



7 June 2015: St John's the Baptist Pinetown

"...eat my flesh and drink my blood" By Forbes T Maupa ©

Mark 14 vs. 12-16, 22 -26: The institution of the Eucharist

In his little book, *God's Pharmacy*, Herman Uys writes "You are what you eat..." This is a statement that has come to be associated with motivations for weight loss programmes and healthy living routines. It is indeed true that by and large, our bodies reflect what we eat or as Herman Uys goes on to say "what we don't eat" as well. Today we celebrate the feast of Corpus Christi which was meant to be celebrated on the 4th of June this year. It is my intention to talk around the topic of the sacrament called the Holy Eucharist. Corpus Christi is loosely translated to mean the Body of Christ but I can't help but notice the close resemblance between corpus and corpse. We need to take note that from biblical and Anglican teaching the two basic and "compulsory" sacraments are baptism and Holy Communion.

A few weeks ago, I attended a requiem mass in a parish I used to be rector in some years back. We had developed an attitude of "open table" in that parish but as we all know, we rectors have the tendency to do whatever we want and change things around when we get into parishes. When it was time for receiving communion (at the requiem mass), the invitation went something like this, "now it's time for communion, if you do not receive in your church, do not come forward, do not test the Lord in case he strikes you down, do not tempt the Lord..." I decided not to receive communion that day because I didn't want to eat the body of such a scary Lord who goes about scaring and striking people down. Maybe some of us here have been to services where we felt excluded for one reason or the other, so let's try and deal with exclusion from Holy Communion. I will use three blocks in discussing this topic and these are our Anglican tradition, Canons and Constitution and mystery. I use the word mystery from the words "*Almighty and eternal God, we thank you for feeding us in these holy mysteries with*

the body and blood of your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ..."¹ All three are based on biblical interpretation in one way or the other. I want to make a claim here that I am quite familiar with Canons and Anglican tradition but I am extremely challenged (as should all of us) when it comes to the mystery aspect. What I will do therefore is to make clear what the law (canons) say and why they might be saying that, mention some different Anglican practices around the Eucharist and then make suggestions on the mystery aspect.

Tradition: What we celebrate as the Holy Eucharist comes from the Gospel narratives and one of the Pauline epistles of which Mark 14 vs. 22-25 read today is one of them². We endeavour as Christians to keep as close as possible to the words Jesus used as reported by the evangelists around the institution of the Eucharist. You will take note that Jesus "instituted" the Eucharist with his disciples and all of us were not there. It is clear that there were no children, no people who were physically challenged (he probably would have healed them anyway), no South Africans, no Americans and so on and so forth. I highlight this point to ensure that we do not use the absence of children at the institution of the Eucharist to suggest that they are not welcome. That would mean that all groups of people who weren't represented on that day should not partake as well. Secondly, Jesus "broke bread" around a table and not an altar like we do. As we heard from Hebrews today, we have maintained the use of the altar from the 1st testament to continue with the theology of sacrifice thereby clearly expressing the notion of Jesus being both sacrifice and high priest. Thirdly, Jesus used real wine (not diluted) and real bread (not wafers) and we have made some changes to this and some even go as far as using grape juice.

Canons: ACSA (then CPSA), resolved in the 1979 Provincial synod that "**baptized children**" should be admitted to communion and the Services for Parish Use 1993 has the form of service to be used for that. It was further resolved that the age for such admission would be six (6) and that hasn't been reviewed to date. I love the suggestion

¹ APB 1989 PG. 129 section 87

² Matthew 26 vs. 26-29, Luke 22 vs. 14-23, John 6 vs. 43-59 (though it doesn't refer to institution) and 1 Corinthians 11 vs. 17-34

in this booklet that godparents/sponsors maybe present to present children for their first communion which would mean that we insist on godparents not disappearing immediately after baptism. Also this service of admission brings the same excitement and anticipation that services of Baptism and Confirmation bring with them. If there is so much hype about Confirmation then surely there must be much more around First Communion! Since the decision was made in 1979, it has taken quite long for the message to get to most of us and some Anglican parishes wait until confirmation (16 years of age) to allow young people to receive communion. The age of 6 was suggested because it was felt that at that stage, children have at least the ability to at least comprehend what is happening and can be taught on how to receive with some dignity. I will address the issue of comprehension a little more when I deal with mystery. As someone who loves a little bit of order and solemnness at the altar rail, it is the teaching aspect to our children on how to receive that lacks and quite a few of our children become confused, play with the wafers and or even unruly at the altar rail. I would make here a suggestion that children must always be accompanied by parents or guardians and where teaching on altar decorum is not offered, it is the responsibility of the parent/guardian to teach their children at home on how to receive. After all, we teach our children how to eat properly and behave around the table. Talking about parents/guardians; is it ok for parents/guardians to prevent their children from receiving communion and my personal response is, **Yes**. I say yes for one simple reason, parents/guardians already play the yes/no role in the lives of their children in all other aspects of their lives and assist them with choices until they can make their own and so it wouldn't be appropriate for us to limit parents on what to allow or not allow their children to do when it comes to church. What the church can only do is offer guidelines and suggestion. I also personally prefer that children receive the "body" only and not the "blood" because of the alcohol content in the blood which has led some Christians to using grape juice. Yes, it is the blood of Christ but it is still alcoholic and many a stories have been told about how some people learnt how to drink at church in the name of the Eucharist. For different theological reasons which we won't discuss here,

the Roman Catholics still insist on only the priests receiving the blood. Some of you might be aware that there is a current debate in the Anglican Church on what to do with alcohol and children and recovering alcoholics. Part of the altar decorum also applies to adults making sure that we don't bump into each other or push each other around. Some of you would remember the tradition that if blessed was spilled on clothing then those clothes would be burnt and if blessed wafers fall then the priest must consume them. It must also be mentioned here that after receiving it is always advised to go back to the pew for meditation or prayer and not use it as an opportunity to whisper and disturb others who might want to pray. Commotion around the Lord's Table isn't something new, Paul in his letter to the Corinthians dealt with such when people were getting drunk and "disrespecting" the solemnity of the table. Order remains necessary. Sadly, in the past refusing people communion has been used as a form of punishment especially for young girls who had fallen pregnant without being married. Surely, Holy Eucharist should be a means of healing and recovery and not punishment. As many as are broken, should come forward to Jesus whose "body was broken" for them! Let us also note that no priest has the right in the Anglican Church to suspend anyone from Holy Communion, only the bishop may do that. And all must receive as often as they can so that we can become that which we eat, more like Jesus.

Mystery: if what we are celebrating is a "holy mystery", none of us can claim to fully comprehend what it is all about. In the face of mystery, we are all children and as such no one can refuse the other permission. This is not to suggest that the church should therefore become a place of "we do whatever we want because no one knows". As any other community of humanity, there are certain rules governing "voluntary association" as it is called in our Anglican Constitution and sometimes we get to those situations where we might say if you don't like it here, try elsewhere. Arguing for mystery doesn't mean we should stop learning or teaching simply because "no one will ever really know". To do this would mean we should stop learning and teaching on anything to do with God because all of it is mystery, we should endeavour to do what we can with our limited resources. Having said that, I personally advocate for an open table for all including all

our visitors baptised or not. Come and partake in this holy mystery and be what you eat and drink. If indeed we believe that through our prayers of consecration, the simple bread and wine we bless become the Corpus Christi then let us all come and eat and drink so that we can be more like the one we are eating, Jesus! With what solemnity and prayerful reflection we can master, what we have is the Lord's table and not mine, it is Jesus' body and blood and not mine so what I offer are suggestions.