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Priest’s Charge

It’s lovely to be here with you this evening as you complete your preparations to be ordained as priests in God’s church tomorrow. Being ordained as a priest is going to bring about in you big changes in lots of different ways. Most practically it will mean that going forward you’ll be able to do three things you haven’t done before. You will be able to preside at Holy Communion. You will be able to absolve people of their sins. And you will be able to offer God’s blessing.

Some people might be inclined to think about these three things as being in the realms of the hyper spiritual. Airy fairy religious stuff that we pious types like getting on with but that have very little to do with the solid material realities of everyday life. I urge you to reject such thinking and rather to understand what you will do as priests as being firmly located in the stuff of existence. In a world where many are now living much of their lives in virtual space, there has never been a time where it’s been more needed to make the case that matter matters. This need is not just about the impacts of the internet. If you look at the international conflicts that are currently raging, the fact that people are material beings located in time and space is increasingly regarded not as a truth to be honoured but as little more than an inconvenience. One that sees people blithely told that they can ‘just’ be relocated from their homelands, instructed to leave their cities. What we do as priests is vital to affirming people’s created material reality in a world where these things can all too easily just be discounted.

You’ve got a big day tomorrow and I’d rather this charge finished before midnight. So this evening I’m going to focus my thinking on the materiality of just one of the three new things you’ll be able to do - the Eucharist. Absolution and blessing will need to wait for another occasion. But for tonight it’s Holy Communion with the question I’d like to ask being - ‘Why does its matter matter?’ Why didn’t Jesus just leave us with an idea we could talk about. Why did he leave behind all the pfaff of insisting that we remember him by holding an actual meal which as priests we need to organise, prepare, help make present in time and space?

Let’s think about words of Madonna. Not the Virgin Mary. The other one. ‘We are living in a material world,’ she sings, ‘And I am a material girl.’ Her song reflects a basic reality of humanity. That we are made out of stuff. You might think that’s pretty darned well obvious and undeniable. And at many levels this is certainly the case. ‘If you prick us do we not bleed’ says the Merchant of Venice who’s only too conscious of his materiality. But it’s also true that throughout human history, and as I’ve already suggested, there have been movements that seek almost to deny the reality that we are single entities made up of bodies, minds and spirits and that would rather drive a wedge between our materiality – these often disappointing, sometimes saggy, medically fallible bodies we live in and the thoughts of our minds, our knowledge, our intellect, understanding and our souls. This goes right back to Greek philosophers like Plato who said that only the rational mind could be trusted because the material body could be tricked. It was pursued by the gnostics who said that the body didn’t matter, only the mind and then only those whose minds had been opened up to particular kinds of understandings. As I’ve already mentioned it’s increasingly the challenge that if who you are is largely mediated by the interactions you have on social media then the body either becomes little more than a vehicle that enables you to press letters on a keyboard and work a mouse or perhaps worse is something that can only be presented in some sort of idealised state – a far cry from the fallible, lumpy, doctors visit requiring reality that most of us have to put up with.

Attractive as the idea of splitting off minds from bodies may be, the reality is that such a notion is not reality. Madonna’s truth is real. ‘We are living in a material world. And I am a material girl.’ Well boy actually. When God made the world, however you understand the truth of that statement, God made the world not just of ideas but of stuff. That became glaciers and buttercups, shoals of mackerel and human beings. We are all material girls and boys. And for Christians, our belief is that when Jesus was born among us, in the incarnation – which literally means ‘*en* carne, in flesh’ – you can’t get much more substantial than that – in the incarnation we believe that God not only made matter, God became matter. In Jesus, his birth and his body, God gracing stuff with a wonder and dignity that it’s almost hard to imagine.

This is what gets expressed when as priests we enable the people of God to celebrate together the Eucharist. In scripture, the greatest meditation on this happens in John Chapter 6 in the context of the feeding of the 5000. Read that text and you’ll see that it is deeply caught up with questions and themes of materiality – of whether we have enough stuff, what we do with stuff when we have it, what it means for God to become stuff and finally how consuming the stuff that is God transforms our live for ever. Simples? No. This is John’s Gospel we’re talking about.

We listened earlier to John’s account. For many of us, our mental image of this is of a very large, terribly jolly picnic set in some kind of national trust Capability Brown designed kind of setting. I don’t think this would have been the reality for those attending at all. The people who were at this miracle came from Galilee – a region of Palestine that was constantly stalked by famine and scarcity. Not only were the people from Galilee, but this miracle happened at an ‘away match’ on the other side of the lake from their home – in Gentile country. So they would have been not only vulnerable to hunger, as they always were, but vulnerable also to threat – they were very much off home turf. So Jesus’ provision of all that food wasn’t just a timely offering to a large group on a nice day out who suddenly got peckish. It was a gift to people who often couldn’t be sure where their next meal was coming from and certainly weren’t that day. Stuff, matter, food for these people wasn’t a matter of preference as it is for almost all of us. It was an existential matter of survival. If you had it, great. If you didn’t, prospects weren’t good.

So the natural thing, you’d imagine, if you had food in the setting of the feeding of the 5000 would be to keep a very tight hold of it. Which is what almost everybody does. The reason they’re hungry is because they’re not sharing what they have. The only person who has the wit to do this is a very, very, very small child who’s open to sharing his packed lunch – a hastily thrown together meal of five barley loaves and two fishes. This action melts hearts and the people discover that together they have more than enough – for all to have as much as they want (very much not their usual experience) and even for there to be leftovers.

‘Great’ everybody thinks. Jesus is the key to establishing a new food economy. They’re so impressed they want to make him king who’ll turf out the ghastly Romans who do very nicely thankyou out of a few people having a lot and everybody else living on the verge of starvation. But Jesus says ‘no’! This wasn’t the point of this miracle at all. The point of the miracle was to experience what it’s like when God’s love, God’s life, God’s power, God’s way, God’s reality becomes manifest in human lives.

Hard though it is for these people, who know only too well what ‘breadline’ means, to hear it, Jesus goes on to tell them ‘it’s not food you need, but the one who has come from God, in whom you will find satisfaction for every craving – material, spiritual, emotional - you’ve ever experienced’. Jesus has a marketing style phrase to put over what he’s trying to help the people understand. ‘I am the bread of life’, he says, ‘Whoever comes to me will never be hungry’.

The focus group he’s gathered around him to test out this slogan doesn’t buy it. Jesus’ audience has real problems getting their heads round this. They can’t see who Jesus is and have great problems dealing with what he has to say about ‘coming down from heaven’ – of God in him having become matter. And then Jesus really turns their mental maps completely upside down. He says to them ‘Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh’.

Which evokes a pretty horrified response form those who hear him. Not unreasonably they say ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’ As a concept this goes against one of the absolute taboos that most societies hold. As Flanders and Swan famously put it ‘Eating people is wrong!’.

Which then leads Jesus to make his point even further. ‘Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you’. The key words here are ‘in you’. For if we are all material girls or boys then if Jesus is to be ‘in us’ then that can’t just be in our heads, in our thought worlds. It has also to be in our bodies, in our matter, in everything that we are. And how does stuff get into our bodies? By what we eat and by what we drink. We eat and drink the Eucharist, in order that Jesus’s life can flow into every part of our life – spiritual, material and bodily – and though us into the life of the whole of creation. We eat and drink so that we can live whole lives, experiencing the whole of Jesus’s life live now. So that, as Jesus says, everything that we are body, mind, soul, spirit, can be raised up, on the last day.

Quite how the mechanics of all this works is another question. At one level, it’s very simple – we just eat and drink. At another level, as you’ll know from all those essays about Reformation arguments concerning the Eucharist that we made you write, well it all gets a bit complicated. Do we eat and drink Jesus through transubstantiation, consubstantiation, memorial or remembrance? Thankfully as Anglicans we seem to have all bases covered on this. If you don’t believe me just think about the words you’ll say to communicants of the host in the Prayer Book’s service of Holy Communion:

Receive the body of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for you. (This is really Jesus).

Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for you and feed on him in your hearts by thanksgiving. (This is a memorial).

Two completely contradictory ideas put over in two concurrent sentences:

While it may be tempting for us to settle these matters through handbags at dawn fought out in the carpark here at Ammerdown you’ll probably be relieved to learn that I’m not going to open up a Reformation style battle this evening. You’ll have to go with what you think the reality is.

But whether we think the Eucharist is really Jesus or not, what I hope you will know, whenever you are at the Eucharist – either as president or among the people of God who celebrate it, that it is that the meal that Jesus gave us is so that all of him can be in all of us, every part of us – every strand of DNA, every passing thought or fancy, every tendon and sinew, every opinion and belief, the lot.

As you’ll know, one of the earliest church fathers, Irenaeus said this – ‘He became all that we are, that we might be saved’. In the Eucharist we might say ‘He enters into every part of who we are, into all of our realities, that every part of us might be saved’.

And not only that he can be in us, but so that we can be in him. All of us, together, who share the one bread. All through Jesus’ life in us, called to live out his life into the world around us – as his body. All of us, called to live out as his body, alongside the bodies of every human being on the planet – the good news that matter matters, that people matter, that creation and all that has been made matters, so much so that God, through his great love for us and for our world sent his only Son so that everyone who lives and believes in him can have eternal life.

When you preside at the Eucharist, this is the truth, the joy, the Gospel that you will carry. And may God bless you and lead you as you do. Amen.