

Reflections for week beginning 8th June

Monday

On Thursday of this week the church celebrates Corpus Christi (literally 'the body of Christ'), where we give thanks for the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper by Jesus, where he commands us 'to do this in remembrance of me.' For some who don't often come to church (and perhaps for those that do!) it may be a mystery as to what we do in this service. So in this week's reflections I am going to break the service up into six parts, and describe each of them.

'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.'

These words start each Eucharist. Not 'Hello, and welcome to the show / my church ...' We meet with and before God, with Jesus as our host. Church architecture can be unhelpful here. The people performing are up on the stage at the front, with the audience in serried rows, waiting for the show to begin and then for the half time interval drinks. Even more so now perhaps, when church is watched on a screen. However some church buildings are different, they – like some modern theatres – are round, with the altar in the middle. They remind us that Jesus doesn't invite us to come along to the show. He invites us to gather around the table; He invites us to join in; He invites us to share – even to share his life.

Of course generally in a world where most of our leisure and indeed much of our work is engaged with looking at a screen, it can feel quite comfortable. We might prefer it if worship was something we watched, and if we didn't like it we could switch channels. TV makes little demand on us. But here is someone inviting us to gather around, join in – dare we?



Tuesday

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'This is the Gospel of the Lord'

The first half of our service is dominated by the reading of Scripture and rightly so. I know, I know, there are usually three readings and only one of them is a 'Gospel', but gospel just means 'good news', and all of the Bible is that. Though not easily or comfortably so sometimes. The Bible is not a book in the conventional sense, but a collection of 66 books, written over two millennia, across three continents by over 40 writers of two different faiths in three languages. It is sometimes controversial, puzzling, bloodthirsty, rude, and incomprehensible, but also it is sublime and joyful, and heart rending and tender, and fantastical. That's why it's important we don't stick to our favourite bits or even worse: the preacher's favourite bits. Even as we follow a pattern of 3 readings a week over 3 years we just scratch the surface – but it's a start. And the sermon is there to help us make sense of it. Certainly it is there to apply those ancient texts to our current contexts – but note some of the things the sermon is not there for: it is not there to make us laugh, or otherwise entertain us, or make us go to sleep, or offer an opinion on current affairs, or the latest social media controversy, or ride the preacher's hobby horse, or show off their stunning learning or oratory. Ask yourself one question at the end – did that help me understand and live by those Bible readings that I've just heard. If not – gently – tell the preacher after the service.



Wednesday

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'The Peace of the Lord be always with you'

These words since the 1970s have acquired a certain sense of dreadful anticipation amongst Anglican worshippers, often followed by the whispers of visitors 'do they do it here?' Meaning are these words going to be followed up by an actual physical handshake and eye contact, potentially with a stranger which is the birth right of every proper English man and woman to avoid, and why we fought at Agincourt, which some people in this congregation can still remember? Of course during COVID19 restrictions this is no longer a possibility, and I guess that even after we return to churches, as a precaution, the sharing of the peace will be the last aspect of full community restored. Alternatively you can avoid it altogether by seeking out a Book of Common Prayer service where it is absent. However don't be fooled by the Roman Catholic liturgy – it looks like you've got away with it, but then it comes later in the service just before communion.

Now I'm a fully paid up member of narcissistic introverts anonymous (there is a great documentary by Rob Gilbert who is in real life cripplingly shy, about how he can still operate as a successful stand up comedian) but I realise that here Jesus does challenge me with his words. It might be nice to feel that we can be pious, faithful and warm in the love of God, but still have cheerfully murderous thoughts about the annoying neighbour with the noisy dog and whiney voice – but Jesus sadly tells us that if we aren't reconciled to our fellow human beings, then we should attend to that before we approach God's altar (Matthew 5:24). And dare I say it lest we lose it in a post COVID19 world – human touch is an integral part of that. We might be scared these days (and quite rightly) of 'inappropriate touch', but that only serves to underline how much appropriate touch is intrinsic to right relationships (see babies, young children, the elderly).

In the church I grew up in, a stranger once came in from the streets, shook hands at the peace with everyone, and promptly went home because he believed it was all over. And it is true that sometimes the peace can seem like a prolonged half time interval with oranges and an extended hug-in. But the sobering thought is this – the people you should head towards in the peace (and therefore those heading towards you) should not be your friends, but precisely the neighbour with the dog and that voice.



Thursday

Today the church celebrates Corpus Christi (literally 'the body of Christ'), where we give thanks for the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper by Jesus, where he commands us 'to do this in remembrance of me.' For some who don't often come to church (and perhaps for those that do!) it may be a mystery as to what we do in this service. So in this week's reflections I am going to break the service up into six parts, and describe each of them.

'Do this in remembrance of me.'

Liturgy books do not make their authors huge amounts of money, being generally read by only their fellow liturgists (themselves a rarefied breed, hence the joke; 'What's the difference between a terrorist and a liturgist?' – 'You can negotiate with a terrorist.') However – had he not been a monk – there is one book which would have made the author a million, as it's probably the one book every undergraduate theology student and seminarian reads on liturgy: 'The Shape of the Liturgy' by Dom Gregory Dix.

For centuries liturgists had studied the texts of Eucharistic prayers, looking for a magic formula, and bandying about technical terms to describe their contents: the words of institution we might just get, but the epiclesis? Anamnesis? Oblation? Doxology? Dix revolutionised thinking about the Eucharistic Prayer. Rather than look at texts for the 'ideal' prayer, instead look for four 'actions' which are common amongst them: He TOOK bread, He GAVE THANKS, He BROKE bread, He GAVE bread. That Dix said is the 'Shape of the Liturgy.'

The interesting thing was that when scholars looked at the bible it was not only the Last Supper which fitted this 'shape of four actions', but other meals, for instance the feeding of the 4000 and 5000. Scholars have revised and argued with Dix since, but still that is the generally regarded as the starting point. So when you are at the Eucharist see if you can see those four actions of the priest at the altar: he TAKES bread and wine, he GIVES THANKS over bread and wine, he BREAKS bread, he GIVES bread and wine.



Friday

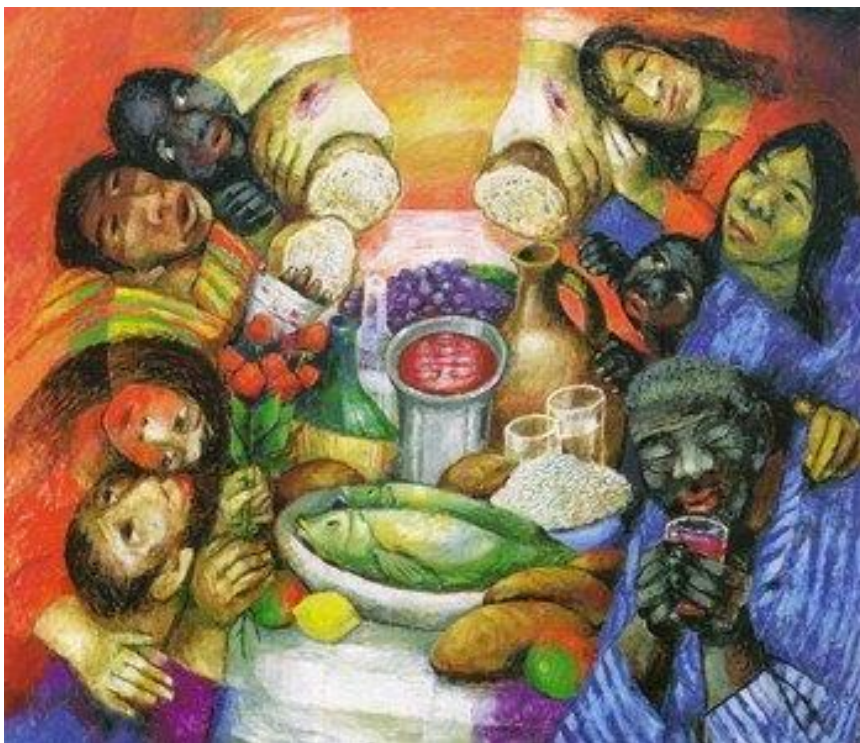
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'This is my body broken for you'

The ancient Greeks probably would have done better in lockdown than us. By and large they believed that stuff you couldn't touch – stuff like your soul, your intellect, and abstract things like trigonometry were more valuable than physical stuff like our bodies and indeed the natural world. So they would have lived happily in the virtual world, and wouldn't have much missed the real presence of others.

Early Christians took a lot from those Greek thinkers, but here is one place where they disagreed. God had made the material world and it was good. Even more than that God had – astonishingly – chosen to come to his people as a real human being, because the prophets and various other virtual messengers didn't really cut it. Not only that, he said that when he was gone we would remember him most closely when we took physical stuff – bread and wine – and ate and drank it. To use a technical world, the Christian faith is sacramental – we believe that physical things contain spiritual benefit. In this part of the service this becomes very obvious: we break bread and share it, with the wine. This is not some virtual or intellectual exercise, it is a simple physical action.

When I break bread at the altar at the Eucharist I always do it near the microphone in the hope that it will produce a nice clear 'crack.' When I was at the Cathedral this effect was magnified, so much so that one person complained to me that this produced quite a shock when it reverberated in her hearing aid. As much as a shock as when the body of the Son of God is broken on the cross I pondered.



Saturday

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'Go in the peace of Christ'

Many Christians call the Eucharist the Mass, a term that derives from the concluding Latin words of the medieval Eucharist: *Ite, missa est*. Which means something like 'Go, you are dismissed.' Some have then tried to link the word 'missa' with the word 'mission' ('*missio*' in Latin). Apparently that is etymologically unsound, but nonetheless I like the idea that being sent out from church is linked to being sent out on a mission. Indeed the word 'Apostle' just means someone who is sent.

After these words there is the rubric '*The ministers and people depart.*' As someone has noted it is the most disobeyed rubric in the prayer book. Perhaps it should read '*The ministers and people get their stuff together, have a chat, and hang around in the hope of coffee.*' Now I'm not against chatting and coffee, far from it, but I do wonder whether we need to retain that sense of being sent out on a mission.

That doesn't mean jumping on a plane, leaving family and friends, and converting natives in the jungle (though it might do!). It means that hopefully having met in the Lord's name, had our sins forgiven, heard the words of the Gospel, said our prayers, and shared in the body and blood of Christ, we might just be changed a little bit. And moreover want to go and share that love and freedom with those with whom we have to do. The Eucharist can seem like a holy huddle, and indeed in some ways it is, but it's a bit like training for something: the training is one thing, but it's only meaningful if you go out there afterwards and put it into practice.

