

Corpus Christi

New Testament Reading: 1 Corinthians 11: 23 - 26

Gospel Reading: *John 6: 51 -58*

Sermon by Revd Ian Henderson at St Peter's on Thursday 4th June

There is a joke that whenever Christians gather to discuss the Eucharist, somebody eventually asks, "What exactly happens?" And after nearly two thousand years of debate, the most honest answer may still be: something far more wonderful than any of us can fully explain.

That is not an evasion. It is simply an acknowledgement that some realities are larger than our words. Love is like that. Beauty is like that. God is certainly like that. And the Eucharist is like that.

Today, St Paul reminds us of something remarkable. Writing to the Corinthians, he says, "I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you." Received. Handed on.

Those few words contain something profound about the Christian faith. Christianity is not something we invented. It is something we inherit. It is something we receive.

Every time we gather around the Lord's table, we are linked to Christians who have done the same before us. Christians in Roman houses and medieval monasteries, in great cathedrals and tiny village churches, in hospital chapels and prison cells, in times of peace and times of persecution. Across centuries and continents, believers have taken bread, blessed it, broken it, and shared it.

We are part of a story much bigger than ourselves, and at the centre of that story stands Jesus. He takes bread and says, "This is my body."

He does not say, "This is a useful illustration." Nor does he say, "This is a reminder to think about me." But, "This is my body."

No wonder Christians have spent centuries reflecting on those words. The fourth-century bishop Augustine suggested that in receiving Christ's body, we become Christ's body.

The thirteenth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas described the Eucharist as the sacrament of love. Both were trying to express something of the same mystery.

The Eucharist is not merely about bread. It is about Christ giving himself, and it is about Christ drawing us into his life.

Ordinary food becomes part of us. We eat it, and it becomes muscle and bone and energy. The food is transformed into us, but in the Eucharist, something rather different happens. Instead of

Christ becoming part of our agenda, we are drawn into his. Instead of Christ being absorbed into our plans, we are invited into his life.

Week after week, we come carrying all sorts of things. Our joys and disappointments, our hopes and anxieties, and our successes and failures. Sometimes we arrive full of faith. Sometimes we arrive simply because we know nowhere else to go.

And Christ gives himself. Week after week. Generation after generation. Without fuss. Without fanfare. Without ever running out. Perhaps that is one of the greatest miracles of all.

Not simply that bread and wine become holy, but that God never tires of feeding his people.

I sometimes think we can approach the altar rather like people standing before a magnificent feast while worrying about the cutlery. Important questions matter. Theology matters. Doctrine matters. The Church has always taken those things seriously.

But before anything else, the Eucharist is a gift: A gift from Christ to his Church. A gift given not because we have earned it, but because God is generous.

And perhaps that is why Corpus Christi remains such a precious feast.

In a world that constantly tells us to prove ourselves, improve ourselves, justify ourselves, and earn our place, the Eucharist speaks a different word.

It says: receive. Receive grace, receive forgiveness, receive Christ, receive life.

The fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich once wrote that the greatest honour we can give God is to live gladly because of his love. There is something of that spirit in Corpus Christi. Not a shallow happiness that ignores life's difficulties, but a deep joy rooted in the knowledge that Christ has not left us to find our own way.

He still comes to his people. He still feeds us. He still gathers us. He still gives himself for the life of the world.

So today we do what Christians have always done. We come with empty hands. We receive bread. We receive wine. We receive Christ.

And in receiving him, we discover once again that long before we ever sought God, God was already giving himself to us.

Amen.