

**Lent IV / 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2020+**

**(the first 'private' celebration of the eucharist during the coronavirus outbreak)**

*1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Lk.22:14-20*

*Do this in remembrance of me.*

On the 21<sup>st</sup> March, 1556, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, was burnt at the stake in Oxford on the orders of Queen Mary.

Proof, if proof were needed, that as a church and nation we have been through many strange and turbulent times before.

Thomas Cranmer, whom the Church of England honoured yesterday, would have been pretty appalled at what we are doing today.

Appalled not just that the church is closed – for the first time, we think, since 1208 – bad enough on any measure.

No, appalled that a priest should be standing here celebrating communion by himself, with no community around him. True, there is also a camera-man, but I'm not sure Cranmer would think that made much difference. He would say, like all good Protestants, that entire point of communion is just that: *communion* – community. The words go together for a reason. You can't have communion without the community, without the people not only here but actually eating and drinking the bread and the wine. The eucharist isn't something a priest does on behalf of everyone else, that the rest of the church just watches from afar – we do this *together*. Priests aren't magicians. Communion should be of the people, by the people, for the people.

All that was part of why Cranmer died. And so it became part of our Church of England identity, part indeed of our law: we don't do this. Priests don't celebrate on their own.

So even though today's Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, and all the Bishops have said it's OK, and that in these strange times the usual law doesn't apply, I was a bit uncertain as to whether we should. What I will do today in this empty church is something if not just wrong, then certainly incomplete. Something wounded.

So why do it?

Well, at one level, because it has been done every single Sunday at least since 1208. Every single Sunday bread and wine has been blessed here in remembrance of Jesus. Reformation and Revolution has come; plague and fire and war have come, Hitler came, and every single Sunday the church in Abbots Langley did this. It would be a sorry thing for us to be the generation, and me the priest, that failed. And indeed, remember our faith is that those past generations are all around us, a great cloud of witnesses at every eucharist. The church is empty, but it's not: it's crowded with all those who have gone before, all who wait for us in the Kingdom. The church is never just the people physically present in the building: it's the whole company of God's people, spread out across time and space. That's why we always name Mary, Alban, Lawrence in the prayers – we're one people with them. We do this with them.

And celebrating communion today, even in this wounded fashion, is not only honouring what has gone before us. It is also about saying: we're going on. This virus is not the end of St. Lawrence's, and not the end of Abbots Langley and Bedmond. It is not the end of any of us. Even if coronavirus turns out to be worse than all the worst predictions, even if it was a new Black Death – and we must keep our sense of perspective, because *it is not* – even then it would not be the end. We know what our end is. We know it because of what we do with bread and wine. Our end is communion. It is the beauty and brilliance of life shared perfectly with God and each other. It is love, and joy, and peace. And no virus will take that from us. Nothing can take that from us.

The central words of every eucharist, spoken over the bread and wine, are Jesus' command: 'do this in remembrance of me.' Do this in remembrance of me. When we obey that command, what we do is to remember that whatever is going on right now in the story of our individual lives, of our church and village, of our nation, our common human story – whatever it is, all of it is swept up in the biggest story of them all. The story of the God who loves the world so much that He gave his only Son, so that all of us might end in joy. The sick, the frightened, the lonely, the dead – all the stories, swept up into Jesus, and so swept up into joy. 'Do this in remembrance of me' – take bread, take wine, come hell or high water, and remember that whoever you are and wherever you are, Jesus died for you; Jesus is with you now, and that one glorious day you will end in Him.

I suspect I'll not be the only preacher this week who has been reminded of some tremendous words about the communion, written in 1945 by an English Benedictine monk, Gregory Dix, thinking on that simple phrase: 'do this in remembrance of me':

**Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it, to extreme old age and after it.**

**From the pinnacle of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth.**

**Men have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold;**

**for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; for the proclamation of a dogma or for a good crop of wheat;**

**for the wisdom of the Parliament of a mighty nation or for a sick old woman afraid to die;**

**for a schoolboy sitting an examination or for Columbus setting out to discover America;**

**for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover;**

**in thankfulness because my father did not die of pneumonia;**

**for a village headman much tempted to return to fetich because the yams had failed;**

because the Turk was at the gates of Vienna; for the repentance of Margaret; for the settlement of a strike; for a son for a barren woman; for Captain so-and-so, wounded and prisoner of war; while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheatre; on the beach at Dunkirk;

while the hiss of scythes in the thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church; tremulously, by an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his vows; furtively, by an exiled bishop who had hewn timber all day in a prison camp near Murmansk; gorgeously, for the canonisation of S. Joan of Arc

—one could fill many pages with the reasons why men have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them.

And best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this just to make the *plebs sancta Dei*—the holy common people of God.

Was ever a command so obeyed?

And so, we will obey. We will do this, Sunday after Sunday after Sunday.

The time will come when we do it together again. When we do it in its fullness, when we do it as we should.

But till then, incomplete and imperfect as it is, we do it still.

We do it as a great sign of faith and hope that we know, however the story ends, it ends in Jesus. We end in Jesus. The world ends in Jesus, in beauty and brilliance and joy. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.