

Sermon: Corpus Christi 2020

How bitter sweet it is in these strange times to be speaking to you through a recording, made in my study, for this year's Corpus Christi celebration. We're usually all together on this special day in our lovely church of St Francis. Our chalice assistants are publicly reaffirmed in their ministry annually on this day. It's been set aside every year by the Church since the twelfth century to give thanks for the body and blood of Christ, given once and for all on the cross and offered to us regularly, as he commanded, in bread and wine. If we have the technology we'll be able to see the church on our screens, the candle lit altar, the clouds of incense, but I for one will deeply miss the special fragrance that always pervades that beautiful place. How bittersweet it will be to see the bread and wine consecrated by Mike on behalf of us all, but not be able to receive it into our own bodies.

Whatever name is given to it, the Mass, the Lord's Supper, the Holy Communion, the Eucharist, whatever words are used at the consecration, it remains a wonderful mystery. We don't need to analyse it, simply to share in it with reverence. Corpus Christi, the body of Christ, the most wonderful Sacrament given to us by Christ himself that we ponder and give thanks for today.

But how can we truly share in it when we're separated from each other physically and unable to respond with our bodies to the invitation to draw near, to eat and to drink, to be fed? It is painful. But there's also other pain around sharing communion that many still have to bear, even when not in lockdown.

Nowadays, all Christians who receive communion in their own churches are welcome to receive at our holy table, but it was not always so. When I went to study in Germany in 1962 my vicar warned me that the only Church where I, as an Anglican, would be allowed receive Communion was in a denomination called the Old Catholic Church. I had a lot of trouble locating such a Church and the nearest one turned out to be 30 miles away! I hitch-hiked there once... but only once! The rest of the time I occasionally went to the Catholic church and sat tight in my pew when everyone else went up to receive. Gradually the painful division between our Catholic brothers and sisters and ourselves is beginning to melt away, but still the ancient Catholic rule remains that we are not yet officially able to share the bread and wine. We don't need to analyse the intricacies of the official theological positions but rather, with love and charity, to respect individual consciences.

In Lourdes, where Godfrey and I are committed to giving a week's service every year where possible, there's great flexibility. At the big international Masses where we're anonymous and no-one will be offended, we readily receive. At small group Masses, where we're known as Anglicans, we seek out the celebrant beforehand to find out, respecting his conscience, whether we should come up with outstretched hands or with arms folded across our breast. Usually we're warmly invited to receive, especially by younger clergy, but on one occasion the celebrant had real difficulty with the question. It was the intimate weekly Mass with the nuns I live with when in Lourdes, so it was particularly important to check with the celebrant, because everyone knew I was not a Catholic. Mother Superior had warned me that the priest with them on that day might have a problem. It was the day after I'd taken my vows to give service every year whenever possible. After four years of apprenticeship, I was now an official "hospitalier". A very special day for the sisters and for me and I'd been invited to take part in the singing and the intercessions and do a reading. The celebrant was a very old man and clearly struggling. He said he longed to welcome me to receive but his conscience just wouldn't allow it. He was actually in tears! I suddenly found myself with an arm round him, saying, In French, "Father, that's alright. Please don't cry. When you bless me I'll know that although the sacrament can't touch my lips, today it will still touch my heart." Together we hugged and cried some more and then I left

him to get ready for the Mass. At the Communion blessing I had such a deep experience of Christ within me that I almost fell over! Afterwards there was a great atmosphere of love and joy.

I pray that in these difficult times when we cannot receive physically, we may still receive deeply in our hearts and minds and spirits and be united and strengthened for continued service in Christ's name.

Amen.

Carole Lewis, Parish Lay Reader

A Prayer to receive Spiritual Communion

In union, O Lord, with the faithful at every Altar of thy Church
where the Holy Eucharist is now being celebrated,
I desire to offer you praise and thanksgiving.
I present to you my soul and body
with the earnest wish that I may always be united to you.
And since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I beseech you to come spiritually into my heart.
I unite myself with you,
and embrace you with all the affections of my soul.
Let nothing ever separate you from me.
May I live and die in your love. Amen.