



ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS
CELEBRATING 200 YEARS

FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI

DEUTERONOMY 8:2-3

PSALM 116

1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-29

JOHN 6:47-58

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY

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As a child, one of my favorite games was Join the Dots. It belongs to a simpler age. You draw a straight line from one numbered dot to the next to form a picture. One of my more creative childhood friends refused to comply with directions. She ignored the numbers sequence, and her outcomes were unintelligible. “I have a whale with six legs”, Cathy would say, holding up her picture proudly.

The Feast of Corpus Christi (the “Body of Christ”) can be spiritually unintelligible if the dots are joined wrongly. Join the dots wrongly and you come up with something that looks like superstition, magical thinking for unsophisticated people. At best, empty ritual, a medieval relic. My own journey towards devotion to the Eucharistic Presence of Christ was utterly foreign to my experience of church and Christianity until my mid-20s. It is not obvious to many serious and devout Christians why this Feast is relevant to the practice of Christianity.

It is true that the feast of Corpus Christi is medieval in origin. It was instituted by Pope Urban IV in 1264 to honor the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Then as now, Corpus Christi is celebrated on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday. The spiritual sequencing is: we venerate the nature of God in three

Persons on Trinity Sunday, and then, we reverence God's offering of God's self to us through the Sacrament of the Altar. Implicit in Corpus Christi is the recognition that the altar of the church is the *axis mundi*, the line connecting earth and heaven, the center of the world.

The celebration of Corpus Christi was abolished in England in 1548 as part of the Protestant Reformation. Today in the Church of England there is permission to observe the Thursday after Trinity as a Day of Thanksgiving for the Institution of Holy Communion (Corpus Christi). But it is not *required* to observe Corpus Christi in the Anglican calendar. Many parishes never celebrate Corpus Christi – neither of my previous 2 parishes honored this Feast day. Many might struggle to articulate what Corpus Christi is, and find it foreign to our tradition.

Rightly understood, Corpus Christi joins the dots between God and the Church on earth. Specifically, Corpus Christi connects the Divine Body of Christ with the earthly Body of Christ. There is a many-splendored glory and mystery to this, but let me offer three specific connections.

First, when the Church consecrates the bread and wine, it becomes the Body and Blood of Christ in absolute reality. A lot of ink has been spent on exactly *how* Jesus is present in the Eucharist. Early Elizabethan Anglicanism held that the Eucharist *becomes* the Body and Blood of Christ *in the heart and mind of the believer*.¹

This theology was intended to be a middle way, incorporating both ends of the spectrum of early Anglicanism: Calvinism *and* more Roman pieties. This was appropriate for the newly established Church of England, which at that time was often reacting against Rome *and* extreme Protestantism. To consolidate a national church, one needs a broad foundation, an inclusive tent.

As the Anglo-Catholic tradition within Anglicanism has matured, however, we may find that this doesn't say enough about the Presence of Christ. Yes, the Bread and Wine *are* the Body and Blood of Christ *in the heart and mind of the believer* but it is *more* than a subjective reception by a "believer".

So first, the Bread and Wine become the Presence of Christ in an objective, absolute way. So much so that

¹ The early Anglican theologian Richard Hooker wrote of 'conjunction' with Christ's heavenly Presence (*Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*).

we treat consecrated Bread and Wine as possessing a continuing sacredness. We reserve the consecrated Bread and Wine; we mark its presence with a sanctuary light in the aumbry near an altar, in the most sacred place within our most sacred building.

Second, even when the church fails to honor its own calling, God's holiness, Christ's righteousness, is *imputed* to the church. Corpus Christi points to the great mystery of Christ's ongoing life in the Church. When we say something is holy we mean that God is in it. The church is holy because of God's own holiness, not because of our strength or wisdom or action. When we point to the body of Christ in the Eucharist, that locus of God's own holiness cannot be extinguished. It can be assailed and desecrated, but it remains the Body of Christ.

This is at the heart of what we are confessing today. Corpus Christi reminds us that it is all grace. God's own holiness comes to us through the sacraments in which we participate, and so we are drawn into God's Divine life not by right or by merit, but by God's gracious providence.

Third, Corpus Christi objectifies or reifies (Lat. *res - thing*) grace, makes it independent of the believer. The Eucharist is a Divine gift that we receive. The sacraments are not the church's property, they belong to God.

Lastly, there are times when Christ's Divinity is hidden. We think of the Crucifixion, death and burial. There are times in the gospels² when Christ cannot perform miracles of healing. There are times when Christ refuses to declare openly his Messiahship and enjoins others to keep silent also. There are times Christ's Divinity is displayed but people do not recognize it for what it is. In all these instances, Christ's Divinity is hidden but Christ is no less Divine because humanity cannot perceive it.

So it is with Christ's hidden Divinity in Bread and Wine. There is no point at which we can "catch" the glory of Christ underneath the Bread and Wine, wheat and grape. But Christ is there nonetheless. These are Divine mysteries perceived with the eye of faith and in the heart of the believer, and above all by the grace of God.

AMEN

² Mt. 13:58; Mk.6:6; Mt. 16:20; Mt.17:9; Mk.7:36; Mk.8:30; Mk. 9:9; Lk.5:14; Lk.8:56; Lk.9:21 etc)

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