

**Sermon for the Feast of Corpus Christi  
Bristol Cathedral  
The Eucharist. June 4 2015**

CORPUS CHRISTI

In the old Court of Corpus Christi College in Cambridge is a carved effigy of a bird in a nest feeding its young. Only this bird, the pelican, is not feeding the fledglings with berries or insects or the flesh of other creatures, but with its own flesh and blood. The legend has it that the pious pelican gives her own self for the sake of its young. Some hundred years before the foundation of Corpus Cambridge, the greatest of the medieval theologians had written about the pelican in one of his hymns. We will be singing one of Thomas Aquinas's eucharistic hymns later in this service (*Pange Lingua*), but in his hymn *Adoro Te* he wrote:

*O loving pelican,  
O Jesu Lord,  
Unclean I am  
but cleanse me in thy blood,  
of which one single drop for sinners spilled  
can purge the entire world of all its guilt*

The pelican thus became the inevitable symbol of Christ the Redeemer: the appropriate ikon for the colleges of Corpus Christi and for this feast of that celebrates the Body of Christ.

This feast always falls on a Thursday, and though we stand this side of Easter, able now to glory in the triumph of the cross, our thoughts are taken back to the upper room on the night that Jesus was betrayed – a Thursday night. Corpus Christi takes us back to the body of Christ who lived and walked as flesh and blood – fully human. The man who not only changed individual human lives but the direction of history by becoming part of that history: entering it, enduring it, redeeming it and transfiguring it. The Feast of Corpus Christi takes us back to the humanity of God etched forever on the conscience and the consciousness of human kind in the shape of the cross.

And this feast points us also to another celebration which always takes place on a Thursday: Ascension Day. Corpus Christi placards the mystery of the God who spent himself to the uttermost, like the pelican in her piety, to feed us and save us. Corpus Christi also points to the glorified Christ whose body entered the heavens, there to sit at the right hand of the Father, with the world in his hands. But the hands that hold the world, the feet that trample evil underfoot, the head that is crowned in glory, still bear the marks of the passion. The body we celebrate today, the body of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus, is a body which carries the pain and suffering and fragility and fear of our world into the heart of God. And there at the Father's side, the body of Christ ever lives to make intercession for us.

And one last thought. This Feast of Corpus Christi not only always falls on a Thursday to remind us of those other Thursdays of commemoration and celebration, it always falls on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday. And I can't believe that that juxtaposition of dates was simply fortuitous. For Trinity Sunday celebrates the unity of God **and** the community of God. Our Christian belief in a God who is one and three is not only a mathematical conundrum to the sceptical; it is a blasphemy

to the monotheist religions of Judaism and Islam. But in the face of all odds, Christians have gone on rehearsing their belief in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As though the notion of God as community might have something profound and simple and true to teach us. Perhaps that God is love – and by its nature love requires more than one. God is love, God loves us, God loves us to love each other. This Feast of Corpus Christi reminds us (because of its proximity to Trinity Sunday) that God is a community of love; and Corpus Christi reminds us that we too are a community of love. The Body of Christ we celebrate here in bread and wine is pointing us to the historical Jesus whose body was broken to make us whole, and to the ascended Lord whose body carries our humanity into heaven. And the Body of Christ which is put into our hands as we kneel to receive God's own self is making us, by that very act, into his body. We, by God's grace, are Corpus Christi, Christ's body in the world, fed from the flesh and blood of his breast, so that we in our turn may feed God's young with love.

Amen