

Sermon Corpus Christi 2024 St. Catherine's, Stuttgart

Our Chaplain, Bishop Antonio, is one to come up with surprises, as I am learning. One of these finds me here in the pulpit responding to his request to preach this Sunday on *Corpus Christi*. Literally *Corpus Christi* means The Body of Christ. In German it translates into Fronleichnam, the Christian festival that was celebrated last Thursday, and here in Germany is marked by a public holiday in those Bundesländer with a predominant or very large proportion of Roman Catholics. Baden-Württemberg is one of them. So, it is quite correct to associate Fronleichnam with the Roman Catholic Church for which this festival is one of the high feast days. It is celebrated in honour of the **real presence** of the body (i.e. corpus) of Christ in the Eucharist.

Then why are we commemorating it in the Church of England? I admit that this is my first sermon on the subject. I come from a very Protestant background, one which my parents brought with them to India as missionaries of the Basel Mission – a reformed Lutheran mission. I will not go into all the conditioning which was in the baggage of these South German missionaries; the celebration of Corpus Christi was certainly not amongst it. The Reformation in the 16th Century on the European Continent had declared the belief in the real, physical presence of Christ in the bread and wine to be unbiblical. However, these missionaries entered a melting pot which was India. In a nutshell, it meant confronting and interacting with beliefs and traditions widely at variance with their own, even within the Christian family. Roman Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans and so on, all were proclaiming Christ

crucified, risen, seated at the right hand of the Father etc. All owned the Apostle's and the Nicene Creeds. For each the celebration of Holy Communion was a central hallmark of their faith. There were, of course marked differences, in the preaching and teachings and especially, as we know, around the understanding of fulfilling Christ's command to share his Body and Blood. One could either go about emphasising these differences, seeing in the 'other' denominations and churches one's rivals or even those on the slippery path; or one could be open to dialogue, curious and prepared to recognise each other's gifts and strengths without compromising what one believed in.

It is this latter frame of mind that has been a gift to me, and whenever Fronleichnam comes around, I remember the time when, as a student in Tübingen, I went with a friend to witness the Fronleichnam procession in München which I experienced not only an exciting and memorable but deeply spiritual.

We still have not touched on why Corpus Christi is a special day for Anglicans too. In our Lectionary - i.e. the Church's calendar which gives all the feast and saints' days etc. - Corpus Christi is given as the '*Day of Thanksgiving for Holy Communion*'. Where Roman Catholicism celebrates '**in honour of the real presence of the body of Christ** in Communion', Anglicans '**give thanks**' for this sacred rite which Jesus instituted at the Last Supper with his friends, and **commanded that those who follow him should continue to do this in remembrance of his sacrificial giving of himself.**

The common ground, therefore, as I understand, is that we gather around the Lord's Table at his bidding to share in Jesus' self-giving love. His Body broken and Blood shed once and for all become the life-giving and life-renewing centre of our faith; we do well to remember this - again and again and again.

The mystery of Christ's sacrifice and our recalling of it in the sharing of Bread and Wine around his table is unfathomable. Each of us who embraces this truth and shares in Christ's invitation has his or her own personal experience of being united with him and with one another. Yet I would like to call to mind a few hallmarks which may challenge us afresh:

1. Among the 'inner circle' of Jesus' friends was a tax-collector - not very desirable company to be associated with. We should ask ourselves: Who can feel comfortable in our company around the Lord's Table? What does that have to say to us of whom we include and of how we engage with them?
2. Jesus included Judas, of whom he knew that he would betray him. It included Peter, who, Jesus knew would deny him vehemently before the night was out. Do we betray Jesus? Do we not deny him in our daily living? At the Lord's Table we find forgiveness and healing. It is ours to share.
3. Though the Last Supper, as the name says, was at a very human level a time of parting, of saying farewell, full of foreboding what the future would bring, full of fear that the years spent following Jesus and putting their faith in him as the awaited Messiah had been in vain and all their hopes dashed —: Jesus turned this last meal into a celebration of

thanksgiving – a Eucharist. For that is the meaning of the Greek word. (Even in modern Greek one says *ephcharisto* for ‘thank you’.)

The Eucharist is the gathering of Christ’s followers to come to his table at his invitation to give thanks for the New Being and the New Beginning which he offers through his sacrifice of himself.

Friends, Jesus does not want us to beat our breasts. As those who believe and follow him, we can respond to his invitation and approach the altar with heads held high, sharing in his meal which he has instituted in remembrance of his life and sacrifice for each and every one of us, whoever we are, whatever our state or status and whatever tradition.

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**