

A Homily for the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, Corpus Christi from Fr Allan

My first memories of today's great celebration are, as a child walking from St Joseph's Primary School in the Heath, Cardiff to the Castle Grounds in the centre of Cardiff. I remember that we didn't normally wear a school uniform. However, it was introduced for the Corpus Christi procession. Our ties were brown and gold. We processed into the city centre where we joined up with the other Catholic schools and parish organisations before entering the Castle Grounds. I remember being impressed by the crowds of people and the sounds of the marching bands that accompanied some of the parishes. This was to be a feature of my Catholic life into secondary school and beyond. It was a joyful occasion.

One of the last occasions for me, before this style of celebration came to an end, took place just before the pedestrianisation of Queen Street. I remember that it was a very hot and humid day and the storm clouds were threatening. However, the organisers decided that the procession was to go ahead. Those of you who remember these times will remember how people used to be delighted by the uniforms and white dresses of the schoolchildren who took part. Perhaps for some the veils and clothes had taken over from the real essence of the feast. On this occasion the sky did grow very dark and the heavens opened just as the Infants from one of the schools were passing Boots the Chemists. The parents panicked as they tried to find and shelter their children. In the commotion and chaos, I heard a mother cry, "And they say there's a God!" Well, yes there is and fortunately God's presence isn't determined by the weather or even by the circumstances of the times in which we live.

In those days the people watching the processions from the pavement enjoyed identifying the schools and parishes. The colours of our uniforms, headdresses and banners gave us an identity. We were St Joseph's, St Peter's, St Cuthbert's, St Cadoc's, St Alban's. We were diverse but we were also united on this occasion as we all came together to celebrate the Real Presence of Jesus Christ at Benediction on the hallowed soil of the Castle Grounds.

Jesus Christ is present not absent. Another memory I have as a child is of one of my relations saying that they wished that Jesus was with us now as he was with his apostles. She thought it would be much easier if Jesus was with us now in that way because he would be able to explain things better than she could! (Not true!!). The implication of this (and the parent who questioned God's presence) is that God is not present and that maybe God has forgotten us.

Corpus Christi must remind us that God is with us. It must encourage us and give us hope. One of the abiding truths of the Eucharist (a Greek word meaning "thanksgiving") is the real presence of Jesus Christ in the mass. This has been a characteristic of the Eucharist from the very beginning. And yet one of the characteristics of our age is that more and more people (Catholics too) are finding this hard to accept.

The first reading for today came from the book of Deuteronomy. It gave an account of Moses speaking to the Israelites who had just emerged from their slavery in Egypt. They also thought that God had abandoned them and complained to Moses. He had to remind them that God had taken care of them and given them "manna" - food to eat. They hadn't worked for this food and neither had their ancestors - it was a gift from God. Having given them this gift God would not forsake them.

(Today we are given a Sequence to read in between the second reading and the Alleluia verse. It gives us a wonderful link between the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospel of John).

Chapter Six of St John's Gospel culminates with today's reading. Jesus is the living bread. Those who eat his body and drink his blood will go on to eternal life. He is the "living" bread. This is not food that "used to be" or which "might be now", it is real and will give life now and forever to those who eat it and drink it. Just as Jesus has given his life for us - out of love for us, we are challenged to eat of his body and blood in the Eucharist so that we can take the Good News to others today. The idea is "that we become what we eat".

In thinking about today's wonderful solemnity, I was very much aware that it can have negative connotations. For example (apparently) 70% of Catholics say they do not believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. I was aware that it can be a source of division among Christian denominations and also within the Catholic community itself e.g. some people are excluded from receiving the consecrated host and precious blood even though they can experience the Real Presence through the gathered community, the Word and the ordained priest. I was also reading an article that says that it diminishes the equality of all people because it is the priest who speaks the words of consecration. Nevertheless, our joy and celebration must not be denied. St John doesn't mention the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper but at the Last Supper something similar was taking place. The tone was very different. Jesus was about to be betrayed and then arrested. We will enter a time of sorrow. We need the Solemnity of Corpus Christi now so that we can express our joy that God is really with us.