

St Matthew's Newcastle

The Body of Christ

Sermon for Corpus Christi 2011

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If you were to go to a meeting of the Deanery Synod - as some sort of penitential discipline, presumably – and ask the others there what they thought of Saint Matthew's High Church, I would guess that many would refer you to our use of incense; others, with more than a hint of disapproval, could talk about the formal nature of our Liturgy. The Area Dean might make mention of the funny little black hat the Vicar wears and which caused him such fascination when he last came for the supposedly annual inspection a few years ago.

In these responses, we would gain an insight into the chasm of understanding, which blights much of the Christian West. The incense, the bells, the vestments are but details. What makes us what we are here is a high view of the Church - hence high church. By this I mean that our community is constructed around a set of propositions concerning the nature of the Church:

- the continuum from the incarnate Ministry of Christ, through the life of the Church;
- the Three-fold Order constituting an essential component of that Church;
- the thread of apostolic continuity connecting us with the Church of the first days - manifested by the unbroken chain of Episcopal consecrations, but comprising much more than that; and, as they say in the advertising world, so much more.

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Interwoven through all those ideas is the Mass for which we are gathered to celebrate and give thanks this evening. The Mass is the ultimate apostolic link, being, as it is, one of the few aspects of Christian identity, which stretches back into the earthly Ministry of Jesus. At the same time, it is no mere intangible rope linking us to the past.

The objective, Sacramental and living Presence of Christ at the heart of its celebration, not only infuses His Church with His risen life in the present, but also a glimpse of that eternal realm, which, one day, we hope to inhabit.

In its celebration, the Mass is an embodiment of the mystical reality of the Church. It is not so much what we do, but who we are. There is an intrinsic and inseparable bond between the historical Body of Christ, the sacramental Body of Christ and the ecclesial Body of Christ. The three interplay at the Mass, not only revealing who is the Church, but also slowly shaping us into that, which God has made us to be.

The Mass achieves its purpose by drawing us into the once-and-for-all Sacrifice of Christ so that little by little, we are, as Eastern Christians would put it, divinised - we experience the restoration of the image of God within us. As that process gathers pace, we recognise more clearly in one another our common human identity and the bonds of Communion between us develop from potentiality to reality. The reconciliation between God and humanity is mirrored by the strengthening unity between members of the Church.

The Church is diminished when it is not a Eucharistic community and Christian discipleship is diminished when it is not rooted in that Eucharistic community. This must be true, because such a separation prises apart those interconnected and interdependent

aspects of God's intervention in history, which we term the Body of Christ.

The Church and the Eucharist she celebrates are fundamental aspects of Christ's continuing Presence and Ministry in the world. It is this conviction that makes us High Church; and it is this conviction, which underlies the significance of our celebration this evening and tomorrow.

The incense, the bells and the formality of our Liturgy simply point to the importance which we attach to the Mass and what it means. As for my little black hat - that just tells everyone how High Church we are.

