



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, June 14, 2020
The Feast of Corpus Christi

Solemn Eucharist

+
A Sermon by
The Reverend Matthew Moretz, *Associate Rector*
on
Genesis 14:18-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; and John 6:51-58
+

Corpus Christi

“Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.”

My little boy, Samuel, fell down two days ago. He was toddling in the park having the time of his life exploring his world, when, all of the sudden, he tripped and fell before one of us could catch him. He’s usually good at breaking his fall, but this time, he fell on his face. And that impact, and those new front teeth of his, did a number on his lip. To our horror, he was bleeding. We did all we could to minister to him, trying not to be frantic. There’s no real way to put a bandage on his lips, and so we had to leave it be, soothe him as he cried, and it wasn’t long before he was in better spirits than us. Megan and I reflected that it was an unfortunate first, but a first all the same, that had to come someday, his first scrape. What I had thought, but didn’t share with Megan, was that it was also another milestone, the first time he experienced the metallic taste of his own blood. After all that, reflecting on Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel, when he repeatedly refers to the import of “drinking his blood,” I consider anew how gruesome that imagery is. It is the definition of provocative in a world where spilled blood is one of the most disruptive things that can happen to you or those that you love. It is at the sight of spilled blood, those that we love, that spurs not only our hearts but entire nations on a new course.

At a visceral level, I still have a hard time with blood, even if it is extracted from me for good reason, say at the doctor’s office. Part of me never understands that her syringe is meant to help me, not to hurt me. Blood, in that setting, is lost for the sake of healing. With the doctor, blood isn’t a sign of death, but it is a sign of life. But even when you know this in your head, your heart, and your viscera react as they will. Even when Jesus, himself talks about it. His first time speaking of “drinking blood” results in one of the most unsuccessful sermons of his ministry. At the end of this particular sermon, given in a synagogue in Capernaum, many of his disciples said that what he was saying was too hard of a teaching to bear. And I think this is putting it kindly. Not only was so much of what Jesus said that day disturbing, but this particular point about blood seemed to fly in the face of what the Torah teaches, basically that one is forbidden from drinking blood in any meal (Deut. 12:16).

And so, not just “some” but “many” of Jesus’ followers left him, to follow him no more. But, gratefully, the Twelve, the core, they stay. And Peter, speaking for the group, famously says, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the Words of Eternal Life.”

Thank goodness that they stayed, that they had the tenacity to stick with Jesus when he became generally unpalatable, that they were willing, in trust and devotion, to push through that envelope of disgust to perceive the treasure on the other side of his hard teaching. And now we have a great spiritual gift because of their tenacity.

When he said “eat my flesh and drink my blood,” he was not asking them to act out some horror show. He was giving them a way for them to consider his life as a source of life for them in a world of horrors, that just as they take in food and drink and it becomes who they are, they are meant to take in his spirit and his presence and his wisdom and take it all in, not just in their hearts or minds, but also into their guts, so that it might make in them a spring of Life. And not just any life. But the kind of life that lasts in a hostile land. The kind of life that fear and disgust and even death can't kill. Eternal Life.

Jesus is trying to get them ready for what is coming. And if they only look at the surface of things they will miss it, even if it is right in front of their face. They have to undergo some spiritual pre-digestion if they are going to take it in properly. And so, like a mother bird, Jesus prepares this hard food for his growing disciples in their nest. At the time of his provocative sermon, he hasn't even started to teach that he must die, which is going to cause howls of protest from Peter. Here he is just beginning to approach the conviction that his being living bread may be about something that is more than personal satisfaction and even self-preservation. His being living bread is going to mean that he is broken, murdered, that he is devoured by the Romans and his own people in one of the ugliest ways imaginable. But it won't have been for nothing. It will have been for the sake of opening up a path to a larger life, Eternal Life, prepared for the whole world.

A lot is at stake in the disciples understanding this process sooner rather than later, for practically all of them will be called to lose their lives as they proclaim this Eternal Life that they found in Jesus. The Twelve disciples inherit a legacy of New Life that is going to be made manifest across the entire planet even unto our time and in this land.

One aspect of their legacy is that we share a meal together, one given for us. And if we looked at it at the surface, we'd hardly think it would be worth anything. Such tiny morsels! And we'd hardly think that the bread and the wine would be appetizing, given what we call it. And yet it still draws us in to deep spiritual undercurrents, with tectonic power that can move us even from afar. We share the bread together and name it as Christ's body so that we might be Christ's body in the world, alive. We share wine together and declare it as Christ's blood so that the same life may flow through the chambers of our hearts. In worship gathered around this bread and wine we see revealed lasting things and lasting life that has always been there for us.

If you think about it, this great gift does not only point to lasting life, it lasts in and of itself. This gift is outlasting nations and empires and every sort of flawed institution until God's Kingdom comes, sustaining us now through pandemic and turmoil, giving us a small perch upon solid ground in so much shifting sand.

In the Eucharist, as happens in Christ, God gives life away so that we might have more life, and in response, in kind we give our lives away, the body, the blood, the kitchen sink, the whole kit n' caboodle, so that others might have life in even more fullness. And that life is not just for people in isolation, but people working together, for institutions, for families, for companies, for states, for halls of justice, for all sorts of broken fellowships that need healing from the light of truth and love that shine from these gifts. Under that light, instead of taking and keeping score, we are giving and forgiving. Instead of learning how to get more of our share, the light of this gift shows us how to lose all that we have so that we might have a share in eternity. Instead of watching people suffer, we mobilize and likely suffer so that the suffering might stop.

You know, it seems like our young nation in this time of turmoil, like my little boy, has stumbled and fallen on its own face, not looking where it is going, heedless of cries to stop, unbalanced, in this case by its sins,

careening with ill-considered momentum, disfiguring itself in the unjust abuse and killing taking place in its name, and we are reeling from that metallic taste in our mouths of something gone horribly wrong.

In every image on our screens or in our own lives of spilled blood or needless death of black persons at the hands of our leaders with impunity, those with eyes to see and ears to hear are horrified, trying not to panic, asking for the strength not to flee or bite back, but to be steadied and then endowed with new resolve for our common life, that deep distress might lead to deep action.

The Body and the Blood that we celebrate and adore today is food that will give us the energy to do this work, the most potent of morsels. Inscribed in its logic is mercy and justice and truth, suffused in its being is sacred presence and God's continuing salvation history that can indeed deliver us from evil. It is not some vestige of primitive religion that we do because we've always done it. In fact, it flips old sacrificial religion and statecraft topsy-turvy. Instead of people sacrificing others to the gods to change the weather or to stay in power, the Eucharist is God offering Godself to Us to change our hearts, calm our storms, even with its provocative imagery, graphic and vulnerable, navigating horror in love.

The Body and the Blood, Corpus Christi, is the entire Gift of God which is light and life and love, the kind that conquers the sting of death and the terror of the grave, and the horror of the evils we can mete out on each other. Even if, in times like these we can only look upon this Gift, or hear about this Gift, may this most potent morsel make its way by the power of the Spirit into the core of our common life and the core of our hearts. May this bread and wine be for us the entire Gift of God enshrined right at the center of our being, healing the state of our souls and the soul of our state.