



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, June 17, 2001
The Solemnity of Corpus Christi

Solemn Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Saint John 6:47-58
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THE BODY OF CHRIST

“How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Let me start by telling you a bit about the beginning of Corpus Christi. In the early thirteenth century, in response to a vision, a devout French nun named Juliana of Liege began a campaign to have the Church appoint a special festival in honor of the Holy Eucharist. After thirty years (at the time of the birth of Dante Alighieri), Pope Urban IV issued a bull entitled *Transiturus* commending the feast of *Corpus et Sanguinis Christi* to the faithful. The great Saint Thomas Aquinas had a hand in compiling the service prayers, lessons and hymns (some of which he wrote himself, such as the beloved “Now my tongue the mystery telling”). By the fourteenth century Corpus Christi was universal in the Western Church, observed the Thursday (or, as is often now the case, the Sunday) following Trinity Sunday.

A special celebration in honor of the Eucharist is not required (except for Maundy Thursday) in the Episcopal Church, but it is an option many parishes take, as we have done for some time now at Saint Thomas. There is good reason for this. First of all, Maundy Thursday, one of the most powerful and beautiful liturgies of the year, is entirely and rightly overshadowed by the Passion of our Lord. Second, it is good to devote a Sunday to the mystery of the Sacrament we celebrate every Sunday, as we devote a Sunday to the mystery of God the Holy Trinity.

So this morning, let us ask, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” Originally, the Jews asking the question were hostile to Jesus. But there were others. Even some of the disciples said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” (Jn 6:60) At that point some of them turned away from Jesus.

But let us hear the Lord. “Except you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him.”

These statements are part of Jesus’ extended teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum after the feeding of the five thousand. It is the sixth chapter of Saint John’s Gospel, and it is called the

“Bread of Life” discourse. The crowds had been impressed by the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves of bread and the fish. So Jesus began his teaching by warning them not to seek the temporary food that perishes, but to seek the food that endures to eternal life. “I am that Bread of Life,” said Jesus, “and the Bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

So we get to the heart of the discourse in today’s Corpus Christi passage, where Jesus put his hearers to the test with the “hard saying” about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. After the Jews who did not believe in him and some of his own disciples objected, Jesus said something very important: “It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” (Jn 6:62)

It is worth noting that, decades later, by the time the Church began to make an impression on the Roman Empire, the Christians were accused of engaging in a strange, cannibalistic ritual. It was said that they ate and drank the flesh and blood of their leader or their God. This, of course, was a hostile reference to the Holy Eucharist. By the way, one persecuting Roman official, Pliny, the elder, said if you caught someone taking part in that ritual, you had the evidence to convict him of being a Christian.

The Book of Common Prayer shows that Anglicans are among those Christians who believe in the Real Presence of Christ under the forms of bread and wine in the Eucharist. There are various distinctions, of a fairly minor sort, among sacramental Christians. There are also Christians who believe the Eucharist to be a memorial symbol of a past action of Jesus, not a present sacramental reality. And there are Christians whose belief is somewhere in between.

But the issue of Corpus Christi is not so much what various groups of Christians say about the Eucharist. The issue is what *Jesus himself* says, and it is Jesus who uses clear, realistic language “This is my Body which is given for you.” Picking up on that, Saint Paul, as we heard in today’s epistle, puts the issue to us: The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?

What we need to understand is not so much, How is Jesus present in the bread and wine? We need to understand why it is a life-and-death issue that we must eat his flesh and drink his blood; for if we do not, “you have no life in you.”

This is not only the heart of the Eucharist. It is the heart of the Gospel. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Sin subtracts from our humanity; it diminishes us; it is dehumanizing. We are not just spirits and souls; we are bodies as well, and sin wastes us, body and soul. When the Son of God took our nature, he particularly took our flesh and blood, and he dedicated it entirely to our salvation. Christ’s humanity, body and soul, is in perfect union with his divinity. It is not marred by sin. It is medicine to our infirmity, food and drink to our hunger and thirst. Listen to Thomas Aquinas on this subject:

“[Christ] offered his body to God the Father on the altar of the cross as a sacrifice for our reconciliation. He shed his blood for our ransom and purification, so that we might be redeemed from our wretched state of bondage and cleansed from all sin. But to ensure that the memory of so great a gift would abide with us forever, he left his body as food and his blood as drink for the faithful to consume in the form of bread and wine.” (*Liturgy of the Hours, III*, p. 610)

So Christ communicates his life-giving humanity in all its fullness to us, and we receive it through faith and love. He does in many ways, but most especially he does it in Holy Communion,

the mystery of the *Corpus Christi*. We eat and drink the Sacrament with our mouths. But it is every bit as necessary to digest the Sacrament with inward and spiritual faith as it is to eat and drink it with outward and physical reverence. *The Body and Blood of Christ are most truly consumed by the heart's genuine desire.*

One last thing. Some time ago, Father Stafford said a wonderful, simple thing. He said that in the Holy Eucharist, *Jesus does to us what he does to the bread and wine*. He changes the bread and wine into his Sacramental Body and Blood. And when we take part, he changes us into his living, mystical Body. At the end of the day, *we are the Corpus Christi*. So dearly beloved, let us take and eat with love and reverence, and let us by God's grace try to live up to what we have received.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.