

Sermon for the Solemnity of Corpus Christi

Sunday, June 11, 2023

“Why must we keep this Feast?”

Text: John 6:47-58; 1 Corinthians 11:23-29

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Even though we have entered into Ordinary Time on our liturgical calendar, the celebration of the Solemnity of the Body & Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ, or Corpus Christi in Latin, is the final hoorah—the uncorking of the champagne bottle—for a celebration that began at Easter. We rejoiced at the Day of Resurrection, marveled at the Ascension, got fired up at Pentecost, praised the fullness of God on Trinity Sunday last week, and finally today we celebrate the Presence of Christ that we experience every time we gather for the Holy Mass. The celebration of the Solemnity of Corpus Christi is at the heart of the Christian experience, because this feast day celebrates something that is central to our faith, central to our belief, central to the Christian doctrine. Through our baptism, we become members of the Body of Christ. In the Holy Eucharist, we partake in sharing the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Ordinary bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ—they are transformed from one thing into another, regardless of what they look like or taste like or feel like, they *are* something completely different. They *are* the actual Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. How it happens and when it happens are a mystery; *that it happens* is at the core of our belief and is rooted in our faith. By the power of the Holy Spirit, something fundamental happens to ordinary bread and wine. It is to be taken very seriously. In the *Book of Common Prayer*, there is something called the Exhortation, which echoes the exhortation that St. Paul issued at the end of what we read from his First Letter to the Corinthians earlier. It is pronounced on Maundy Thursday and again on Corpus Christi, before the Confession. It says:

“If we are to share rightly in the celebration of those holy Mysteries, and be nourished by that spiritual Food, we must remember the dignity of that holy Sacrament. I therefore call upon you to consider how Saint Paul exhorts all persons to prepare themselves carefully before eating of that Bread and drinking of that Cup. For, as the benefit is great, if with penitent hearts and living faith we receive the holy Sacrament, so is the danger great, if we receive it improperly, not recognizing the Lord’s Body. Judge yourselves, therefore, lest you be judged by the Lord.”

The Exhortation invites us to receive Christ’s Body in the right spirit, the right frame of mind, with the right intent, which is why we confess our sins and are given absolution every time we are about to participate in the Holy Eucharist.

What *is* the Body of Christ? In our Gospel reading for today Jesus tells us that he is the bread of life, not just ordinary bread, not even the manna from heaven that

sustained the Israelites in the wilderness after the Exodus, but food from heaven that will secure for us something that only God can give: eternal life. This bread transcends time and space, allows us to touch the divine, sustains us spiritually in the present, and nourishes us for the life to come. Jesus stated at the last supper that this bread is his Body and this wine is his Blood; that statement, we call those the Words of Institution, and we hear them in the Eucharistic Prayer. Jesus tells us in the Gospel passage that we must consume his body to have eternal life, but in verse 54 when he says, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life,” he doesn’t ask us merely to consume his flesh and drink his blood, he says that we have to gnaw on his flesh and imbibe his blood. Some of us have been taught that when we receive the wafer that is the Body of Christ, that we are not supposed to chew it. We’re supposed to take the host into our mouths and let it dissolve in our mouths completely. But the words of Jesus say something different in the original words of the Gospel; he says we have *to gnaw* on it. What does it mean to gnaw on something? It means that we get it all in our teeth, between our teeth, we grind and we chew and it becomes a part of our anatomy for a while. Similarly, imbibing is not just simply drinking, imbibing means that we get drunk off of it. Just like when we take an alcoholic beverage, it doesn’t simply quench our thirst and relieve us of dehydration, it actually changes our thinking—if you drink enough of it. When we gnaw on his Body, it becomes a part of our anatomy. When we imbibe and get drunk off his Blood, it changes us—it changes how we think, it changes how we act, it changes who we are. Together they transform us into the living vessels of God.

The celebration of the Solemnity of Corpus Christi is a stark reminder that God is real and present among us in our daily lives and in the world today. It reminds us that God is not a remote deity who lives somewhere up in the heavens far away from us, but is ever present and moving among his creation. We proclaim that God is really and truly present in the world, that he is constantly in our midst. There is so much worry and despair around us. We are concerned about ever increasing violence in our country. We are worried about our health. Just this week, we experienced an environmental catastrophe as wildfires rage in Canada and threaten our well-being hundreds of miles away. We continue to struggle with acknowledging the rights of all human beings and protecting the dignity of all women and men of all ages, born and unborn. We are worried about our safety at home and in the streets. We are worried about our finances as the cost of living continues to rise. We are worried about the environment. There are so many things on our minds right now, we need more of the presence of God in our lives; we need more of the Body and Blood of Christ. We need to know that God is in our midst to aid us in living our lives in this tough world. After the 11:00 mass today, we’re going to display the sacrament publicly by processing it through the streets, and instead of the usual blessing and dismissal at the end we will participate in Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament through which we are blessed by Christ’s Real Presence. The

celebration of this great solemnity is a reminder that Christ and the love of God himself continue to dwell among us through the mighty power of the Holy Spirit. The celebration of Corpus Christi is a reminder that God himself continues to be fully and tangibly present among us in the midst of our struggles.

If we proclaim that Christ is in the world, if we proclaim and live out the love of God that Jesus Christ taught us how to show, then we can make a difference and change the world. We can break down the barriers of hatred, prejudice, racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, selfishness, greed, and hopelessness. We can bring about the long-desired kingdom of God, a place of love, life, and peace. Amen.