

'This IS My Body, This IS My Blood - DO THIS IN MEMORY OF ME

As I was listening to the reading, I thought it must have been a very messy business being a priest in the Old Testament! All that slaughtering of animals and then throwing all the blood at the people. But, of course, these Scriptures are keen to show us that all those sacrifices have been replaced by the one and eternal sacrifice of Christ. I love history, I think I said this to you last week, and I've studied that page in some depth in the past relating it to the Catholic belief in the Sacrifice of the Mass. However in the 16th century, when Luther started the Reformation, although he had some good gripes, he unleashed an avalanche. Up to that point, there was a sense of unity in the Western Church. Even though people had different nationalities and cultures, there was this sense of Christendom, that everybody in the West was part of Christ's Kingdom and witness in the world, united around the Mass.

The Mass and the authority of the pope was seen as a central pivot, that the faith had come from Jerusalem, all the way to the centre of the Roman Empire which had collapsed, but a new nation - Christendom was born, and it was still thriving at the time of Luther. So, once that avalanche was unleashed, of course, a principle was taken away, which was, where do you find authority for doctrine? Of course, Luther said "scriptura sola," scripture alone, in Latin, but that unravels very quickly with modern biblical criticism. You need to see and read Scripture with an interpretive eye, and in the light of a Tradition dating back to the Apostles.

The differences between the long held beliefs of Christendom and the reformers became more extreme. The Fathers of the Council of Trent - a council called to counter the claims of the reformers heard how far the more extreme reformers had drifted from catholic belief and tradition. The practices of the Zwinglians or Calvinists, in Switzerland were designed to show their repudiation of the Real Presence. I think they celebrated the Eucharist once a year and even then, it was just a little memorial service to remind them of what Jesus did at the Last Supper. When the meal was over, and again to deny the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, Zwingli ordered, the remaining bread to be thrown outside for the chickens to eat. This was the extreme Protestant stance of course. They didn't believe that Christ was present, and their Service was merely a memory of Jesus at the Last Supper.

It's so profound what was lost at the Reformation and what later had to be strongly restated at the Council of Trent. I want to read you something from Justin Martyr, who was martyred in 165 AD. He was writing to pagans to explain what the early Christians

did and he'd received in turn. So, think about this. He died in 165 AD, but he wrote this piece much earlier and it's our Eucharist. He says,

"At the end of prayers, we all embrace each other with a kiss of peace. The bread is brought to the priest and a cup of water and wine. This he takes and offers praise and glory to the Father of all through the name of the summoned of the Holy Spirit."

Justin recounts that the priest gives thanks at length for our being granted these gifts, and when he has finished the prayers and the thanksgiving, all the people present give their assent with

"Amen",

a Hebrew word signifying

"So be it".

When the priest had given thanks, and all the people have assented, those whom we call deacons gave a piece of the consecrated bread to each member present. We don't have a Deacon in our parish, but we mirror the first Eucharists through the assistance of our Eucharistic ministers. Justin continues -

"After the thanksgiving has been offered and after giving some of the Bread and Wine of the wine to each of those who are present, the Deacons then carry away what remains to those who are sick. This food is called Eucharist by us and only those are allowed to partake who believe in the truth of our teaching and have received the washing for the remission of sins and who live in accordance with the directions of Christ. We do not receive these gifts as ordinary food and ordinary drink, but as Jesus Christ our Saviour Who was made flesh through the Word of God and took flesh and blood for our salvation. In the same way, this food, over which thanksgiving has been offered, through the word of prayer which we have from Him - this food, by which our blood and flesh are nourished through its transformation is, we are taught, the flesh and blood of Jesus who was made flesh and became Man."

Now, that was put beautifully by Justin, to somebody who didn't know what went on at the gatherings of the first Christians, and it couldn't be clearer that what Justin has received, very quickly from the apostles' time, is an understanding of a participation in the very presence of Jesus. It's this foundation that we have received in the apostolic tradition that's constantly been passed on through the ages. And so you can imagine the shock and upheaval, that the Reformation, which had some benefits of course, caused in the understanding of Eucharist revelation, authority, and tradition.

Corpus Christi, the feast, was established before the Reformation, to emphasise devotion to the Eucharist. After the Reformation, the Council of Trent promoted the feast of Corpus Christi more strongly to get people to have a prayerful devotion to the Eucharist. I can remember, and I'm sure many of the older people here, that we used to have a procession, the Corpus Christi procession where the priest would carry in the monstrance the Consecrated Host. We'd process around the streets, showing our witness and devotion to

the real presence of Christ. After the Mass of the Lord's Supper nowadays, there is a beautiful procession of the Blessed Sacrament to the Altar of Repose. But the former outdoor processions were also deeply rooted in a sense of that Old Testament tradition and that God has pitched His tent among us. That sense that the presence of Christ in the Eucharist was not just something for us, but to show the world that God has incarnated himself and made himself accessible to the whole world.

And so above all, in this feast, we not only celebrate tradition, we uphold the living faith of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and we witness in the world to the fact that God has pitched His tent among us.