

# Corpus Christi ...

## *... thanksgiving for the Institution of Holy Communion*

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*A sermon given on the Feast of Corpus Christi, Thursday 30th May 2024 – by Revd Canon Peter Wadsworth, in Beverley Minster*

*John 6:51-58; John 13:1-17; John 13:34-35*

*In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit . Amen.*

On the face of it, there is something almost absurd about the Eucharist. How on earth can a small piece of unleavened bread and a sip of wine be a means of communion between human beings and God? And yet that is the gift that Christ gives to his people, that he gave to his first disciples at the last supper, and that he has given countless millions of times down through the centuries in every possible circumstance: everything from the grandeur we saw last year king and queen receiving communion at their coronation; through to communion celebrated at bedside for those who are seriously ill; with chaplains in fields of battle. At every conceivable moment in human life, the Eucharist is celebrated and communion is shared. And when we do so, we are drawn into the deepest intimacy legacy with God in Christ.

Now theologians, you will not be surprised to know, have argued for centuries as to exactly what happens in the Eucharist. But I must say the definition that I like best of all is a wonderful one, I think, which when the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church met together back in the 1970s to look at the Eucharist, they came up with a wonderful definition which brought together both Catholic and Protestant emphases. What they said was, 'Christ is truly present in the bread and the wine. When that presence is met by faith in the believer, a truly life-giving encounter ensues.' That's bringing together perhaps a more Catholic emphasis on the real presence of Christ, but also the Protestant understanding that the faith of the believer is absolutely vital in the act of communion, so when those two come together, a life-giving encounter ensues - we are fed for the journey which we make through life.

But if we go back to the last supper (and in some ways, every time we do this, we are brought back to that upper room - *[now,]* you probably know from your own experiences that the languages don't translate directly from one to another), the word 'remembrance' *[that Jesus uses in Luke's account of the Last Supper and]* that we use so much in the communion service means far more than just to remember something that's happened way off in the past. The Greek word, which we translate as 'remembrance' means 'to make alive and operative in the present moment, something that happened in the past.' It's bringing it into the present and making it real for this moment and this time and that's what we mean *[in our communion services]* - we bring that extraordinary experience of the upper room into the reality of our lives and our churches.

But the giving of the bread and the wine as the body and blood of Christ was not the only great symbolic action at the last supper - there was also the washing of the feet which preceded it. If churches do it at all, they do it only once a year on Maundy Thursday - and yet it is also vital to this experience of God, because whether we're talking about Christ kneeling at the disciples feet and washing them or giving himself wholly in the bread and the wine, this is all about the radical giving of Christ to us and to the world. And with that washing of the feet, he gives a new commandment that you *'Love one another as I have loved you; and as I have washed your feet, go out and wash the feet of others.'*

So as we gather for communion week by week, and receive this great gift, it's not some private gift to be hoarded, as it were, inside us. It's a gift to strengthen us for service, to allow us to go out and minister to others, - that we who have had our feet washed and we who have received communion, go out to do the same for others.

Amen

# Reading Text

## John 6:51-58

*51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.’ 52 The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’ 53 So Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; 55 for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. 56 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57 Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.’*

## John 13:1-17

*<sup>1</sup> Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. <sup>2</sup> The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper <sup>3</sup> Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, <sup>4</sup> got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. <sup>5</sup> Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. <sup>6</sup> He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" <sup>7</sup> Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." <sup>8</sup> Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." <sup>9</sup> Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." <sup>11</sup> For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." <sup>12</sup> After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? <sup>13</sup> You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. <sup>14</sup> So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup> For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. <sup>16</sup> Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. <sup>17</sup> If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.*

**John 13:34-35**

*<sup>34</sup> I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*