

Sermon for 19.8.18

Over the past weeks the gospel readings from John have taken us on a journey through events and details that lead us to our celebration of the Sacrament of the Eucharist or Holy Communion.

Our journey began with the miraculous feeding by Jesus of the 5000 on the mountain, Jesus walking on water, and Jesus proclaiming that he himself is the bread of life come down from heaven.

We then travelled through Q&A time between the crowd and Jesus and learned from Jesus that the work of God is to believe in him as sent by God as the bread of life from heaven.

Things become a little more confronting when Jesus tells the crowd that if they want to have Jesus' life in them, and be raised on the last day, they are to eat of this bread which is his flesh and blood.

Richard Burridge writes of today's passage: *This picks up Wisdom's metaphorical invitation to eat and drink from the earlier section and goes beyond it. And in this passage we hear that to eat and drink the flesh and blood of Jesus means that we abide in him eternally as he is in us eternally.*¹

What these gospel passages proclaim, I believe, is Jesus as the embodiment of God's love and grace for us in flesh and blood, given for us and offered to us through God's love for the creation. It is an amazing mystery of divine love carried to extremes and one which we are offered and receive in the Eucharist.

In the Anglican tradition, the central focus of the service is the Holy Communion or Eucharistic liturgy.

The flow of the order of service in a traditional Anglican service has a forward looking vision from the beginning when we gather together.

Gathered in Christ's name we look forward to partaking of the Holy Communion and also look forward to when Christ will come again.

In terms of the rhythm of the service, we begin with the gathering together, we then sing together - we are welcomed, and our first prayer is that of preparation.

The confession and absolution follow and make us ready to sing the hymn of praise, Gloria in Excelsis, then hear the prayer for the day and settle to listen to the readings from scripture.

After the Gospel reading we hear the preacher delivers the sermon that connects the scriptural teachings with our own lives and what this means in terms of our relationship with God and with each other.

Our statement of faith follows in which we declare our belief in the Trinitarian God - Father Son and Holy Spirit. It is then that our prayers as a community of faith are offered to God who has promised to hear them. These are followed by the offering of God's peace to one another.

¹ Richard A. Burridge. John. The People's Bible Commentary: A devotional commentary for study and preaching:. Abington UK. P97

Each of these different components intentionally lead us on a path towards the central focus of our worship service, The Eucharist.

The elements are brought to the altar. The gifts are brought also to the altar and we are then ready and prepared for the priest to pray the great thanksgiving prayer.

The bread and the wine is sanctified as Christ's presence among us in flesh and blood, and the host is broken for us and given to us. The service then ends with the blessing and dismissal.

It is a beautiful, grace filled liturgy that recalls and obeys Jesus Christ's command that we *do this in remembrance of him* when he shared the Passover with his disciples nearly 2000 years ago.

And as we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, spiritual nourishment pours forth in communion with the Holy Trinity, Christ's Church (which is all of us), and together with the Angels and Saints in the Heavenly Liturgy where Christ eternally intercedes for us.

How wonderful it is to worship God in this way.

During the week I listened to Dr. Rowan Williams², previous Archbishop of Canterbury, talking about Saint Terese of Avila, as a theologian of the Eucharist – and as Terese was one of the mystics that I visited on my recent pilgrimage, I thought I would share with you this morning some of the insights Rowan Williams highlighted in his presentation about her.

Saint Terese's belief was that the Eucharistic presence – the body and blood of Christ is the centre of importance of the church. She believed that the invitation and welcome that God extends to God's people was in the sacrament. She believed that the reserved sacrament housed in the aumbry or tabernacle and lit up by the sanctuary lamp, was the visible sign of God's invitation, presence and welcome.

Now Terese lived in the troubled times of the 16th Century - the time of the Reformation initiated by Martin Luther in response to corrupt practices in the Roman church.

The reformers saw much of the sacramental practices of the church as idol worship and sought to shift the central focus that the Sacrament held in the liturgy, to that of the Word of God through scripture passages and quotes supporting sermons about practical mission. This is why in many protestant churches the pulpit was raised up in a high more prominent position for central focus.

Saint Terese didn't agree with this theology and she was horrified at the reformers actions of throwing out, or taking away from the churches the aumbry's and tabernacles and the reserved sacrament they housed. She saw this as throwing out or taking away Christ from the church. She saw Christ as being made homeless and without honour and this for her was a complete crisis in the life of the church, best described through her famous image, "a world in flames".

In response to this crisis she reformed her own religious order of Carmelites that included religious and lay people. Her reforms made this religious order *a community of the sacrament*, a community of invitation to friendship with Christ, a community of God's welcome extended to God's people through the sacrament, the body and blood of Christ.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0TNKipIBUko> St Terese Theologian of the Eucharist. Accessed 14.8.18

The sacrament for Terese, is about divine relationship that we are invited into.

It is a manifestation of the divine life in the Trinity and therefore the communicant who receives the sacrament receives also a place in that relational divine life in the Trinity.

In Teresa's reflections on the Lord's Prayer – the petition *Give us this day our daily bread* – is not a petition for physical food or sustenance – rather it is a prayer to God that He, Jesus, will not be taken from us – that he will go on being given, being sent into the world for us.

"This day" in the verse - ' is *the day* that is as long as the world lasts – *the day* is the entire history of the universe. In this petition "give us this day our daily bread" therefore, we were taught by Jesus to pray that he will always be with us as long as the world exists as he has been with us through the history of the universe.

Now these reflections of St Terese, I suggest are for us to ponder over for they offer a different perspective that we may be used to.

They are not something that we hear about every day, yet they are a gift to us from a Saint and mystic of the 16th century, whose visions and writings were held in such reverence, that in 1997 Terese joined with a special group of saints and was declared a doctor of the church.

When we come to take communion today may we be present to the moment and our experience of the Sacrament bringing us and welcoming us into the fold of the divinity of the Trinity, and may we be present to each other in that divine relational love.

The Lord be with you.