

FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI YEAR A (VIRTUAL) HOMILY 2020

THE BREAD OF LIFE FOR THE BROKEN

Jn 6.51-58 Deut 8.2-3, 14-16 1Cor 10.16-17

Welcome once more to our virtual celebration of the Feast of Corpus Christi, now 88 days since the pandemic shutdown in Australia. I passed the COVID 19 test at Highpoint, having had a cough and a mild cold, but best to be sure, particularly with school back this last week. Meanwhile, patience is the virtue we most need at present, with the ongoing uncertainty about when we might move forward with opening the church for weekday and then weekend Masses. We just have to wait for further directions from government and health experts, as the risks are ongoing and real, whatever we might think or wish for.

We have been able to resume Baptisms, celebrated a very happy wedding with 20 present last Sunday, while funerals are ongoing, now with 50 permitted to be present, all with physical distancing. With only 20 still permitted to be present at Mass, we are not ready to open up, as it only creates difficulties with exclusion, and so division. I believe it's fairest for all to wait just that bit longer, with patience. The same goes for our sacramental celebrations for First Eucharist and Confirmation! These sure are strange and unprecedented times, but the restrictions are working here, with just over 100 deaths in Australia, compared with 114,000 in the USA, remembering the unseen, insidious and ubiquitous coronavirus is still creeping around out there!

Someone said to me after a recent funeral: ***“Father, I like watching Mass on the screen, but I do miss getting the bread”*** (and in those words was no suggestion of trivializing the Eucharist as Real Presence). It was a genuine and heartfelt expression of faith. Therein lies the heart of our celebration today, for Corpus Christi, a feast first proposed by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, such that Pope Urban IV (originally Jacques Pantaleon!) declared and confirmed this feast in 1264. It has been celebrated ever since, in the Catholic Tradition. and is still a public holiday in many European countries and elsewhere. I've even been to the beach at the city of Corpus Christi in Texas, the city dating back to Spanish missionaries, presumably. And then there is Corpus Christi College, our Victorian seminary, established in the 1920's by Archbishop Daniel Mannix, that Bill Attard and I entered together with 25 others in 1971, and which continues today in Carlton, having been somewhat mobile over the decades, via Werribee, Glen Waverley and Clayton! Way back there, when at Werribee, we used to look forward to a night out and party on the feast of Corpus Christi with the Blessed Sacrament Fathers' and Brothers' community at St Francis' Church in the city, days long gone!

It's a very Catholic thing, and has expanded into a universal feast over the centuries (*but not for the Protestants, whose theology of Eucharist is generally more symbolic*). Traditionally, in the Corpus Christi celebrations of the past, where there was often a procession of the Blessed Sacrament after Mass, and some may remember the Eucharistic Festival procession at Salesian

College Sunbury in the past. These days, the closest we get it the Holy Thursday procession to the Altar of Repose, for prayer, adoration and reflection, as we await Good Friday.

Brendan Byrne SJ comments that it is good to have a separate feast beyond Holy Thursday when we commemorate the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, as that time is overshadowed by the tragic events of Good Friday and then the joy of Easter. Says he: *“One of the advantages... is that it enables the Eucharist to be set in the wider scriptural context that has attended it from the beginning... the tradition of the Israelites being fed during their Sinai wandering by ‘bread from heaven’ – by God’s gift of the manna (in the desert)... In the Eucharist believers encounter and receive the outpouring of divine love and communication of life foreshadowed in the experience of the Israelites at the time of their desert wandering.”* And so, on we wander and wonder today!

Don’t we all have happy memories of our First Communion day, as highlighting our growth as fully participating at the altar? (*Here’s my First Communion Certificate and Child’s Mass Book – in English, as Mass was in Latin back there in 1959!*). My last Masses at Manly 5 years ago were celebrations of First Eucharist for the young people there, a very happy memory on this feast day. That’s where the uncertainty and change this year are a more than a bit frustrating for our potential First Communion families, as to when and how we will celebrate as a faith community!

The focus on adoration seems to have developed over time, following a distorted sense of unworthiness to receive Communion in past centuries, as if it was only for the pure and the perfect, and fear of being in a state of mortal, or even venial sin, so that it had got to a point where virtually only the priest who received Communion, and the faithful present observed with holy reverence. But who is to suggest the priest is any better than the faithful Catholic worshipper, and certainly just as, if not more, imperfect? It might seem we’re back to that now at present, with just me here right now, but this is only a temporary measure, and at least a means of engaging and participating, if just in a spiritual way!

My good friend Frank O’Loughlin, 51 years ordained and PP at Sandringham, liturgist and theologian, has written extensively on the fundamental importance and meaning of the Eucharist in Catholic life. So has Frank Moloney SDB, scripture scholar. My main recollection of his thoughts go to his book titled *“Bread for the Broken”*, where he emphasises the way in which Eucharist is spiritual food for our journey of life, to give us strength to live the Christian life, and face our daily ups and downs. This is *‘the bread’* of which my friend, whom I quoted earlier, spoke of missing at present. Hers was a statement of faith, that Eucharist is the bread of life and does have a powerful effect on us, when we receive it as believers.

Of course, as usual, there is the necessary connection between faith and life, as Paul reflects in his Corinthian communications, where, despite Christian Baptism, the community had remained class conscious and divided, despite his exhortations, so that he writes back about equality, and all being welcome at the Table of the Lord, with no exclusion clauses.

This theme fits well with the current heightened awareness of “***Black Lives Matter***”, not to condone the violence or vandalism or lack of physical distancing in protests, but to emphasize the dignity and equality of all, and the need to address issues of prejudice and inequality in our community and our world. We can’t change history, but we need to know the facts, good and bad, and to learn from them, so we don’t repeat the mistakes and wrongs of the past.

Once more, I can’t express better Claude Mostowik MSC’s insights on the meaning of what we celebrate today: “*The celebration of the Eucharist is trivialized when it is used to determine a person’s worthiness, when used to put up more barriers between people. It’s like putting Jesus back in the tabernacle, where he is worshipped but not connected with humanity.... Taking and eating the bread of life has consequences for us as a community ready for action... if the physical and spiritual hungers of people become more present to us. The Eucharist needs to respond to the cry of the poor and cry of the earth, the cries of people who are hungry, illiterate and homeless... We are the Body of Christ here on earth... The Gospel today leaves us in no doubt that God’s presence wants to be made concrete in what is human, and human action, where changes come with challenging, and replacing systems of injustice.*”

And perhaps one of the fringe benefits of this strange and unique time is an increased awareness of the significance of Eucharist in our lives as the Bread of Life and Bread for the Broken, as we look forward to returning to really physically gather together around the Table of the Lord. Meanwhile we continue our virtual engagement together in faith.

john hannon

14th June 2020