

Thursday 31st May, 2018
Corpus Christi - Year B

Genesis 14:18-20
Psalm 116:11-17
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
John 6:51-58

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

This sermon was preached at St. Mary Magdalene's, Adelaide, on the Feast of Corpus Christi. I was honoured to be invited to preach at the occasion. In preparing the sermon, I was grateful for the insights of Rev. Anne van Gend, who had shared her wisdom about Covenant at the recent Diocesan Ministry Conference.

Some years ago now, in my previous parish of St. Martin's, Hawksburn, in the Diocese of Melbourne, we set out to deepen our ministry relationship with one of our neighbouring churches, the wonderful parish of Christ Church, South Yarra, just a little further down Toorak Road than us. Their Vicar was the Rev. Dr. Richard Treloar, now Bishop Elect of the Diocese of Gippsland - a wonderful appointment, by the way, in my opinion!

Anyway, one of the things we decided to do was to arrange a Joint Mission Dinner - a gathering of the two congregations, a guest speaker, and a focus of mission giving for, on this occasion, indigenous ministry through Wontup-il-Buya College. Our parish hosted the evening, and it was a highly successful event.

We decided, the following year, to run it again, with a different mission focus. Christ Church hosted it, and in his introduction and welcome, Fr. Richard welcomed us to the "traditional Hawksburn and South Yarra Joint Mission Dinner". I said to him afterwards that it might have been drawing a bit of a long bow to call it "traditional".

He looked at me and said this: "don't you know, Sam - if you do something once in the Anglican Church, you'll be called innovative, and you risk all sorts of people

getting their noses put out of joint. But if you do something for a second time, it becomes time-honoured tradition, unable to ever be changed or stopped. This is now a tradition!!”

If we extrapolate that sort of thinking out to our view of the Holy Scriptures, and look at the four accounts we have in the New Testament of our Lord instituting the Sacrament we gather to celebrate tonight, then, maybe we could say that anything found in all four of those accounts is not just important, not just traditional, but surely must be absolutely sacrosanct - vital or pivotal to our understanding of the Eucharist.

So, I wonder - what do you think we might find *is* common to each of the accounts we have, in the three Synoptic Gospels, and in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians? Well, it is nothing to do with sins or forgiveness - these words are only found in Matthew; and even the words “drink”, and “poured out” are not common to each of the accounts.

Rather, there are three key words which are included in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Paul’s accounts of the Last Supper. And they are body; blood; and Covenant. Now you are probably not surprised that body and blood are there. But what about covenant - what does it mean for us that when Jesus ritualises one specific meaning of his death, he speaks in terms of *covenant*.

I appreciate - this is a hugely complex and hotly debated term. But in terms of what this Feast tonight means, let me try and unpack why *Covenant* is central to what we believe and what we do.

In the beginning, God created. Before that moment of creation there was darkness, chaos, wild, swirling emptiness. And God created through acts of limitation and separation. So light is separated from dark, sea from sky, sea from land, species from each other, and faithfulness from disobedience.

The limits are essential to creation, for it is by remaining within its ordained limits that creation is able to be what it was designed to be and “functions according to

God's creational plan and purpose." In all of this there is peace, harmony, life. There is Shalom.

In the biblical narrative, then, these limits are put in place through an act of faithfulness on God's part and held there only by God's commitment. Humankind alone is given an optional limit - humankind alone has the gift to be able to choose to overstep the boundaries God has set up.

Which, of course, they rapidly proceed to do. In eating from the Tree of Good and Evil Knowledge, Adam and Eve overstep their limits as creatures. What transpires might be understood as the beginning of a de-creative process, of chaos leaking back into the world.

Time and time again, throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God tries to re-establish Shalom - and at each point this is marked with a covenant; a promise; a re-commitment. God makes a covenant with Noah after the flood - marked by the sign of the rainbow. God makes a covenant with Abraham, promising numerous descendants, and a marked section of land. God brings the covenant of the Law through Moses, and another covenant is formed with Aaron, whose family will be the Priests of Israel. And the covenant with David is marked by his anointing as King.

God so desires relationship with God's people that God reaches out in love and faithfulness, again and again covenanting with the beloved creation and humanity. And what we gather to celebrate tonight is the ultimate covenant - the ultimate act of our self-giving God to once again create Shalom.

Looked at in this way, Jesus' words at the Last Supper take on a particular meaning. There is a new covenant being formed here through bread and wine - a covenant sealed by the eternal one promised by the prophets. Once again the framework of the Covenant is being repaired being restored, healed - atoned for, if you like -and once again a people are being set apart to maintain that Covenant.

And what is the sign given by God to mark this covenant? It is nothing less than Jesus' own sacrifice - his body and blood, symbolized in bread and wine. Is it any

wonder, then, that we approach such elements with reverence and respect; for in this blessed sacrament we see and receive God's very essence; not something distant like the Law, or a sign like the rainbow, or even a promise - rather we are strengthened and nourished, as we hear once more Christ say "every time you do this, remember me"

That command of Christ has echoed throughout history as Christians have gathered together to participate in these sacred mysteries. Such an act of remembrance is dynamic and creative.

As we receive Christ's body given for us, we become his body, the Church. As we remember, the fullness of Christ's presence is mediated to us. As we obey that command we are formed into the body of Christ; and we are called to mediate the fullness of his life to others. The body that we receive and become is for the life of the whole world.

The Eucharist is a place of honesty and of abundance. The risen Christ meets us in the midst of our hopes and failings, our fears and desires. He comes as gift, in bread and wine. As we receive him, he abides with us and we in him. We become his Church, his body. As Paul writes elsewhere in 1 Corinthians: Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

Tonight, as in every Eucharist, we celebrate the reality of Christ's presence among us. He comes among us as a gift. We receive from him what we are becoming: *Corpus Christi*. The challenge to us is to commit ourselves to self-giving. That is our mission. And it is both a daunting and exciting task. We are called to be alert to the needs of our community, whilst drawing them into a dynamic society which transcends differences of gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity or class.

As we participate in this great feast, let us give thanks that God has come to us, in Covenant relationship; that we have a memorial of Christ's passion; as we celebrate the gift of Christ's presence in bread and wine. In all this, may our vision be renewed; let us pray that by the power of the Holy Spirit we may fulfill our calling

as the Body of Christ, being sent out to in peace to love and serve. Christ dwells in our hearts; may we share his love in a restless and aching world. Amen.