

A Sermon for the First Sunday after Trinity Sunday, June 14, 2009
In the Octave of Corpus Christi
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We are in the octave of Corpus Christi, which was last Thursday. An octave is an eight day observance of a feast. Corpus Christi means “Body of Christ.” The observance was established in the year 1246 to celebrate the sacrament of Christ’s body. The idea was that the commemoration of the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday was overshadowed by the theme of the Passion in Holy Week. Thus, another Thursday was set apart as a feast day for the sacrament itself.

One of the sad ironies of church history is that the sacrament, instituted by Christ as the sign and means of unity, became the thing that divided Christians. The medieval Roman understanding of the Mass and the doctrine of Transubstantiation were met with various alternative theories about what happened at the Lord’s Supper and how Christ was present, or not present, in the sacrament.

The late Orthodox priest, Alexander Schmemmann, wrote a book entitled, *For the Life of the World*, which provides a different and helpful way of looking at the issue. The problem is that many have taken one aspect of the liturgy, the consecrated bread and wine, excerpted them from the liturgy and subjected them to examination. We ask, “What are they and how did they become that way?” The answer can only be discerned by placing the sacred elements back into their context.

The liturgy is the means by which the church gathers as a body and ascends with Christ. Through the liturgy, we experience what St. Paul means when he says that we are “seated in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:6). Our liturgy has its particular logic of ascent. We cover the detail in our Inquirers’ Class and here can be content with a brief summary.

We approach the altar of God with humility, penitence and joy. Then, Jesus is revealed to us in the Liturgy of the Word. In response to the revelation of Jesus in the Word, we begin the offertory. We offer bread and wine to God. These represent us and, indeed, the whole creation. In the offertory, we take the creation that God has given us and offer it back to him with thanksgiving.

The consecration begins with the words, “Lift up your hearts. We lift them up unto the Lord.” This indicates a change of venue. We aren’t in the world anymore. We have ascended into heaven. This helps us to understand the logic of consecration.

Fr. Schmemmann writes, “In this world, the one that rejected Christ, no bread or wine can become the body and blood of Christ” (42). But the liturgy is ascension and entry into the world or age that is to come. In heaven, and in the age to come, Christ is in all things and all things are in Christ. Thus, the words, “This is my body” and “This is my blood” reflect the reality of heaven.

To scientifically examine the bread and wine to find out what they are and how they became that way is to attempt to try to understand heaven in terms of this world. The sacrament works the other way. We take the creation into heaven where it is transformed into new creation. The new creation cannot be fully understood by the scientific method. It is the reality of heaven and the world to come, but from the perspective of this world it will also be supernatural and, thus, a mystery.

What does the church's ascent into heaven and participation in the new creation have to do with daily life? We can understand the practical application in terms of the gospel, The Parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19, BCP 190).

The rich man did not feed Lazarus because he did not see Lazarus as one made in God's image. His vision was bounded by the world, which is blind to the kingdom. Through the eyes of the world, a poor beggar can only be an object for scorn or neglect, or a project for improvement or charity.

However, when one ascends into heaven to see God and taste of the kingdom, one begins to see this world in the light of the kingdom. Jesus said in last week's gospel, "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." It is through faith and the baptismal gift that we are enabled to see the kingdom. We ascend in the Eucharist to renew our vision.

When one sees the kingdom of God, one sees the true value of all things. One sees the image of God in all people. One understands that the absence of money, status or power, or the presence of illness or misfortune, do not diminish the value of a person as one made in God's image. To love, in Christ, is to treat all things according to the objective value they have in the kingdom—and not according to the subjective value they are given by the world.

If we do not ascend into heaven as a habit of life, we will not learn to see things from the perspective of the kingdom of God. This is why the central activity of the Christian life is prayer. To be a Christian is not merely to "do good things." To be a Christian is to live a life of prayer "in Christ." As Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing." (John 15:5 NKJV).

The good works which "thou hast prepared for us to walk in" are simply the natural impulse of that life. Without the grace of God that comes through Word and sacrament, we have no life and can do nothing. We must first receive from God the grace that saves us from our self-centered lives and changes us into the image of Christ. Only then can we begin to love our neighbor as we ought.

In the sacrament heaven and earth are joined as earth is caught up into heaven. This looks forward to the consummation of all things, when heaven will descend to earth and the world will be visibly transformed (Revelation 21:10-11, Romans 8:21). The commandment to "Do this in remembrance of me" is only "until his coming again." When he comes in glory with the angels and all the saints, we will no longer need to ascend in the sacrament. Christ will be present in his fullness always. What are now the realities of heaven will be the realities of earth as well.

Lazarus also points us to the end. He is also a sign of Christ. He reminds us that we who are fed with the riches of Christ must also feed Christ with the riches we have received. For the same Jesus who said, "This is my body," also said, "Inasmuch as ye have done it to one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40).

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