

**Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> April 2017, 7.30pm****Readings: Exodus 12: 1-14; I Cor. 11: 23-26; John 13: 1-17, 31b-35**

The other day I came across a definition of what it means to be a Christian. It was this: *Christians are people related to God in the Christ who is their new and Spirit-filled life, their forgiveness and health, the one who loves them and the one who represents himself to them in their fellow-believers.* As definitions go it isn't bad, although I think I would also want to add something about Christ representing himself in every human being we encounter. But I understand what the definition is trying to establish: something about being together the Body of Christ. The Christian wants to say and believe that God is for us and with us. God is for us and with us. And if we want somehow to see and experience the meaning of that definition then there is a sacramental way of doing this. We call it the Eucharist. For in the Eucharist there is continual entry into the life of Christ, the perpetual possibility of a new start, forgiveness and healing, ministry and the love of one for another, the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

But Christ is no philosophical idea or theological theory. He is a living person, God personally living in our humanity, and like any person he is what he is as a result of his past, of his particular history, his biography. All of us are what we are as a result of our families, our childhood, our youth and all the experiences we have undergone, our activities and their outcomes. But unlike us Jesus made his own what was done to him as well as what he himself initiated. We believe that in accepting death he brought forgiveness for the sins of the world. We know that we can be channels and initiators of wrongdoing. We hurt and

we hurt back; we are blamed, so we blame others; we are put on and we put on other people. But with Jesus this is not the case. We are channels; he was a sponge, taking the sin of the world but not passing it on. Rather it all stopped there. The sin he took to himself and did not pass on he took with him down into death and left it there. God raised him without it. *“The death he died he died to sin once for all, the life he lives he lives to God” (Romans 6:10)*. He is dead to sin, dead to this present world-order, and living to God in the resurrection, in a different kind of life to which we can go only through death, death by water in the first place in baptism, and then by the continual dying which that death by water sums up and makes meaningful in advance. If we want to celebrate the love of Jesus in its entirety, to affirm Jesus as God’s sacrament, we will find ourselves celebrating the life of one who is dead to this present age and alive to a future to which we have to go out in an exodus rather than an ecstasy. We have to go out to him by faith, wherein alone we can find him. He is present to our faith: not because of it but simply present to it. So when we celebrate the Eucharist we can fairly expect to find it all somewhat ambiguous and mind-boggling. We celebrate someone who is alive in a new order of things that as yet we can have very little idea of, but which we can anticipate.

The signs themselves, the sacramental symbols, are necessarily ambiguous. They are signs of a real absence as well as a real presence. They are signs that all is not well, but also signs that *“All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well”*. Note that the signs we are given are bread and wine, not wheat and grapes. They are human manufactures, not unmediated gifts of God from the earth: *“...this bread which earth has given and human hands have made...this wine...fruit of the vine and work of human hands”*. In being human manufactures they are already ambiguous. Those lines of the poet Hopkins come to mind:

*“Generations have trod, have trod and all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; and wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell”*. Think of the conditions in which human hands make bread across the world. Think of the domination, exploitation and pollution of human resources and nature that goes into bread, all the bitterness of competition and class struggle, all the organised selfishness of tariffs and price-rings, all the wicked oddity of a world distribution that brings plenty to some and malnutrition to others, bringing them to that symbol of poverty which we call the bread line. And the wine too – fruit of the vine and work of human hands, the wine of holidays and weddings, the wine that loosens you up inside and so is such a good symbol of forgiveness, wine which is both water and fire in one. This wine is also the bottle, the source of some of the most tragic forms of human degradation: drunkenness, broken homes, sensuality, abuse, debt. What Christ bodies himself into is bread and wine like this, and he manages to make sense of it, to humanise it. Nothing human is alien to him. If we bring bread and wine to the Lord’s Table, we are implicating ourselves in being prepared to bring to God all that bread and wine mean. We are implicating ourselves in bringing to God all that is broken and unlovely, for only he can make sense of it all. We are implicating ourselves in the sorrow as well as the joy of the world.

In receiving those gifts back from God transformed into the body and blood of his Word we are implicating ourselves, therefore, in sharing not only what is positive in our lives but what is negative. In communion we are not feeding our faces. We are eating and drinking the gifts of God together. We share with one another what is necessary and prosaic, the day-to-day stuff of our lives; plain, unadorned and with no pretensions we offer it in the gift to one another of the eucharistic Bread. But we also pass on to each other the chalice, and thereby act out our readiness to share the things of the Holy Spirit

of God – inspiration, joy, blood and fire, whatever is sweet and intoxicating and passionate in our lives. This bread, this wine, then, all this ambiguity and possibility are set on the Lord’s Table. We give thanks over it. We tell a story over it, in a characteristically Jewish/Christian way of praising God, reciting what God has done. Finally we receive back the Gifts in the form of broken bread and outpoured wine. We receive them as offered in sacrifice. We take them into our own lives to become ourselves a living sacrifice. What is offered on the altar is indeed our souls and bodies, the mystery of who we are. We are there in chalice and paten. When we stretch out our hands to receive the Eucharist and say Amen to the words “The Body of Christ” and “The Blood of Christ”, we are saying Amen to our own mystery, to bread that has been broken and wine that has been poured out. We Christians as the Body of Christ say Yes to that broken body of Christ and his blood poured out: Yes to his sacrifice. We are saying Amen/Yes to the call to become ourselves his broken body. We are committing ourselves to being prepared to be held in the hands of Jesus and to be broken by him, snapped out of what we think we are, where we think we belong, who we belong with, who we want to call ourselves. That will involve entrusting ourselves to other people, to people who may take liberties with us, for Jesus is present to us now mediated in other people who play to us the Jesus who holds and breaks.

The Eucharist, like all the sacraments, is *for* something. It is *for* the building up of the body of the church and of the human family. In saying Amen to that, we are saying that we too are prepared to be *for* the church and *for* the world. At this Last Supper Jesus committed the future and made it part of his own freely-willed history. In accepting the gift of that Supper from him we too are committing the future in advance, saying that we are prepared to be *for* others and *with* others, to be given up and broken for them and with them.

Whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup we proclaim and placard the self-offering and dying of Jesus. At this celebration of the Last Supper into that self-giving of the Cross we are now invited to enter.