invitation is extended daily to us as he offers himself to us.

At the centre of every priest’s life, and at the centre of the life of every parish, is the Mass – always to be honoured, always to be respected, always to be handled with the greatest sensitivity and dignity, because we are handling the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, true God and true man, soul and divinity.