

**SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND JONATHAN ANDREW**  
**AT 10AM SERVICE OF HOLY COMMUNION ON WEDNESDAY 19 JUNE 2019 –**  
**CORPUS CHRISTI**

**Genesis 14:18-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 6:51-58**

Today we're celebrating the Feast of Corpus Christi. 'Corpus Christi' simply means 'the body of Christ', and this day is a celebration of the gift of Holy Communion. In the Middle Ages this was a great festival of the Christian year and it still is in many Roman Catholic countries, and in some Anglo-Catholic parishes as well.

So today I thought it might be good to explore a question that I'm often asked regarding the differences between Anglican and Roman Catholic doctrine about what happens in the Holy Communion. And people are often astonished when I reply that for most Anglican and RC priests and theologians, there is no substantive difference whatsoever – or at least that was the conclusion of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission which reported back in 1971. But unhelpful and misleading caricatures remain when each side tries to describe what it thinks the other denomination believes.

And so the Anglican accuses the Roman Catholic of believing in magic – that in some sort of divine conjuring trick the bread of communion is transformed physically into human flesh, but the Roman Catholic knows as well as we do that the closest scientific tests will disclose no such change. Then, changing tack, the Anglican attacks the Roman Catholic for pretending to re-sacrifice Christ on the altar at every Mass, while the Roman Catholic would be horrified by any such thought – he knows that the Mass is effective not by repeating Christ's sacrifice, but by making his one sacrifice present and effective for us.

But in return the Roman Catholic often similarly misunderstands our teaching. He suggests that we are simply re-enacting a meal that took place 2,000 years ago as little more than a memory-jogger. He would probably be astonished if he attended this service and heard us using words almost identical to the modern Roman Mass, words that describe the bread of communion unequivocally as 'the body of Christ'.

But if we (Anglicans and Romans alike) are not expected to believe in a physical or chemical transformation of the bread, in what sense are we to say that Christ is really present in the Eucharist? Well, in one sense, we are not saying anything very special – God in Christ is, to the eyes of faith, present in all things and so of course he is present in the Eucharist! But there are other more specific ways in which Christ is especially present in the Eucharist:

First, and we must never forget this, he is present in all of us here today. We describe ourselves, the Church, as the body of Christ, and so we must remember that as we gather as a worshipping community we make Jesus present in the world.

Second, Jesus, the Word of God, is present in our Bible readings. If we listen attentively to the readings and to the sermon, we will hear his voice.

Third, and scarily for me, he is present in his priest, who represents a focus within the assembled people of God, who presides at his table, and who in the Eucharistic Prayer speaks Jesus' words, and repeats his actions – taking, giving thanks, breaking and sharing.

But finally, we claim that Christ is present in the bread and wine. That God takes ordinary things of this world and transforms them – changes their meaning, purpose and effect, if you like – so that the bread of this world becomes the bread of heaven – its potential to nourish us physically becomes an ability to nourish us spiritually.

I sometimes find it helpful to consider that in the Eucharist we are caught up in an exchange of gifts. We, the people of God gather, making the Church, the body of Christ, present here in this building. We listen to our Bible readings, and God is present and communicates with us in his Word. Through our priest, we repeat Jesus' own words and the things he did at the last supper - we offer the bread and wine to God, but not only the bread and wine – we also offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, as Jesus did on the cross. And so God takes our simple gifts and transforms them, giving them back to us as food for our journey of faith, but not just as food, but as a participation in the very self-offering of our Saviour, so that in eating we participate in his crucified and risen life. And it's that life which builds us up, which strengthens us and ever more closely unites us with him and with one another, so that we may become ever more self-giving and Christ-like, so that the Church may become more truly what it already is, the body of Christ.

**Amen**