

MORE THAN JUST BEING THERE

Genesis 14. 18-20

1 Corinthians 11. 23-26

John 6. 51-58

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

I wonder if you have ever seen that cartoon that portrays a cowboy in the middle of a barren desert, with only the odd cactus nearby, answering his mobile phone, saying, 'I'm completely alone, with no one to talk to'. The joke, of course, is that in answering his phone the cowboy is not completely alone. But perhaps the deeper joke, or the deeper insight, is how far we go not to be alone, for even desert dwellers need the company of others.

This is something that we see all round us. We see it in the lengths people go to, in order to find someone to share their lives and to love them; and in the efforts people make to keep friendships alive. We see it in what men and women have sung about for centuries, the need to be loved by another and the pain when it does not work out.

We see it even in the proliferation of mobile phones, to be able to contact others and be contacted, no matter where we are. We see it in the prayers that people utter; asking not to be left alone by God, but to feel his presence as they journey through life.

Our need not to be alone is a deep one, and has to do with something much more than mere human proximity. A person can feel completely alone in a busy city, and two people can be in a room together without being present to one other in any

meaningful way. Yet people who know that they are cherished might not feel alone, even though their loved one is far away.

What makes the difference is that being present to another in a meaningful way involves some *gift of self*. When you are loved and cherished by another, that person has given something of himself or herself to you; and even a person who listens with compassion to a stranger has given something of himself or herself for that brief time.

It is a Presence of the most meaningful kind, a Real Presence, and a Gift of the most ultimate degree, that we celebrate today on this Feast of Corpus Christi, the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ. Long ago, the presence of God was shown to the people of Israel in the wilderness, when he fed them with manna, gave them water from the rock, and led them to the Promised Land.

Yet the Presence that we celebrate today is of a deeper kind than the one they understood. Our Lord says this is our gospel passage, when he claims that the bread he gives is not like the bread our ancestors ate (for they are dead); but whoever eats the bread he gives will live for ever.

This Presence of Jesus to us is a Presence so intimate that it is appropriate that it is signified and brought about through the consecration of food and drink. Just as food and drink nourish us and become part of us, so Christ nourishes us and becomes part of us too, living in us. Our Lord's gift of himself is total, shown during his life on earth by his giving his life to us by dying on the cross, and by giving us his body and his blood. As a total gift of himself, his Presence to us is therefore 'Presence' in the fullest sense, whole and entire:

‘For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them’.

What this shows to us is that what we celebrate today is not so much the presence of God among men and women in the past, two thousand years ago, when Jesus walked among us. No. Today's Feast is about the here and now. The complete Presence of Christ to us is constant, and shown most powerfully when men and women come together to celebrate the Eucharist. Here, the body and blood of our Lord are consumed by us, transforming us, making us men and women in whom God dwells. And this Presence is not just a reality that exists only when we celebrate the Eucharist; it is carried by us into the world throughout our daily lives.

That is why the Christian faith tells us that we are never alone. Far from it. Even when we feel abandoned by others, God is always with us and is present to us. We are perhaps not so different from the cowboy in the cartoon: we may sometimes think we are completely alone, but we are not, and that is indeed something to celebrate with great joy.

Amen.