

## CORPUS CHRISTI, YEAR A, 2020

Some Scripture passages are always baffling - and certainly difficult to preach on! The Beatitudes fall into this category, I think; but so does the sixth chapter of St John.

If I am being honest, grappling with today's Gospel text (and the whole of chapter 6 in St John) has probably been one of the defining moments in my own spiritual life, as a Catholic. Sometimes, we just get those 'crunch moments' where we have to wrestle with the full implications of what is being said and come to a clear and distinct decision: 'is this true, or is it all hogwash?' I came to that decision in my mid-to-late teens, regarding this text, and I think it changed my life. Obviously, I came to the decision that what Jesus is saying here in the Gospel is, literally, true.

The central question is this: Is Jesus Christ truly, literally and physically present in the Eucharist or not?

The answer, from the Lord's own words, and from the apostles and early saints of the Church and down through the ages, has been an unrelenting 'yes'. With St Peter (immediately after these words of the Lord and upon His cross-examination of them) is to say, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed and come to know that you are the Holy One of God' (Jn 6:68-69). In other words, 'Lord, we may not fully understand what you are saying and what this all means, but you are the Son of God and we believe that what you say here is true'.

In a nutshell, the last 2000 years of doctrinal development on the understanding of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist is basically summed-up in St Peter's response. For the denial of this truth - of his 'flesh being real food and his blood being real drink' (as Jesus so clearly labours at great length and with much shocking, ultra-realistic language for his fellow Jews) - is precisely where Judas loses faith in Jesus. After teaching this 'doctrine at Capernaum', it is where we learn that 'many of his disciples no longer followed him' and that Jesus was aware that, 'one of you is a devil. He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was to betray him' (Jn 6:70). So, these words of Jesus have always been a dividing point from day one: either we believe in what he says, like Peter (that he will give us his true flesh and blood to eat and drink as real food), or, like Judas, we deny them and no longer follow him. To be blunt: we 'betray him'. There is no middle ground. It's not a coincidence that it is precisely at the Last Supper (the institution of the Eucharist), when Jesus dips the 'bread' into the dish and hands it to Judas that he nevertheless takes it and departs to betray Him and we are told that 'night had fallen' (Jn 13:30). John sees all this quite clearly. It's one of his 'themes', so to speak.

I have preached several times before about the 'realism' of Jesus' words here but it bears repeating, at least a little. We must be clear: Jesus is a Jew! He knows from Jewish law that it is blasphemous to encourage the drinking of blood and the eating of flesh meat ('sarx' in Greek, which has the connotations of flesh meat dripping in blood). And the word 'to eat' (trophein) refers much more to 'gnawing' - like a dog would gnaw on a bone! It is scandalous language for Jews and is worthy of a stoning offence. That is why they complain, 'how can this man give us his flesh to eat?', and why they later will say, 'this is intolerable language; who can accept it?' (Jn 6:60). Jesus is, therefore, not speaking metaphorically or poetically here. He truly means what he is saying. And all the early saints of the Church clearly testify to this belief. This doctrine is not in anyway seriously challenged for more than a thousand years. And when it is, a gradual, devotional counter-reaction takes place from the bottom-up which, ultimately, ends up in the institution of the Feast Day which we celebrate today [cf. St Juliana of Liege, who petitions her bishop and Spiritual Director, Jacob Pantaleon, to institute this Feast in their diocese. He does, and he is later elected pope as Urban IV and makes it a universal Feast for the Church in 1264].

In a sense, the very reason why we have this Feast Day or Solemnity is because of those who have doubted the literal truth of Jesus' words. Today is a day when the Church asks us to make a personal re-commitment to the faith of Jesus' real, physical, body and blood, soul and divinity Presence in the Blessed Sacrament. The question for us all is: do I believe it?

What is not in doubt is this: the integrity of your faith, and the practice thereof, depends upon how you respond to that question. Or, as Jesus put it: 'what about you, will you go away also?' (Jn 6:67).