

Homilies for Ascension, Pentecost, The Trinity, & Corpus Christi

As we move into the second half of Easter and into Ordinary Time, once again, we celebrate four great feast days on successive Sundays. At one time the Feasts of the Ascension and Corpus Christi (the Body and Blood of Christ) were celebrated on Thursdays – for the Ascension precisely 40 days after Easter, and for Corpus Christi the Thursday after Trinity Sunday. Quite often these are popular Sundays for the celebration of First Holy Communions, when a different kind of homily needs to be preached. So, what follows is not a “complete set” of homilies, as it were.

The Feast of the Ascension

FEAST OF THE ASCENSION 2010

In keeping with this Feast and in the light of these readings I want to suggest that the full Gospel story is like a trilogy – a story written in three parts. The first two parts, the first two volumes, were written by St. Luke and today's Feast of the Ascension is the hinge that links them together.

In the first volume, the first part of the trilogy, we have St. Luke's Gospel. Here we have an account of how the Good News was first given to Mary at Nazareth in Galilee. Jesus is born and lives in Galilee until the start of his Public Ministry. In that ministry he begins around the shores of the Sea of Galilee at Capernaum but gradually he journeys up to Jerusalem where the events that form the nucleus of the Gospel take place – his Passion, Death and Resurrection. The Gospel ends, as we have heard in the Gospel for this Feast, with Jesus leaving the disciples at the Ascension. He tells them to stay in Jerusalem until *“you are clothed with the power from on high”*.

The second book of the trilogy is also written by St. Luke and is, of course, the Acts of the Apostles. We heard the opening verses of the book in our First Reading. It begins, as we heard, where the Gospel left off – with this Feast of the Ascension. Jesus prepares them for his departure by telling them that they will receive the Holy Spirit (*“the power from on high”*) and that they will bear witness to all that Jesus has said and done, beginning in Jerusalem and going out then *“to Samaria and indeed to the ends of the earth”*.

The Gospel – Nazareth, Galilee, Jerusalem. The Acts – Jerusalem – Samaria – the ends of the earth. In fact, for St. Luke, the *“ends of the earth”* seems to be Rome, because in the Acts of the Apostles we hear the Gospel preached by Peter, Paul and others firstly in and around the Temple in Jerusalem, then out to Antioch, across Asia Minor and Greece, and finally to Rome, where St. Luke finishes his work.

The third book in the trilogy is not written by St. Luke. It begins where he left off and is the story of how the Gospel continued and continues to be witnessed to in all the different parts of the world. It is the story of the Church. It is our story. In our own time, in this place, we bear witness to the Good News. To what happened to Mary in Nazareth, to Jesus as he taught by the Sea of Galilee, and as he suffered, died on the Cross and rose from the dead in Jerusalem. Now, following the lead from the apostles who began the business of witnessing, it is our task to bear witness here and now.

If that seems a tall order, a difficult, even dangerous task in a world, a society that doesn't seem to want to listen to the Christian message, then we can take heart from these first disciples who were themselves unsure, even getting it completely wrong at times, but still the message, the witness **has** come down to us today and it **can, and will be** passed on to the next generations under the power of the Holy Spirit that is with us all and who empowers us to do this work now that we celebrate the completion of Jesus' work.

FEAST OF THE ASCENSION 2013

That's a very cheerful and up-beat ending to our Gospel, "...they went back to Jerusalem full of joy; and were continually in the Temple praising God." As a matter of fact ten days later, according to St. Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, they were all locked up in the Upper Room, fearful of what the Jewish authorities might do to them. Perhaps that initial joy and confidence have evaporated as they face the reality of their situation:-

Jesus, their Master, is no longer with them as he has been. They are on their own now, except for this praise of the Holy Spirit to guide them.

During his time with them Jesus preferred to use the word '*disciple*' to describe his followers. It is a word which can also be translated as '*apprentice*'. He is the Master Craftsman, they are his apprentices learning their trade from his example and expertise. We, today, are the current crop of apprentices, called to learn our craft from the Master and from previous generations of disciples. Of course, no matter who we are, whether we are a parishioner or a parish priest in Washington, or the Bishop of the Diocese, or the Bishop of Rome for that matter, in relation to the Master, throughout our lives, we are always apprentices.

BUT – and this is where our celebration of the Ascension comes into play – we are also called to grow up, to be mature disciples who take up the responsibility of sharing and teaching Jesus' message today. Just like those original disciples, there might well be the same reaction that they had:- an initial welcome, "*Oh yea, I'm up for that!*", only to be followed by a certain fear and wondering how to go about such a daunting task.

The thing is that Jesus did not leave behind an instruction manual which outlines in a step-by-step process everything we have to do, in each generation, to preach that Good News effectively in our own time. We are not following a series of commands on a TV or computer screen when we are trying to set up the TV or install a new application. It just isn't like that. What we do have, however, are Jesus' words and actions in the Gospels, the wisdom and experience of the first generation of disciples in the rest of the New Testament, and the wisdom, the triumphs and the mistakes of subsequent generations in the great tradition of the Church.

Each generation is called to try to share the Good News in a way that is accessible and understandable to the people of the day – in the language they use, in their experience of life in all its varieties {poverty, wealth, sickness, freedom, slavery, hopefulness and expectations [realistic and otherwise]}. The Good News is for all peoples of every generation.

There is no doubt that, as generations in the past have done, we will make mistakes, possibly go down blind alleys but, aware of Jesus' promise and gift of the Holy Spirit to guide us, we will also get it right and move on as the mature, adult disciples we are called to be.

The Feast of Pentecost

PENTECOST 2004

The other day I happened to catch the "*Thought for the Day*" slot on Radio 4's Today Programme. Picking up on the alarming report on the problem of obesity in this country the speaker contrasted the over-feeding of the outer-man/person in our culture to the new starvation of the inner man/person – sometimes called "*The Spirit*". Whereas in many places where food is scarce and hard to come by there is a strong tradition of feeding the spiritual, the inner person, the reverse is not the case **for** us.

It seems that a reliance on fast, convenience foods containing too much sugar, salt and fat are building up problems for the future health of the nation. It is not too far-fetched with regard to the spirit – the inner

person – there is also evidence of a reliance on the equivalent of fast foods and quick fixes. Everything from crystals, to Reiki, to Tarot cards are used by some people for that spiritual buzz. I notice that one of the TV channels is even offering a live séance next week in which people are invited to take part in groups in their homes. Reality TV taken to another extreme, another excess.

The story of God's Spirit in our lives has a very different look to it. We heard in that First Reading of the initial buzz the disciples felt on the First Pentecost. We also find people having similar experiences both in the early church and today. But there is much more to the Spirit than that initial buzz.

Notice that two of the metaphors for the Spirit – Wind and Fire – are two of the four basic elements of life – Earth, Air, Fire and Water. They are things that are always present as part of the basics of life. God's Spirit is part of the basics of our life. Which is why, I think that in our other two readings, we have that image of the home:

- *'...The Spirit of God has made his home in you'*
- *"... we shall come to him and make our home with him..."*

God's Spirit lives in us, is at home in us, and enlivens our own spirit. But like everything else that we are at home with, we can take it all for granted and neglect it – starve it.

People **do** feel the need for the spiritual in their lives – something to feed their Spirit. The gap, the emptiness of a life lived without the Spirit is deeply unsatisfying – but quick-fixes don't work, just as quick-fixes don't work in feeding the outer person in the long term.

Sustained and healthy nourishment from the Spirit comes in the usual, unsurprising forms – prayer, reflection and exercising the Spirit in action – for justice, healing, wholeness. All those things which lead to ultimate satisfaction in our lives.

PENTECOST SUNDAY 2004

The images of today's feast are familiar to us: a strong wind, tongues of fire, Jesus breathing on his disciples. From people cowered in the Upper Room with the doors locked 'for fear of the Jews', suddenly we have people ready to burst out of the doors into the centre of Jerusalem ready to proclaim their belief in the Risen Lord, and to share that belief with others. These people are fired up, filled with enthusiasm, where five minutes earlier they were cowering with fear and dread. I wonder how many of us have experienced such a dramatic change in our attitude towards faith. Indeed, I wonder where our enthusiasm lies at times.

Last week our Mass was somewhat more lively than usual, our temporary visitors have a different way in expressing themselves, but one thing was particularly noticeable to me in that celebration – the enthusiasm with which the children about to make their First Holy Communion answered "*I do*" to those questions about their faith in the renewal of baptismal promises. They said it with gusto, and it was great to see.

In talking with a group the other day people were sharing experiences when they felt a powerful sense of the presence of God in their lives. One person mentioned a particular rosary rally they took part in where there was a real sense of everyone praying together, someone else mentioned a festival Mass and the singing of a particular hymn that had a deep impact on them. In sharing similar stories at other times people have talked about a quiet time in a chapel, or at a shrine, or at a particular place of pilgrimage. The occasions are different for different people, but the experience is the same: a deep sense of the presence and power of God present in their life.

I hope that all of us have some memory of an occasion like that. As Catholics we tend to shy away from such ideas thinking that they belong either to the earliest days of the Church or to Pentecostals and people like that. It is certainly true that we should be wary of people who think that to be a true Christian you need to have a profound experience like Pentecost every day of your life. That is not the way faith works.

Most of the time our lives are pretty mundane, plodding along at a steady, often monotonous pace. Sometimes life is rough and difficult, and sometimes, thank God, it is vibrant and exciting. Our faith tells us that God is in all of these occasions, present at all times. Memories of events where God has seemed particularly close – at rallies, Masses, in chapels, on particular occasions – high times – can help us get through the low times, and sustain through the monotonous times.

The Spirit of God has been given to us at Baptism and Confirmation – a Spirit that never leaves us, even if we forget or ignore the presence of the Spirit ourselves – always there. Special moments can bring to the surface the realisation of that abiding presence at all times. That presence brings with it all kinds of gifts, as St. Paul talks about in our Second Reading. For the disciples, it was the courage to go out and to preach the Good News, and ultimately the gifts are all for the same purpose; so that the God who shows himself in our lives may be known and experienced by others.

It is as simple as that. Where, then is our enthusiasm for professing this faith, for sharing this faith? What difference does this feast make to our lives, or is it just another marker that one more week has passed in our lives?

Every one of us has received the gift of the Spirit. Where can this be seen?

FEAST OF PENTECOST 2010

The Christian Faith is one that offers an approach to life that is *“both... and”* rather than *“either...or”*. As such we are used to trying to hold together things that seem on the face of it to be paradoxical. God is both three persons and one God. Jesus is both human and divine. At the same time SINNER AND JUSTIFIED.

The paradox – the *“both...and”* that we are invited to hold together – about the Holy Spirit is that the presence of this Spirit is both hugely transforming and quite ordinary. This is something brought out in our Readings in the Liturgy.

The extraordinary and transformative power of the Holy Spirit is brought out in that First Reading and its account of the First Pentecost – a powerful wind from heaven, the noise of which filled the whole house and the appearance of tongues of fire. Something very special and very different is going on here and through the presence in them of this Holy Spirit, the Apostles, who had been more or less in hiding in the room where this all took place, are now sufficiently fired up to go out amongst a potentially hostile crowd and bear witness to their faith in the Risen Jesus, with some quite extraordinary results. The transformation power of the Holy Spirit.

Our other Readings bring another aspect of that Spirit to light – which is *“both...and”*. In the Gospel Jesus tells his disciples that he and the Father and the Spirit will come in love on the disciple and *“we shall make our home with him”*. This is precisely the same image used by St. Paul in our Second Reading, *“the Spirit of God has made his home in you.”* Now there is nothing more normal, ordinary and everyday than *“being at home”* and this is how the Spirit is described.

The Holy Spirit, then is **both** powerful / transforming **and** makes a home in us. This, we believe, happens from our Baptism and Confirmation and no matter how far we may stray from realising and understanding that presence in us – the presence of God – Father, Son and Spirit – is never and can never be taken from us. There is never any question of someone who has rejected God for however long in their lives ever being re-baptised or re-confirmed. The very idea is nonsense. God never leaves us. It is we who leave God in some of the things we may get up to in life.

Under God's grace we come back to God, to a realization of God's abiding presence in our lives – through forgiveness received in the Sacrament of Reconciliation through our prayer and reflection.

When we come home to ourselves, realise the presence in us of the Holy Spirit, **then** the transforming power of that can be unleashed in our own ability, just like those apostles on the First Pentecost – to bear witness in our lives to the presence of the Risen Christ offering hope to our world.

God is always “*both...and*”.

PENTECOST SUNDAY 2013

One of the messages of this feast of the coming of the Holy Spirit is that God wants to be as easily accessible to us as possible. Realising God's presence in our lives is not complicated, it is not difficult. We don't have to go on long searches in exotic places to find God, because God is already, and always with us. As both our Second Reading and our Gospel tell us – God has come to make “*home*” with us.

It is usually we human-beings who have made this realisation of God's presence difficult and complicated because of the way we live and structure our lives. This was not meant to be, but in our sinfulness from the emergence of human-beings in evolution, we have tried to be too big for our own boots. The first eleven chapters of our Bible of the Book of Genesis, try to convey this pride, arrogance and laziness of when we are at our worst in a series of graphic stories which try to account for our current predicament. The first of these stories, about the Man and the Woman eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, is the first and best known of these stories, but it is the last of these stories which has particular relevance for us on the Feast of Pentecost.

As the story goes, in their arrogance humankind decided to build a huge, tall tower reaching up into the heavens so that they could climb up into the heavens and take over from God – a God they no longer needed because they were so wise and clever they could do without him. The story goes on to tell us that God cursed these human-beings with different languages so that they could no longer understand one and another and so co-operate in building this tower – the Tower of Babel – or Bubble, as it is called. It's a great story which truly gives us an insight into our potential for arrogance and for complicating things.

One of the effects of the coming of the Holy Spirit on the First Pentecost was to reverse this curse and to **uncomplicate** things. The people listening to the disciples in their preaching of the message of the Good News heard them and understood them in their own language. Once again God is easily accessible to all human-beings. God has come among us as a human person in Jesus who lived, died and rose again and who has now sent his Spirit to be with us always in our lives – our own particular journeys of faith.

In the Second Reading St Paul tells his audience, “*The Holy Spirit has made his home in you*” thus fulfilling Jesus' promise in our Gospel that in their love he and the Father, “*will come and make our home with him.*”

Simple, accessible, right here, right now, always when we take the time to stop, to be still, to be quiet, then we will be able not so much to find God's presence in our lives as to let God find us and journey with us whatever comes our way.

The Feast of the Trinity

TRINITY SUNDAY 2004

I feel sure that our two New Testament Readings were chosen for this Feast because in the space of a few sentences the three persons of the Trinity came into play. For St. Paul we are reconciled with God because of what Jesus did for us and we remain in God's love because of the Holy Spirit that has been given us. In the Gospel Jesus talks about the Father and the sending of the Spirit.

It's all very neat and tidy, but it gives no hint of the decades and centuries of quarrels and fights that were to come as people tried to understand and explain this God of ours in the next generations. Whether in preaching, writing, praying or in art, disputes arose that were ultimately settled by councils, synods, and the odd army or two.

At times the doctrine of the Trinity became simply an intellectual conundrum – a mind game. I remember when first ordained talking to a priest who had trained in Rome in the 1930's. Because of his intellectual training at that time he used to dread having to preach on Trinity Sunday. In the College at that time these men training for the priesthood were there for seven years with no holiday back at home during that time – living in a very strict regime. The Senior Year were expected to practice their preaching by delivering sermons in front of the whole college. Now this was not the most sympathetic of audiences – cooped up for so long away from home they relished someone getting it wrong – a form of entertainment.

This was not an act of generosity, simply part of the game because everyone knew that there were bound to be more than three such mistakes.

Gerry's fear of preaching on this Feast was understandable, but in his later years he had got beyond this far, he said, when it finally dawned on him that it was really a Feast to celebrate God's love and especially God's love of us. The be all and end all of the Feast is not some sterile mind game.

Barriers have been something of a theme of this last week for me. Spent a few days in Berlin seeing what has happened since the Wall came down – a barrier to keep people in. The newspapers and TV have been gearing up to celebrate the breaching of another barrier with the 60th anniversary of the D-day landings. Barriers are erected because of suspicion, fear and even hatred. Although Christians have done much in suspicion, fear and hatred of others, this is not how our God is and the lesson of communion, love, inclusion and reconciliation, is one that we have to keep on learning for ourselves.

TRINITY SUNDAY 2007

A rather caustic philosopher once observed that *"In the beginning God created man and woman, and ever since then, men and women have been returning the compliment!"* He was actually being rather observant. We human beings do indeed have a tendency to create images of God that **we** would like God to be.

If at heart we are angry people the God we create for ourselves is an angry God ready to exact vengeance on anyone who dares to step out of line. Why? Because if we were God that is exactly what we would do.

We project on to other people, other things, how we would like them to be. We give them labels, put them in pigeon-holes and categorise them according to our needs.

But the God we claim to worship does not fit any neat categories that we would like to draw up, as we can see in today's Readings.

Psalm 8, our Responsorial Psalm is a hymn to creation which marvels at all God has created – all of it *“the work of your hands”* – a God not aloof, but one willing to get his hands dirty. This comes out also in the extraordinary images in the First Reading. In parts of the Old Testament we have about *‘Wisdom’* – something that is seen as a kind of forerunner of what we have come to call the Holy Spirit, and here we find wisdom,

“at play everywhere in the world, delighting to be with the children of man and woman.”

God at play, God delighting in us – not really images that we would conjure up for ourselves.

Then almost at the opposite extreme we have St. Paul boasting about his sufferings – and finding the love of God present even there. And in our Gospel we have Jesus telling his disciples that when the Spirit comes he will lead them to the complete truth about who he is and what he has done. And here we have the most absurd picture of God that no-one would ever invent for themselves – a God who becomes one of us, even to the point of dying for us on a Cross. No-one would ever create a God like that for themselves. But that is the God revealed to us – the God we **profess** to believe in.

As youngsters most of us learned that God is everywhere. Or, to put it another way – there is no situation, ➔ no circumstance we find ourselves in where our God is absent. What we need to do really is to get out of the way with our own images of what we think God **should be**, and allow God to be God in our lives – allow ourselves simply to be present to the God at play in the world – to the God who delights in us.

TRINITY SUNDAY 2010

Leaving faith solely at the head level leads us into all kinds of problems, at the centre of which is our belief that there is one God in three persons. At such a level of the head this is, of course, impossible – so we swathe our belief on creed and prayer and actually concentrate on Jesus as God most of the time.

But faith is not just about head, it is about all of us – heart and gut as well. Our Readings speak to all of us – to the mind about the truth of God in the Gospel; to the heart about the beauty of creation in both our First Reading and the Psalm; and to the gut when St. Paul talks about suffering brings about patience, perseverance and hope.

At times different aspects of life present affirmation to our faith (the beauty of creation, the power of intellectual argument). At times life presents great challenges to faith – the failings of clergy to safeguard the young, the death of an innocent.

There is much more to faith than what can be present in the head.

Mary Oliver Swans

*How could I help but adore them
How could I help but wish*

What we love, shapely and pure,

Is not to be held, but to be believed in.

And then they vanished into the unreachable distance.

Faith in God - Faith in the Trinity is about love – it is about every aspect of our being.

It is not to be held but to be believed in – **lived**

Being in the mystery – part of it.

TRINITY SUNDAY 2013

Many of you will have heard of 'Flash-Mobbing' but many others won't have heard the term. It refers to events which take place usually in a busy town square or a bustling shopping centre, or a mainline railway station. As the crowds go about their business someone will begin a dance, or a piece of music, gradually many others will join in, apparently at random, joining from among the on-lookers, until there is a great throng of people taking part in the music or the dance. The crowd gathers round intrigued and enthralled by the spectacle. Then, when it ends, everybody just melts back into the crowd and 'normality' returns – 'Flash-Mobbing'.

People may have seen an event like this on TV or on YouTube or the internet and I have been directed to two in particular this week. One is a performance in a town square in Sabadell, near Barcelona of Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy', where gradually from one Double Bass player the scene grows to a whole orchestra and chorus, much to the huge delight of the local crowd.

The other is set in Antwerp Central Station, a very grand 19th century civic building with a marble-mosaic floor, great columns and grand staircases. At first you see the people on the station concourse scurrying off for their trains while the Arrivals and Departures are announced. Then, suddenly what comes over the P.A. system is Julie Andrews singing the 'Do-Re-Me' song from the Sound of Music. First one guy and a young girl start to dance, others gradually join them. Children flow down the grand staircase on to the concourse and join in the fun – ultimately there are about 200 dancers in all.

But it is the reaction of the on-lookers which is fascinating. Bewilderment, puzzlement, wide-eyes, smiles, mobile phones out taking pictures, people stopping in their tracks to witness what is going on, some trying to join in the dance. There is one guy – and there is always one – who takes absolutely no notice of the whole thing and clearly has nothing else in mind but catching his train. But everyone else is absolutely enthralled. For a few minutes their busy lives, scurrying for trains to get home or whatever, is put on hold, suspended and they are caught up in the spectacle, in the moment, and then the song finishes, the mob melts away, and 'normal services are resumed.'

What, you may well ask, has all that to do with the Feast of the Trinity? Our Readings today are full of images about God – trying to describe who God is. Some of it is in poetry, some of it, like St Paul in the Second Reading comes in the form of intricate analysis. Outside the Bible St. Patrick used the Shamrock, St. Boniface used the Fir Tree, and an Orthodox Jew Artist used the image of three angelic-looking men sat at a table. Words and images abound but in the end they all fail because God is much more than all of them.

What we get are glimpses which for a while give an insight into a connection with this God of ours. Notice these last few lines of our First Reading

"I was by his side a master craftsman delighting....ever at play..."

It's reminiscent of what happens to the on-lookers in that Flash-Mob from the Sound of Music. Delighting at the play going on in front of them, caught in wonder, caught in the moment oblivious of anything else. The same, hopefully, happens to each of us, from time to time, as we catch a glimpse of the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

TRINITY SUNDAY 2016

As I am sure you know in the Ancient World each civilization had its own gods and goddesses. They had many of them: a sun-god, a moon-goddess, a god of fire and so on. The people of Israel were strange and unique in that world they believed in only one, all powerful God. In the other civilizations they believed that their gods were often at odds with each other, falling out over petty jealousies and rivalries and woe betide any mere mortal who was unlucky enough to get caught in the cross-fire. These were not nice people and mortals were rightly very scared of them, having to offer them sacrifices all the time to appease their wrath.

This did not happen with the God of Israel, but such was the mind-set of people in the ancient world it was difficult for people to believe this. So it is in both parts of our Bible that when God makes an approach to someone, usually through the ministrations of an angel, the first words spoken are always, "Do not be afraid." This was a very different image of God from every other civilization and became unique when God took on human nature in his Son Jesus Christ. Now even if you are not very comfortable with the idea of calling the Father, "Daddy", as Jesus does in the prayer which he gave his disciples, the Our Father, nonetheless that person is still referred to as "Father" – a loving, approachable person. This is why St Paul could write in our second reading today, "The love of God has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us." This God, as our readings have been pointing out in the last few weeks has made "home in us" – with us, in us at ever step of our journey through life.

Our first reading referred to "the Wisdom of God" crying out. This Wisdom is often seen as a kind of embryonic idea of the Spirit of God, and notice what that Wisdom was saying, "I was... ever at play in his presence, at play everywhere in his world, delighting to be with the sons of men (delighting to be with humankind)." "Playing", "delighting" these are images of God unlike any other faith, and certainly in sharing fully in our life, as God does in Jesus, is absolutely unique and is done for one reason and one reason alone:- love, God's absolute, unconditional love for humankind.

Of course that love has a purpose. It is not shared with us as an end in itself, simply to be wallowed in. Rather it is given to us to enable us to engage in the great project that Jesus talked about throughout his ministry:- building the Kingdom of God. From what Jesus says, and how he acts and interacts with people, we know that this Kingdom is about building bridges between people, bringing things like healing, peace, hope, justice, fairness and so on into the world. This is the project, the task, we have been given. It is something already begun in Jesus' life, death and Resurrection, and this enables us to respond to the call to engage in this great project.

As we celebrate this Feast of the Trinity at the point where we return in our liturgy to Ordinary Time, after the high celebrations of Lent and Easter, we are reminded once again to see all of Jesus' ministry as an expression of God's love for us and as an invitation to follow – to take up our part in the great project of building God's Kingdom.

CORPUS CHRISTI

FEAST OF THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST 2007

I'm not sure if you are aware of this or not but for over six months now, most of our Sunday celebrations have been high season, high Liturgy, as it were. Beginning with Advent we then moved into Christmas – a short little piece of Ordinary Time – then straight into Lent, Holy Week, Easter and Pentecost. Next week, thank goodness, we take things down a bit and go into the green vestments of Ordinary Time until the end of November, until the whole cycle begins again. No doubt by then I'll be fed up of Ordinary Time, but just now I yearn for it.

You see, most of the time we do not live at the high peaks associated with great celebrations in our lives. Every day is not Christmas, Easter, a birthday or an anniversary – it is an ordinary day. We are, however, invited especially to be aware of the God who is present to us in these ordinary times, just as much as this same God is present in the times of high celebration, and indeed tragedy also.

The connection between the two – the ordinariness of life and the extraordinariness of God's presence – can be made in a number of ways – most notable in our prayer life. But on this Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ we give thanks to God for something God has made available on a weekly, even a daily basis, on this journey through life – the Eucharist.

Here we have ordinary materials, bread and something that has become much more common in this country in the last 30 years – wine. Bread – a basic foodstuff; Wine, a signal for celebration – become Jesus' Body and Blood for us to nourish us on our journey.

St. Paul reminds us in our Second Reading of the origin and focus of all this - The Last Supper and Jesus' Death on the Cross. Our Gospel reminds us that this is part of the miraculous generosity of our God who wants to make sure that all people are fed and satisfied.

In sharing in the Eucharist, in receiving Christ's Body and Blood, we share in Jesus' Death and Resurrection. We share in the generosity of our God, and are fed, nourished for our journey through life in which we are invited to share the generosity that we have received with those who go hungry and thirsty on a daily basis.

Today on this Feast, in **this Eucharist** we give praise and thanks to our God for this great gift of his Son in Holy Communion.

FEAST OF THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST 2010

In what Jesus does in that Gospel St. Luke gives us a pattern not only for the celebration of the Eucharist but also for how the Eucharistic Community should shape its ministry. There are, in fact, two sets of patterns offered in this Gospel passage.

The second pattern is probably the most familiar one – outlining the celebration of the Eucharist and it is very simple: - Jesus took, blessed, broke and gave – here the bread and the fish, in our Eucharist the Bread and the Wine. The actions go further than merely describing what the priest does during the Eucharistic Prayer with the bread and then wine in invitation of Jesus. What Jesus does in that Gospel passage and what the priest does at the Eucharist is what Jesus did once and for all with his Body and Blood on the Cross – taken, blessed, broken and given for us, for our salvation.

The first pattern offered in the Gospel also tells us something about the shape of the Eucharist, but it also tells us something about the point and purpose of the people who gather to celebrate this ritual. Notice what Jesus does: - he welcomes the crowd, teaches them, offers them healing and satisfies their hunger.

Here is the wider pattern of our Eucharistic celebration – creating and making welcome; healing and forgiving; reflecting and teaching; satisfying hunger.

At an even broader level here is the pattern of what any community celebrates this ritual – an Eucharistic Community should be about: - offering a welcome to all, offering healing, forgiveness and reconciliation; offering opportunities for reflecting on and teaching about the mysteries of our faith; and reaching out to satisfy hungers of all kinds – hunger for knowledge, for healing, for basic food and water in developing countries; and so on. It is all part of the pattern of the Eucharist we see in today's Gospel.

I think that it is going to be very important to bear this pattern, or shall we say "*Patent*" for a Eucharistic Community, in mind over the coming weeks and months.

Bishop Cunningham has written to all the parishes of the Diocese inviting us to take part in discussing and reflecting on how we might move forward in planning for the future. The first three topics to be looked at are:-

New Structures
Formation for All
Spiritual Formation.

A meeting will take place at St. Robert's on 19th June (10.30am – 3.30pm). The Bishop would like as many people as possible from the Diocese to come along and share their thoughts.

Whatever the outcome of these discussions – the pattern of whatever emerges needs to be about Welcome, Healing, Teaching and Satisfying hungers.

FEAST OF THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST 2013

Each of our four Gospels gives an account of that miracle of the loaves and the fishes, and while they all agree on the main details of what took place each has a little personal detail that gives a particular insight into Jesus' ministry. In today's account from St. Luke's Gospel, it is a very specific introduction to the story which lends insight into what Jesus is about. Notice the four actions on Jesus' part in the build up to what happens:-

- He welcomes the crowd
- He talks to them about the reign of God
- He heals the sick
- And finally he feeds the hungry.

Each of these is an aspect of Jesus' ministry and it tells us that Jesus' message relates to the whole of our lives, not just a little piece of them to which we might give the label '*religious*' or '*spiritual*', as if nothing else mattered to God.

No, there is no aspect of life which is left untouched by the Gospel message and the call to discipleship. Emotional needs are addressed by welcome and hospitality; spiritual needs by teaching; and physical needs by healing and feeding. Everything included, nothing left out.

So we can take it that the Eucharist – Jesus’ Body and Blood which we honour and celebrate in a very special way on this Feast Day - is food to nourish and sustain us in all of these areas as we try to follow in Jesus’ footsteps, trying to imitate his way of being.

Last weekend I came across a sentence in a book I was reading that caused me to stop and think over what point the author was making in a very blunt way. The sentence reads, *“The reason why we have to keep coming back to church each Sunday is because last Sunday’s message did not work at any deep level.”*

Now that can be read as a criticism of our general attitude when we come to church - and in some ways it is – but, I think more importantly, it is a simple statement of fact: the message that we are presented with in Jesus’ ministry, in his life, death and resurrection, is so enormous and its meaning and effect so all-encompassing, that we cannot possibly take it all on board in one go. In fact, it takes a lifetime, and more to come to terms with it, to integrate it into the whole of our lives, the whole of our being.

Whether it is the message of the presence in us and among us of the Holy Spirit which we celebrated a couple of weeks ago at Pentecost, or the all-consuming love of the God who is Father, Son, and Spirit which we celebrated last weekend on the Feast of the Trinity – taking this on board is a lifetime’s work, and like everything else in life, it needs to be nurtured and nourished. It is why we come back to reflect on these things regularly – every year.

Nurtured and nourished by constant reflection on Jesus’ message day by day, week by week, and month by month in the Scriptures – and equally nourished and nurtured by frequent feeding on the Body and Blood of Christ – given by Jesus at the Last Supper precisely for this reason.

Just as Jesus welcomes, teaches, heals and feeds – and does so in many different ways – so we, the disciples of today, are called to do the same, fed by His Body and Blood.

FEAST OF THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST 2016

The complete actions of Jesus in that Gospel passage are very similar indeed to those used every time we celebrate Mass. Notice how Jesus, “made the crowds welcome,” “talked to them about the kingdom of God”, “cured those in need of healing”, and then “took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it” to the assembled crowd. There in a nutshell is the basic structure of our Mass – something which has been celebrated in many different forms, but with that same basic structure ever since Jesus commanded the apostles to “Do this in memory of me”, at the Last Supper.

When we gather the Lord welcomes us, just as he did the crowd, “The Lord be with you”, and invites us to his table. As we then confess our sins we receive the healing and forgiveness that we need, as indeed Jesus did with that crowd. In our Scripture readings Jesus talks to us today about the Kingdom of God, just as he did back then. Finally in our liturgy of the Eucharist, at the Offertory, in the Eucharistic prayer, and the Communion that follows, bread is taken, blessed, broke and given to us – his body and blood as St Paul reminds us in our Second Reading today.

Today, on this feast of Corpus Christi, we give particular thanks for this great gift – the greatest gift indeed - that Jesus gave us and are reminded how important our celebration is as we continue on our journey through life. Jesus’ Body and Blood are offered to us as food for this journey – the sustenance to keep on going with the task that we now have of building God’s Kingdom today.

Many centuries ago St Augustine was teaching new members of the congregation at his church in North Africa about the Mass. These people had been baptised, confirmed and received Holy

Communion for the first time at the Easter Vigil Service the night before. On Easter Sunday morning they returned to church for another celebration of the Eucharist and Augustine points out a few things for them to think about. When he describes that part of the Mass immediately before Holy Communion when the priest holds up the consecrated host and chalice Augustine says,

“See what you are. Receive what you are. Become what you receive.”

“See what you are”... You are already the Body of Christ, the Church, and what the priest is showing you is also the Body of Christ, in the form of the consecrated bread. “Receive what you are”... Receive this same Body of Christ in order to, “Become what you receive.” Although we are already, from our baptism, members of the Body of Christ, the Church, we are far from being complete, wholesome members all of the time. We need help, support and nourishment to grow more and more like Christ... to grow more and more into people who are truly living our lives as members of God’s Kingdom, supporting each other and helping others to see God’s Kingdom present, and at work in what we do and say.

In celebrating Corpus Christi, we remind ourselves of this calling to become more like Christ in response to receiving the great gift of his Body and Blood.

FEAST OF THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST 2019

That Gospel passage comes immediately after the Twelve had returned from the preaching mission that Jesus had sent them on. They are both excited to share what has happened, but at the same time they are exhausted by their efforts and want nothing more than to rest but, as they say, there is no rest for the wicked, a crowd has followed them and the needs of others always have priority in Jesus’ ministry and he immediately welcomes these intruders.

Now, those of you who have read Dom Henry Wansborough’s reflections on today’s Gospel in the Wednesday Word will recognise the angle I am coming from. Dom Henry points out that, whilst we might presume that the Gospel on this Feast would give us one of the accounts of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, perhaps rather strangely we are instead given this account of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. In fact, however, when we look into what goes on here we find that it does indeed tell us much about what our celebration of Mass – our Eucharist – is all about.

We know from the accounts in the other Gospels that the Feeding – sometimes referred to as the Miracle of the Loaves and the Fish – took place at the time of the Passover. That is in itself significant because at the Passover the following year Jesus will, indeed, institute our Eucharist: the replacement for the most important ritual in the Jewish calendar when they celebrate their liberation from slavery in Egypt. The Christian celebration will now be centred on the freedom from slavery to sin of all people, won in Jesus’ Death on the Cross.

What happens in the account of the miracle is precisely the pattern of how we celebrate Mass each week: we gather and are greeted, we hear about the Kingdom of God in our Readings, we are offered healing (the forgiveness of our sins). As in the four steps of Jesus’ action in the account of the miracle, so bread is ‘taken, blessed, broken and given’ for people to eat.

In our Gospel we are told that Jesus ‘welcomed’ the crowd, talked to them about the kingdom of God, offered healing to all who needed it, had a real concern for the hunger of these people so, with what seemingly very little that was available he took, blessed, broke and distributed it among the people. Perhaps rather more symbolically 12 baskets of leftovers are collected which,

if nothing else, witness to the overwhelming generosity of what is on offer. Far more than is actually needed. For too long our thoughts have dwelt on the scarcity of Jesus' Body and Blood and we have gone, as a church, into intricate details trying to work out who may and who may not receive the Eucharist.

Now it is the case that what we have been given here is the most precious gift imaginable – Jesus' body and blood. There is nothing more precious to anyone than their own flesh and blood. In this case, of course, this is not just 'anyone' it is Jesus himself who is offering his Body and Blood. None of us should approach such a gift lightly. We should be aware of what it is we are receiving, about how precious it is. At the same time, however, we should refrain from being judge and jury about who is worthy to receive and who is not. That is something known only to God!

For now we give thanks on this feast for the gift we have been given and pray that we may receive with due understanding of its worth, and of our own unworthiness – an unworthiness that Jesus overcomes in his great generosity to all in need – including ourselves.