

Corpus Christi
John 6:47-58

The Hidden Feast*

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Church of the Transfiguration
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I always get excited around the month of June. It's the time of year when many Episcopal parishes take part in flamboyant parades in their local communities. Parishioners and clergy alike get dressed up in fabulous outfits. People march through the streets with great joy and excitement. Sometimes the bystanders watching the festivities are scandalized by all the excesses and can't believe what they are seeing. But a good time is had by all.

I am talking, of course, about the annual Corpus Christi procession in many Anglo-Catholic parishes. You would be forgiven, of course, if you thought I was referring to LGBT Pride – which, by the way, is next weekend; more about that later. The Corpus Christi procession – complete with canopies, humeral veils, monstrances, copes, and all kinds of liturgical finery – often rivals (and sometimes even exceeds) the fabulousness of any Pride march. But, in some ways, Corpus Christi is also about Pride – specifically, Eucharistic pride, and pride in our liturgical heritage as Anglo-Catholics.

Today, we, like many Anglo-Catholic parishes around the world, celebrate the Feast of Corpus Christi, which means “Body of Christ” in Latin. It is the one feast day in the liturgical calendar that is dedicated exclusively to the Holy Eucharist. Think of it as a joyous version of Maundy Thursday. Although we celebrate the Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharist during Thursday of Holy Week, that day is often overshadowed by the footwashing rite, the stripping of the altar, and the reservation of the Sacrament. On Corpus Christi, we focus solely on the gift of the Body and Blood of our Lord.

The Feast of Corpus Christi is a great paradox. On the one hand, there is a lot of external pageantry and spectacle, particularly with communities that honor this day with the exposition and benediction of the blessed Sacrament, as well as with grand liturgical processions.

In Toledo, Spain, for example, the annual Corpus Christi procession involves the parading through the city of a monstrance that is over ten feet tall – almost twice as tall as I am! – and that weighs over four hundred pounds. The monstrance, which holds the consecrated host, sits on its own giant float and is made out of nearly 6,000 pieces of gold and silver. It was crafted in the sixteenth century by the greatest metalworker of the day.

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But on the other hand, Corpus Christi is the antithesis of pageantry and spectacle. In some ways, it is the quintessential hidden feast. Let me tell you what I mean by that. The feast is hidden in at least three ways.

First, Corpus Christi is hidden in the Episcopal liturgical calendar. If you look at the calendar of the church year at the beginning of the Book of Common Prayer, you will not see this feast listed anywhere. Although Corpus Christi is traditionally celebrated on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday – or transferred to the following Sunday, which is what we do – it has been missing from the official Anglican liturgical calendars since the Reformation.

Second, Corpus Christi is hidden in our liturgical books. There is no collect of the day or official readings for this feast day. Instead, we use the generic collect “Of the Holy Eucharist.” We don’t have a bulletin insert today because the Episcopal publishing house doesn’t print an insert for Corpus Christi. Even the beautiful rite of Benediction, which we will celebrate today at the end of mass, is hidden from our liturgical books. There is no such rite in the Book of Common Prayer or even in the Book of Occasional Services. (By the way, Fr. Platt tells me that Transfiguration was one of the very first Episcopal parishes to celebrate Benediction, going back to the 1890s under our second rector, Fr. George Clarke Houghton.)

Third, Corpus Christi is hidden in our liturgical history. The feast was not something that was established during apostolic times. In fact, it did not come into existence until the 13th century, when a cloistered nun from Belgium – Juliana of Liège – had a vision about the need for a feast day that solely honored the Holy Eucharist. Although the feast day became extremely popular in the late Middle Ages, it was abolished during the English Reformation because of its association with papist practices. However, it was resurrected during the Oxford Movement of the 19th century and the rise of Anglo-Catholicism.

And so we celebrate the quintessential hidden feast on this day. The theme of hiding is actually perfect for Corpus Christi. After all, what we celebrate is the hiding of the almighty and omnipotent God – creator of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen – in a small disc of unleavened bread. As an Oxford scholar, Miri Rubin, wrote in her book *Corpus Christi*, the entire religious system of the late Middle Ages focused on a ritual, veiled in mystery, which “turned bread into flesh – a fragile, small, wheaten disc into God.”

Indeed, theologians through the centuries have noted that the Eucharist is actually about deception. That is, all but one of our senses are deceived. We may think that we are seeing, smelling, tasting, and touching bread and wine. But in fact, we are encountering the very Body and Blood of Jesus Christ – the real presence of Christ – at the altar, albeit in hidden form. Only our hearing is not deceived. The words of institution, which we hear in today’s epistle reading and which we will hear later at the high altar, are true. “This is my Body.” “This is my Blood.”

As Jesus tells us in today's gospel passage from John, he is the "bread of life." Unlike the manna that came down from heaven for the Israelites in the Wilderness, Jesus is the "living bread" that will lead to eternal life. Those who eat his flesh and drink his blood will live because of him. What you and I encounter at the Eucharistic table is, in fact, the Bread of Heaven, and the Cup of Salvation.

By the way, our eucharistic theology is also hidden. As Episcopalians, we have a unique perspective on the Eucharist. The Roman Catholics believe in the doctrine of transubstantiation, which explains in philosophical terms how the accidents of bread and wine are literally changed into the substance of the Body and Blood of Christ during mass. The Reformed Church, on the other hand, believes in memorialism, which insists that the eucharist is simply a memorial of the Last Supper and that nothing at all is changed during mass.

As Episcopalians, we are located somewhere in the middle of this spectrum. We believe in real presence. That is, we can say with confidence that Christ Jesus is really and truly present with us in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood. Yet exactly what happens at mass remains hidden as a mystery.

But back to Corpus Christi. I believe that the larger significance of the feast is this. If Christ is hidden in a small disc of unleavened bread – and if we take the doctrine of the incarnation seriously – then it follows that Christ must also be hidden elsewhere in creation. And so it is our job, as disciples of Christ and proud heirs to the Anglo-Catholic tradition, to find him – wherever he might be. I like to think of it as a divine game of "Where's Waldo?"

John Henry Newman, one of the founders of the Oxford Movement, preached a powerful sermon in 1834 called "Christ Hidden from the World." In it, Newman stated that Christ is never where we expect to find him. Rather, Newman asserted that "[Christ] is a hidden Saviour. . . . He is secret. . . . He has made the poor, weak, and afflicted, tokens and instruments of His Presence." This is why so many Anglo-Catholics in the 1800s ministered to the inner cities and slums of London and New York. The Body of Christ can never be limited only to smells and bells.

Newman's words ring just as true today as they did over 180 years ago. Where might Christ be hidden in your world? Chances are, he's not where you think he is. Chances are, your senses are being deceived even though you might be looking right at him. Could he be found, for example, in a Pride march? Next Sunday, many of us will be marching or otherwise participating in LGBT Pride after our solemn high mass and cookout. I'll be there, looking for the hidden Christ at Pride. I hope you'll be there too.

May the Feast of Corpus Christi open your eyes to the hidden God all around us. May the Holy Spirit lead you to the real presence of Christ – particularly among the poor, the weak, and the afflicted. And may you always be nourished by the Body of Christ, wherever it may be hidden from the world.