

[Deuteronomy 8: 2-3](#)

[Psalm 116: 10-17](#)

[1 Corinthians 10: 1-4, 16-17](#)

[John 6: 47-58](#)

A SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND ALISTAIR SO ON THE FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI, MAY 25, 2008, AT ALL HALLOWS' CHURCH, SOUTH RIVER PARISH, IN DAVIDSONVILLE, MARYLAND

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I was in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, this past week, attending the ***Start Up Start Over*** conference. This conference consisted of a series of seminars related to church growth and evangelism from the Episcopal perspective. I learned a great deal about congregational development. But I suspect that I also gained a few pounds as they fed us well and a group of us young priests went out to try different restaurants there every evening. In fact, we are very blessed to have the abundance and varieties of cuisine we have nowadays: French country style cooking, spicy Thai dishes, Spanish tapas, savory sushi and sashimi, oysters coming from both coasts, Moroccan bisteeya, and the world famous Kobe beef, so on and so forth. Recently, we have begun to experience the mélange of all the delicious flavors into what is known as fusion contemporary dining experience, such as lightly pan-seared tuna sashimi on baby spinach salad coupled with Chardonnay and Sake: where the East meets West. Truly, any human culture is never far from food and drink if we want to live. Doesn't make perfect then, that God also comes to us in food and drink? The Israelites in the wilderness ate manna from heaven in their sojourn to the Promised Land. In his earthly ministry, Jesus fed five thousand on a hilltop from five loaves and two fishes. And in John's Gospel today just proclaimed by Deacon George, Jesus says, "...my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink." (KJV: My flesh is food indeed and my blood is drink indeed.)

Today, we celebrate the Feast of Corpus Christi, where we proclaim to the world the joyful mystery of the Blessed Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. Remember that, on Maundy Thursday, we celebrated the poignant institution of the Lord's Supper at the Last Supper that Jesus had with his disciples before he was betrayed. The Feast of the Body of Christ is the happy ending of the Last Supper. We now look at the institution of the Eucharist from the perspective of the Resurrection, from the perspective of the ever-abiding Spirit of God that remains with us all through our journey of faith. The very fact that we call this sacrament "Eucharist" indicates our joyful, optimistic, and forward-thinking relationship with God, because "*eucharisto*" means "to give thanks" in biblical Greek. Today, we show the world that we give thanks to God for the ultimate feast in the Body and Blood of Christ.

Some years ago, I was accosted by a freelance evangelist at a bookstore. She commented that Catholics believed in cannibalism. I was just about to say, "have a nice day" and move on. But we did end up having an interesting conversation. To this day, I still find it odd that most Bible-believing, literalist Christians take Scriptural passages literally except when it comes to the *dominical words* uttered by Jesus, "This is my Body...this is my Blood." As Episcopalians, our belief in the nature of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist has not changed for hundreds of years, as Elizabeth I encapsulated it amidst the turmoil of religious war and political intrigue at the time of the English Reformation,

"He was the Word that spake it; He took the bread and brake it; And what that Word did make it, I do believe and take it."

Obviously, this aphorism is very open-ended and diplomatic, shall we say? But this *via media* Anglican stand is the receptacle on which the diversity and richness of our Communion exists. We can say for certain, though, we do believe in both the spiritual and material presence of Jesus Christ our Savior in the Eucharistic feast. This “both...and” is the focal point of our liturgical life; this “both...and” is the focal point of our corporate worship. Jesus is both Priest and Victim in the Eucharistic Feast. Jesus is both the Alpha and the Omega. Jesus is both the Prince of Peace and Breaker of the Status Quo of every age. Indeed, the Real Presence of Jesus in the Bread and Wine of Communion has tremendous implications for our relationship with God. The fact that through the Eucharist, “Christ truly dwells in us, and we in him,” indicates that God loves us spiritually and materially. The material world was created by God and God loves us through the created matter of the world as well.

One of the best examples of this motif of the Eucharist is the poignant story of *Babette's Feast* that shows us the essence of God's love for us in the Eucharistic feast. *Babette's Feast* is a beautiful motion picture adapted according to a novel written by Isak Dinesen in the late nineteenth century in Denmark.

Babette is a 19th century Parisian political refugee. She flees on a boat to Frederikshavn in Denmark with the help of her nephew. And there, she forms a relationship with two elderly and religious sisters. The sisters, Martina and Philippa, are the daughters of a pastor who has founded his own religious sect, characterized by the renunciation of all earthly pleasures.

Babette, whose background as a great Parisian chef is unknown to the villagers, works as a cook and housekeeper for Philippa and Martina in their house in a small village on the remote and beautiful coast of Jutland. The sisters were once beautiful women, who had given up their chance at romance and fame, taking refuge in the austerity of the religious sect founded by their father. Babette goes on to spend fourteen years as their cook, her only link to her former life being a lottery ticket that a friend in Paris renews for her every year. One day, she wins the lottery and decides to use the money to prepare a delicious dinner (*un vrai diner français* as Babette calls it) for the sisters and their small congregation. The menu includes such delicacies like *Cailles en sarcophages* (“Quails in sarcophagi”), *Blinis Demidof a l'Oobleck* (Yeasted pancakes with gingered carrots and beets), *Soupe a la tortue a la Louisianne* (Turtle soup), among other epicurean delights. Most guests believe that this sumptuous meal is Babette's farewell dinner as a gift to the congregation. But Babette later tells the two sisters that she has used the entire fortune she won from the lottery to prepare this feast of all feasts. Babette will continue to stay with the sisters who are so moved and inspired by her self-sacrifice, which is truly an icon of the Eucharist. They call her “an angel from God.” Through Babette's feast, the two sisters have seen a different side of God.

Indeed, God can transform us through religious austerity with its denial of earthly enjoyments, as well as through the sumptuousness of Babette's feast. This divine reality of both the spiritual and material blessings cannot be better contained than in the Holy Eucharist, where Christ is present both spiritually and materially. And this divine feast is for all people. As Jesus tells us,

“when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed...”

On this Feast of Corpus Christi, may we be inspired by the richness of God's love in feeding us the Body and Blood of Christ and know that God is truly “with us” in spirit and in truth. This divine love should energize and motivate us to follow the model of the Eucharist in all of our corporate life: we pray for the poor, and we also ought to feed them and clothe them; we pray for the sick, and we also ought

to visit them and care for them; we promise to strive for the justice and dignity of all human beings, and we also ought to make that a reality in our common life and in our public life.

Sisters and brothers, we are the Body of Christ. May God grant us the grace to be ambassadors of God's love to the world!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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