

**Society of Catholic Priests Conference 2010**  
**Sermon for the Eucharist at Southwell Minster**  
Gospel: John 19: 26-27

My dear sisters and brothers in the ministerial priesthood of Christ, it is a delight to be with you at this conference, and a privilege to reflect with you today. I am grateful for the invitation.

I have been asked to reflect with you on what it means to be a Eucharistic people in the different settings we are visiting today. And I'm going to do so in the two sermons I've been asked to preach – one at this Eucharist and one later today when we celebrate Evensong and Benediction.

A Eucharistic people, then. In this first sermon, I want to think with you about what it means to speak of the Church as a people, a holy communion. In the second sermon, we'll think about what it means to speak of the Church as a people of thanksgiving. I'm hoping that covers my brief.

So, first of all, a people. What a marvellous thought that as Christians we are not alone, we are part of a people, a community, the Church. Listen again to our Gospel reading at this Eucharist: just two verses from chapter 19 of St John's Gospel, words which we hear every Good Friday in the meditation on the words from the Cross. Jesus, crucified and in agony, bearing our sins. When he saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing near the cross, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold your son!' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. In just two verses, then, John speaks to us of 'the foundation of the Christian community by the crucified King'.

So here is the first thing for us to note. The Church is a community founded by Jesus, the King who reigns from the cross.

A second point might seem to be that Jesus founded the Church as a family. 'Woman, behold your son!' 'Behold your mother!' So there is an ancient catholic tradition of calling our Bishop 'Father', continued in the Church of England's ordinals (though we may soon have to make them more gender inclusive). And a monastic tradition of using family titles: mother; father; sister; brother. In a family that is working as it ought, we feel that we belong and that others belong, not because we are the same, not because we always agree, not because we always get on, but simply because we belong together. So it is in the Church when it is working as it ought – we feel that we belong together simply because we belong together.

But we might get further by asking what makes us belong. In the family, we belong together because we share ties of blood or covenant. In the Church, we belong together because we are made one, by baptism and faith, in Christ. So it is because we all belong to Christ, because Christ has united us all to himself, that we belong together. Come back to the Gospel story and look again: what binds Mary and the Beloved Disciple together? Jesus – they belong together because they both belong to Jesus. So it is with us. We are bound together not by the blood of family ties but by the blood of the crucified one. Our communion is a holy communion, founded on the cross.

So it is that the Eucharist, the sacrament of holy communion, shows us most clearly what it is to be the Church. Here we see, as in a sermon in picture form, what it is to be the Church – we see that Jesus unites us to himself and so unites us to one another.

But *much more than that* happens in the holy communion. It's not just a picture, but a reality. It's not just us speaking, God is also speaking. In this sacrament, Jesus Christ deepens our unity with him, and so deepens our unity with one another.

Indeed, *even more* is happening in the holy communion. For truly the Last Day breaks in at each Eucharist. Through his priests, God speaks his final, definitive word, the word which he spoke on

Good Friday. God's final judgement is to unite the faithful in Christ and so to unite them to one another. *Anamnesis* is an encounter with the past of the Cross, and for this reason it is also an encounter with the *Eschaton*. And what do we encounter? We encounter holy communion, God's final judgement to unite Christ's people to Christ and so to one another with blood ties.

You know, often we forget this. We Christians, our business is *anamnesis*, the anticipation of the last day, getting started with the heavenly banquet now. And yet we forget.

What would it look like if we remembered? It would look like this. We would know that the most important thing about a person is that God loves them in Christ. We would love others simply because God loves them; and we would refuse to let failings and disagreements get in the way of that. We would remember that Christ, from the Cross, has made a home for us together.

St Benedict identified one virtue as the primary virtue of the monastic life. Do you remember which one it was? It was patience. Isn't that a strange idea? Well, maybe not so strange, actually. He's thinking mainly about the need to love people, and not to allow their weaknesses to define them, though in fact we might add that we also need to work at not holding their strengths against them! But in any case, Benedict is thinking of community life in which we try to accept and love people who are different from us because God loves them. The most important thing about a person is that God loves them.

Of course, in this vale of tears, we manage all of this only sinfully and falteringly. But, *mirabile dictu*, we do manage it in part, and we need to thank God for his grace that we do manage it in part. It is breaking in of the last day in our midst. Yes, when we love someone else simply because God loves them, it is ray of sunshine breaking in on our dark world from the last day.

And where might we see all of this? Well, actually, we might see it in all of the Christian communities we are visiting today. They all look quite complex communities, don't they? Full of people who want different things, with different tastes, and different ideas.

The city centre church, with the traditional language, high church, choral people; and the liberal, inclusive, 'Common Worship' congregation; and an inner city community, with a more informal style of worship. And that was just one benefice! Or the cathedral church, seeking to serve different congregations, and a diocese, and a bishop, all at once. Or the six different churches served by one priest, and a shrine to which different groups look for different things.

What they have in common is this:  
the presence in them all of different groups;  
and an attempt in each one (no doubt with varying degrees of success) to hold that diversity together in unity;  
and an openness to others, an attempt to include people, to engage with people where they are.

A passion, at least sometimes, for making connections!

Here, in these diverse communities, surely, we can see evidence of holy communion, of the breaking of the last day, of the reconciliation which issues from the cross.

So let us thank almighty God, who has given us so many opportunities to love others different from ourselves simply because he loves them. And let us thank him for the times when others love us simply because God loves us. For truly, it is then, just for a moment, that we are in heaven.

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