

SERMON – AWE AND WONDER – HOLY COMMUNION

Back when I was around 21 years of age I was dating a girl who was a lapsed Catholic. One Christmas Eve I went with all her family to the pub followed by a late-night curry in Birmingham. Around 11.30 one of the family said, “let’s go to Midnight Mass”.

At this point I’d never been to a church service in my entire life ... but I’d had a few beers and was in a merry mood, so I thought “yeah why not, let’s get the Christmassy vibe.”

To be honest, the service felt pretty dull, but the influence of the beer and the magic of the Christmas carols kept me engaged.

Then suddenly at one point in the service everyone around me started getting up from the pews and making their way in an orderly fashion down the aisle to the front of the church.

No-one explained to me what was happening, so I just got up and followed them. Alcohol has a way of making you high on bravado and low on intelligence.

I followed everyone right up to the rail and before I realised what was actually happening, (Communion), I found myself on my knees and the priest offering me a wafer. I truly had no idea what to do and in sheer panic I touched it with my nose and quickly walked away.

I think it’s fair to say that at this point I’d been rumbled as a non-believing, no Catholic imposter. This was my first embarrassing experience of Holy Communion. And it would be over 25 years before I took Communion again. This time with a little less stress and a lot more appreciation of what’s actually taking place.

So this past week, I’ve been exploring the history of this central sacrament of our Christian faith, and it’s been a humbling and a very convicting reminder of **3 core things**.

Firstly, just how much the radical power of God can change lives. The Eucharist is now the beautiful sacrament central to **my** worship life and spiritual food for my Christian journey.

Secondly, just how **radical** and **shocking**, those words we’ve just heard from Jesus really are. These are the words that lie at the heart of this Holy Sacrament.

And my 3rd conviction, was just how much the early church developed a much more expansive and wide-reaching understanding of what Jesus was trying to tell us.

So my hope today is a simple one.

I want to explore **why** their understanding evolved the way it did, and in doing so, I hope this will deepen our appreciation of what Jesus was trying to make us understand. And in this, elevate and enrich our own experience of Holy Communion. Deepen our union with Jesus Christ. Because this has been my gift this week.

So let’s begin with those first words from Jesus. These are the words that lie at the heart of why we even receive this Holy Sacrament.

Jesus said to His followers, ⁵⁵**For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.** ⁵⁶**Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them.**

Now if you want an example of just how much Jesus’ words can search our hearts and stretch our minds - look no further.

From the moment Jesus said these words - to this present day, they still challenge all of us to engage with the magnitude of what He is trying to make us understand.

For those first listeners the challenge was too much. They said...

⁶⁰**“This is a hard teaching, Master. Who can accept it?”** And we’re told that **‘from this time on many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him’.**

I think you can actually hear the sadness in Jesus words when He turns to His closest friends and asks them ... ⁶⁷ **“You don’t want to leave Me too... do you?”**

How they respond, is what changes the course of everything. Simon Peter says to Jesus, **“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the *words* of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”**

Doesn’t this give you and I an important spiritual wisdom for our journey.

It’s because they stick with Jesus and still follow Him, (come what may), they will have their hearts and minds expanded into a much deeper understanding of WHO Jesus is – and this will change their reality and their lives forever.

So how much do we choose to keep following Jesus (no matter what), so that our capacity to believe and understand can grow more deeply?

As I said what’s really struck me this week, is how the first followers of Jesus go from **“what the heck are you talking about Jesus** – to an understanding that’s about as profound as it gets?

The early N/T writers and early Church Fathers come to regard the sacrament on which these words are based, as both the **‘source and the summit’** of our Christian life. Informed by the witness of the ***Cross - the Resurrection - Ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit***, they come to see the Eucharist, Holy Communion as the **‘sacrament of all the sacraments’**.

And these words from Pope Francis capture the magnitude and the significance of this deeper understanding of the early Church Fathers as well as any.

The Eucharist is itself an act of cosmic love. Yes cosmic. Because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world. The Eucharist joins heaven and earth, it embraces and penetrates all creation. Worthy of Awe and Wonder

What we now have, is the belief that the Eucharist is both Cosmic and Commonplace. And by Cosmic, we’re talking about the Cosmos. Which means an orderly harmonious universe. The Divine Order of things.

The worldwide Church now believes that we are partaking in a sacrament where heaven and earth intersect. So when you and I come forward take the bread and the wine, we are entering into a union with Christ -that embraces and penetrates all of Creation. The Cosmos.

How can this NOT invoke the spirit of awe, reverence and wonder in our hearts and minds.

The reason we get to this understanding is because spiritual giants like St John and St Paul were giving us this mind-expanding wisdom of God.

In John 1. **In the beginning was the Word and the Word was WITH God – the Word WAS God and ALL things were created through HIM.** This is John giving us the Christ of the whole Cosmos. Christ the **Word** made **flesh**.

And St Paul gives us exactly the same truth in Colossians 1:15-16 And you will find this in Ephesians and Hebrews too.

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.

**He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation,
¹⁶for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth.
He made the things we can see and the things we can’t see**

This is scripture now giving us Christ **the Word**, who is there at the beginning of all creation, as the **Divine Order** of **all things**. But who manifests at a certain point in human history. We call this the Incarnation. The **Word** becomes **flesh** in the person of Jesus the Christ.

And it's this understanding of Christ as 'the Word' made flesh – that's key to understanding why the Eucharist is both Cosmic and Commonplace.

So now, take all of this truth and revisit those first words from Jesus that caused so many to turn away?

⁵⁶**Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood - remains IN me, and I, IN them.**

However, you come to understand the power of these words is obviously your journey not mine. **But I can only hear them like this.**

In some way that's *rightly*, both majesty and mystery, when we receive the body and blood of Christ, we are in some way consuming all the truth we've just explored.

We are in a Divine Union with Christ the Word made flesh. We are IN Christ and HE is IN us.

We are consuming and internalising the Christ who is '**image of the invisible God**'.

The Christ who '**is supreme over all creation**',

We are feeding our souls with the great **I AM** who told us, that **He** is the '**bread of Life**'.

We are now in a Holy Communion with the **One** who dies on the Cross to break down all the dividing walls of hostility, to reconcile **all** of creation.

We are in the presence of the **Risen Christ** who scripture tells us is now in ALL THINGS. The Alpha and the Omega. The same, today, yesterday and forever.

This is WHY, the Eucharist is both Cosmic and Commonplace.

It's Cosmic because it transcends time and space: It connects you and I to the Last Supper and the eternal reality. It takes us beyond the physical limitations of the room.

It's commonplace because it involves basic, earthly elements—bread and wine.

It's Cosmic because it reveals a universal scope: It unites the entire church—past, present, and future—It takes the concept of an infinite, Creator and condenses that presence into a tangible moment of our human experience.

It's commonplace because it involves every day routine human actions: **Gathering, eating and drinking**. It happens in local community spaces, week after week as a regular fixture of our ordinary life.

So this morning, when we hear Jeremy say the eternal words of Jesus... **"Take, eat, this is my body given for you - This is my blood of the new covenant shed for you."**

Let the scope and the depth of what's taking place register and resonate at the deepest level of your being.

The whole point of this series has been to challenge all of us to open our eyes and hearts to the expansive life-giving presence of our Triune God, Father, Son and Spirit. And to let this evoke in our sometimes-jaded souls the spirit of awe, reverence and wonder.

Which always grows and flows from the soil of a grateful heart. It's why in the NZ prayer book page 404 this beautiful sacrament is called **The Great Thanksgiving of the People of God**

- We the people of God, give grateful thanks for the beauty of God's good Creation.
- For the work of the Cross and the Risen Christ.
- Grateful thanks for the gift of the Holy Spirit at work in our hearts and in the world.

So, as you come forward today to receive the body and blood of Jesus the Christ - bring one thing you are grateful for.

One circumstance where you've seen or sensed the presence of Christ the Word made flesh. One place where you've noticed the burning bush of God's radiant presence.

**I'll finish with a personal story of my own that I will be bringing the table.
Because it felt like a living example of Christ the Word at work in my life.**

On Friday, I was part of a memorial service for someone from our community who died in very sad circumstances. It was just the close family and laying of the ashes over at Eden Gardens. It was a beautifully moving service and as I was leaving there was a fair few members of public milling around.

Just as I was saying goodbye to one of the family a guy looked at me ... pointed at my collar and said – **“Ive got a question for you.”** And I could sense the friend who was with me chuckling and thinking ‘good luck with this Josh’.

Anyway, the guy looked me in the eye and said to me... **“Where’s Christ in our suffering”?**
I did a quick prayer to God... **“please Lord give the words that won’t disappoint this man”.**

I stumbled out the words of how I believe Christ entered into all our suffering on the Cross and is always alongside us etc. And thankfully he said to me ... **“I like that friend”.**

I breathed a sigh of relief and said, **“what’s your name”** - and he said, **“I’m John.”**

And I said to him..., **“Well actually John - more than this, Ive just taken a memorial service for someone I knew - who died too soon in very sad circumstances - and all I can tell you, is that Christ was there with all of us in our suffering.”**

“Christ was alongside bringing comfort in the tears - bringing smiles in the precious memories we shared - and ultimately walking with all of us in the slow steps to healing.”

And he put his hand to his heart and said **“that’s beautiful brother”.**

We ended up talking for about another 10 mins and he introduced me to his daughter in her early 30’s who came out from the café, and I said listen John... **“I totally believe that Christ is all around especially in chance encounters with strangers and I believe this is a God moment.”** And John said ... **“I do too Josh.”**

We ended up taking a selfie - gave each other hug and said our goodbyes.

Now I don’t believe in any way shape or form as God being the old man in the sky... but if I did, he would like this.



Or at least an Old Testament prophet.

One last thought. And it’s about what we’ve talked about these past few weeks. The need to pay attention and notice.

I confess that when John approached me all my instincts were to close him down as gently as I could so I could get back to my busy life. But if I had of done, I would have missed out on the gift of this encounter. And for this I’m very grateful.