

I hope our visitors will forgive me if I give some news to our regular congregation first. Although our hope to have a new vicar is still at least 5 months off, we moved a significant step closer last week with the church council approving the parish profile, the job description, which will be advertised during September. A huge amount of dedicated work has been put into this by many people so that it accurately reflects who we are and where we hope to be under a new leader. As always it is a balance between preserving the best that we have with an openness to new ideas that the Holy Spirit is leading us so that we grow in numbers, depth and care for our parish. There will now be a meeting with the archdeacon for the election of two parish representatives who will sit on the selection panel and then with the bishop so that he hears what kind of priest we are seeking. Please continue to pray earnestly that the right candidates will be called by God to see and respond to our call over the next two months.

Our profile states clearly that we are very definitely an Anglican church that values the traditional threefold balance between Scripture, the Word of God, the tradition of the church and the sacraments. We are thus a church where preaching is important, where vestments are worn and the Eucharist is said or sung as the main service each Sunday.

But why does the Eucharist, the breaking of bread and the drinking of wine, lie at the heart of our worship? I want to suggest 3 reasons this morning, and I am sure you can supply plenty more since we come from many different parts of the Christian family, as we continue to explore over these 5 weeks chapter 6 of John's Gospel, where the story of the Last Supper as the institution of the Eucharist is replaced by an extended meditation on the Bread of Life.

At the end of communion today the choir will sing Elgar's beautiful setting of Ave Verum Corpus, a 14th century text sung at the Catholic Mass:

Jesus, Word of God incarnate,
Of the Virgin Mary born
On the cross thy sacred body
For us men with nails was torn.
Cleanse us by the precious blood and water
Streaming from Thy pierced side
Feed us with thy body broken now
and in death's agony

There's the clue to why this is so important : in our prayer to the Word of God that he will feed us with his body broken. It is exactly what Jesus tells his disciples in verse 55 'My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.' By receiving the bread and wine in this service we believe we shall be fed the real food that we need to draw close to him and to live his way. How is this possible? It's not magic, a conjuring trick, the bread remains bread and the wine, wine but God promises that it will take on an additional significance. It will become for us the body and blood of Christ. It is a mystery which we dimly understand now but is a sacrament, as the Fathers of the church said, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. With these everyday objects, God promises to give us himself, the very life of Jesus into our mouths so that we may truly be his children. That is why we treat the moments before, during and after our communion with special reverence. We sit quietly reflecting on who we are about to receive, we prepare who we shall bring with us in prayer as we kneel at the rail. We may have special words in mind as we receive bread and wine. I find the words of St Thomas 'My Lord and My God' very helpful here. We won't want to chat or greet people (the Peace is for that) as we come or go from the rail as we shall just want to focus on the supreme joy of meeting and receiving Jesus.

Two other reasons why this is special can be found these verses. John records Jesus saying 'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.' Receiving the

sacrament changes us. Just as Helen said last week, we are what we eat, so we too become Jesus' by sharing in his body and blood. We are changed into the people he wants us to become, the process of formation begun at our baptism continues ever so slowly, rubbing of the sharp edges, making us people who bear the fruits of his Spirit. And not only individually but he is making us into his Body on earth now. As a community, a parish, we are united through our sharing in the Eucharist to be his people in Keswick, to reach out for him in loving care and to speak his words of hope and salvation wherever we go.

Remember the wonderful words of St Teresa:
Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.

It is the challenge but also the energy that we need to be his people, his body here. It is the impetus that we pray our new leader will encourage us to rediscover as we journey with him or her into the future.

Finally we break bread and drink wine because Jesus said 'Do this in remembrance of me.' There can be no more simple, direct yet profound command. Of course we are very aware that it is a wonderful gift to have the Eucharist at the heart of our life and worship Sunday by Sunday. In many places the shortage of clergy or the lack of funds means that this is a luxury that can only occasionally be experienced. We must work hard to preserve this legacy at St John's by our regular attendance and our faithful prayerful devotion.

Writing exactly 70 years ago, Gregory Dix, an Anglican priest, wrote these wonderful words

Do this in remembrance of me. Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacles of earthy greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth.

Man has found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; for the proclamation of a dogma or for a good crop of wheat; for the wisdom of the Parliament of a mighty nation or for a sick old woman afraid to die; for a schoolboy sitting an examination or for Columbus setting out to discover America; for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover;

in thankfulness because my father did not die of pneumonia; for a village headman much tempted to return to fetishism because the yams had failed; because the Turk was stopped at the gates of Vienna; for the repentance of Margaret; for the settlement of a strike; for a son for a barren woman; for Captain so-and-so, wounded and prisoner of war; while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheatre; on the beach at Dunkirk; while the hiss of scythes in the thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church;

tremulously, by an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his vows; furtively, by an exiled bishop who had hewn timber all day in a prison camp near Murmansk; gorgeously, for the canonization of Joan of Arc – one could fill many pages with the reasons why men have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them.

And best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom the pastors have done this just to make the plebs sancta Dei – the holy common people of God.

May we be able to eat his flesh and drink his blood today so that Jesus will abide in us for ever.
Amen.