

Sermon, 6th June 2021, Peel Cathedral – Corpus Christi

Readings: Genesis 14, 18-20; John 6, 51-58

Remembering

Some of you will know that for months I've been endeavouring to declutter. Each time I've moved house I've taken stuff to charity shops, but I've kept all kinds of things knowing that I wanted time to go through them, think about why I've kept them, decide what I would really like to keep and get rid of the rest.

Some twenty years after their deaths, handwritten letters from my parents have drawn me back into many memories. Some gifts remind me of their givers. Others – such as the plaque that reads “A tidy house is a sign of a wasted life” are supposed to raise my spirits, even if I now can't remember who the giver was.

Objects can be powerful reminders of people, places, situations and feelings. But some things can be used or viewed so often that their power to trigger memories is diminished. They are now so much part of our lives that they lose their significance.

Today we are celebrating Corpus Christi, the Day of Thanksgiving for the Institution of Holy Communion. It was a genius idea that Jesus had, the evening before he died – taking the basic constituents of any Middle Eastern meal, bread and wine, and giving them additional meaning.

But as our Gospel reading reminds us, it wasn't the first time Jesus had associated himself with being bread. He said *“I am the Living Bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”*

His audience at the time were puzzled. How could they eat his flesh? What did he mean by giving it for the life of the world? But **we** know about his last supper and his crucifixion. We have some understanding that his death was the culmination of the raft of sacrifices detailed in the Old Testament. You'll remember there was a burnt offering of an animal, and sometimes this was followed by a grain offering whose purpose was to worship God and acknowledge His provision. Sometimes the grain offering was given in the form of flour; at other times it was made into a simple unleavened loaf. From the time of Moses, 12 loaves – one for each of the tribes of Israel – were baked each week and laid on the altar, with incense burning beside them. Known as the Bread of the Presence, or Showbread, the loaves were a holy offering to the Lord, and were eaten by the priests. The grain offering was accompanied by an offering of wine – more than a litre, poured out onto the altar fire.

So bread and wine had special significance to the Israelites, as well as being the common ingredients of meals. For Christians, Jesus is present and can be remembered and celebrated at every meal. Members of the Salvation Army fear that even important symbols can become meaningless and choose not to have communion services, instead marking every meal with a grace.

But for us, we rehearse the Gospel story every week as we come to worship. We gather as a community to celebrate the Eucharist. We begin by asking for God's forgiveness for our sins, realising that we are in the presence of God, creator and sustainer of the universe. We listen to readings from the Bible including a reading from one of the Gospels. There's a sermon and we pray together. Each week we also use one of the creeds to restate our faith. We remind ourselves of God our Creator; of Jesus who lived, died, experienced resurrection and was received back into heaven – and who will come again; and of the Holy Spirit who gives us life. We encourage each other as we look forward to our own resurrection and new life after death.

In the early Church the faithful would bring small loaves of bread, which they put into a basket at the back of church. They also brought small cruets of wine, which they poured into a common flagon. The flagon and basket would then be brought forward at the offertory. In this way the bread and wine consecrated during the Eucharist were literally the offering of the people. The bread and wine was the gift to God from the people of God. This is why, as our offerings are being received, bread and wine are brought from the back of the church to the altar.

The priest – today that's Ruth – leads us in praying the Eucharistic Prayer, and we will all say the Lord's Prayer together. This all leads up to us receiving the consecrated bread and wine.

One lady I met valued the bread and wine so much that she said she didn't think she could manage to live through the week without them. For others it can become a ritual rather than a life enhancing experience. Each week we say: *Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word, and I shall be healed.* The humility we express should be real, and taken out with us into our daily lives so that we value day by day – even hour by hour – the living presence of Christ with us.

And notice the hope that we express too. When Jesus was living here on earth, he healed all who came to him. A couple of weeks ago, the Vicar of Braddan told us of the healing of his long term back problem when he dipped his toes into Maughold's well in the north of the Island. Miracles are still possible today. For each of us, life is finite - and the ultimate healing will be when we leave our aging, diseased bodies behind and discover what a resurrection body is like! In the meantime, we give thanks for doctors and nurses, and pray that each of us will experience becoming whole – enabling our heart, mind, soul and strength to work together in harmony, and becoming Real. Accepting who and what we are and making the most of it, by the grace of God.

But the Eucharist shouldn't just be about us and our needs. As we accept the bread and wine we are remembering Jesus' sacrifice of his life for us. Eucharist means *giving thanks*. Ali's reading from the Old Testament is a short and somewhat mysterious encounter between Abraham and Melchizidek. Abraham's nephew Lot was living in Sodom. There had been a war involving nine different kings and their armies. The King of Sodom was on the losing side and Lot was captured and all his goods confiscated. When Abraham heard the news he took 318 trained men from his household, pursued the victors and rescued Lot and his family and all the plunder that had been taken.

On his return he was greeted by the King of Salem, Melchizidek, who was also a priest of God most high. We know little else about him. But he blessed Abraham and the impact of that encounter led Abraham to give him a tenth of the spoils. In societies at that time it was common for kings to take 10% of people's wealth in order to build up their armies and pay those who tended their fields or worked in other offices, and to be able to have the lifestyle of a king.

For me, Abraham's generosity to Melchizidek raises the question of how we are generous to God when he blesses us week by week in the Eucharist. Abraham's gift was from an unexpected source of income. One of my brothers decided to give 5% of the next unexpected income he had on the basis that it would be surplus to his planned expenditure. Had it been a £5 note he found on the pavement, he would have given 50p. As it happened, he received £9,000 because he'd been mis-sold an endowment mortgage. At the time he knew a family who had moved from Liverpool where the single parent father had not felt safe. The authorities said he'd made himself intentionally homeless and refused him support. He desperately needed £450 as a deposit to enable him to rent a flat – exactly 5% of the windfall Stephen had received. Worth thinking about?

At the end of the service, we will be sent out into the world to love and serve the Lord. In some services the words are that we are sent out as a 'living sacrifice' to live and work to God's praise and glory. That is quite a challenge. What impact might those words have on your life – and mine – this week? Each day as we slice the loaf, fill a cup or make toast, let's give thanks and remember that we can be refreshed daily by the living bread.

In a few moments we will be moving towards the climax of our service. I'd encourage you to think afresh about the words that we use, to remember that Jesus said: *I am the Living Bread*, and to feed on Him.

Amen