

St Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London EC2V 6AU

High Mass on the feast of Corpus Christi

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I had the pleasure - although some of you may wince at the idea - to spend most of the final year of my theological training at a university in Germany. A welcome escape from the repetition of three years living and worshipping in community, I was awash in a veritable sea of German beer, German sausage and the odd bit of German Protestant theology! The specific city I studied in was Halle, in the old East German Republic, and somewhere that (by virtue of being his birthplace) lays claim to Georg Friedrich Haendel, despite British claims to the contrary.

But it also lays claim to a rather interesting church history, along with the other churches of the old East Germany. For it was in late 1989, that the Protestant churches of the GDR were widely seen as having played an important role in the overthrow of the communist-led government. In these heartlands of Luther and of Reformation, the church challenged the all-powerful atheist state, acted as the 'church for others' and was widely recognised for leading the revolutionary movement. The churches were a unique intermediary and were thanked immediately following the fall of the Berlin Wall. And yet, thanks in some part to overblown revelations of Stasi infiltration and amalgamation into West German structures (where money called the shots)... the churches of East Germany, full at the end of 1989, had all but emptied a year later.

And yet the Christians of the East had developed a credible theology of 'Church within Socialism', something of value for the rest of Christianity in Europe. It was an insight into a serving church, that accepted exclusion by the state and yet avoided retreat into a private religious sphere. In our Gospel reading, Jesus gives his flesh in the Eucharist for the life of the world. And it is Jesus who stresses the mutual abiding of the believer and himself. In the Eucharist we see, through the divine gift of flesh and blood, a sign of sacrifice. And we are sent out from here to be living signs of this.

We heard too that for Paul, who in 1 Cor. gives the earliest extant account of the Eucharist, participation in the ritual will 'proclaim the Lord's death'. Against the elitism of certain powerful people, Paul makes clear that 'God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong'. And through participation in the Eucharistic meal, irrespective of power or wisdom, we all proclaim God's greatness and all share in his redemption. It is a perpetuation of the sacrifice of the cross throughout the ages.

And so it was for the church in East Germany, it took a stand and yet was soon forgotten, a sign of strength in weakness and then a sign of sacrifice. One of the real saints of the Protestant church in Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, preached about weakness as the greatest of Christian traits. Christianity is a religion of people with inferiority complexes; it owes its success only to the masses of miserable people whose weakness and misery Christianity has glorified! Rather a bleak outlook and I do wonder where exactly modern 'happy-clappy religion' fits into Bonhoeffer's schema... but I digress. Sacrifice born of care for the weak can be a wholly good thing, but it can also have its dangers. The modern infatuation with cultural victimhood and the need for safe spaces (provided the narrative is agreeable) lacks to my mind any sense of humility. We are to be unforgiving about those who transgress moral standards of the day, all to protect often self-defined victims of cultural hegemony.

But these are now the powerful people, shutting-down opposing views, where the narrative doesn't fit. This is simple condescension, whilst Christianity ought always to seek to voice challenge from a place of weakness.

So what of the Eucharist and of Christ's real presence within the elements of bread and wine on this feast day of Corpus Christi? To keep with the German theme (there's little point in stopping now), we might look to the Lutheran view of such matters. Less radical than many may suspect, Luther saw the presence of Christ in the Eucharist as something of an extension of the Incarnation. The reception of Christ in the Eucharist is a perpetual sign that we are in Christ and Christ is in us. All who are baptized and receive the Body of Christ in the Eucharist are of one body. And at the fraction, that moment where the host is broken, we say together: 'though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread.' When we are sent out, transformed into the one body and knowing that Christ dwells in us and we in him, we can take confidence from the countless examples down the ages of people taking stands and then soon being forgotten. Because for us, our strength is made perfect in weakness. Whatever our shortcomings or failures, when we are aware of our likeness and communion with God, especially here in the reception of body and blood, there we have God with us, there we have God's strength and God's grace. Amen.