

Sunday Homily

THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST (CORPUS CHRISTI)

6 JUNE 2021

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK II

"This is my body...
This is my blood."

Illustration

Ross McGinnis was born in June 1987, and brought up in Knox, north of Pittsburgh, in the United States. He was a Boy Scout, loved playing sports and hoped to become a car mechanic. At the age of seventeen, he joined the army for the training to help him reach that goal, as well as to serve his country.

His unit, the 26th Infantry Regiment, went out to Iraq in August 2006. Ross served as a gunner in a military vehicle, a Humvee, patrolling a notoriously violent area outside Baghdad. On 4th December 2006, a grenade was thrown from a rooftop at the vehicle, and it fell into the hatch. Ross yelled, "Grenade", and was about to jump out, as he was supposed to do. However, he realised that his four colleagues did not have time to escape, so, making a split-second decision, he threw himself on top of the grenade. The explosion blew the doors off the Humvee, but, apart from Ross, there were no other casualties. In June 2008, Ross McGinnis was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor, America's highest award for valour.

Gospel Teaching

When Ross McGinnis used his body as a shield to protect his friends, he was giving up his entire being, his life with all its potential. His was a true sacrifice of love, a holy – and truly human – action. Jesus Christ was the person in history most truly human, and what Ross did at that moment was a Christ-like act, and so a fundamentally human one.

When Jesus died on the cross, he too was using his body as the shield to save his friends – that includes us, and the whole of fallen creation. He put his body between us and everything that makes us inhuman, all that brings destruction to the world. It was not just his words that Jesus gave in service, not just the ability to heal, to perform miracles, to teach with authority. He also served through giving up his body, his being, his life, that we may receive his body, his being, his life. In his body he gave concrete expression to the love of God for us. And in the Eucharist he gives us himself as real food to build us into his body. This is why the Church, the body of Christ, today celebrates and delights in this feast of the Body and Blood of Christ.

Application

We are not a people who exist in a spiritual, other-worldly environment. We are human beings of flesh and blood, with our feet on the ground in this world. We do not live in and for ourselves, in some kind of abstract, interior, closed world. With our bodies, we relate to the world and to other people around us. And now, since the death and resurrection of Christ, we live in a new way in relation to the world and to other people.

We live as members of a eucharistic community, a people formed, grounded and fed by the Eucharist, a people in communion with God and with each other. We need food for our bodies, in the physical form of bread and wine, as well as in the spiritual form of the words of God spoken to us in scripture, in the liturgy and in private prayer. For we are a unity, body and soul, just as the eucharistic host is the body and blood, the soul and divinity of Christ, in which he is really, wholly and entirely present.

When we receive Christ in communion, it is the whole Christ we are receiving – the being, the life, the fullness. By taking his life into our own we are allowing him to take us into his life, the life of the most fully human person who has ever lived. That has consequences in the here and now.

Instead of using the expression “It’s only human” for some lapse of standards, we can now pray to become more fully human. For only when we are conformed to the humanity of Jesus are we truly human. If we are fully conformed to Christ we cannot be petty, cruel, spiteful, malicious – or anything else that reduces the stature of that humanity. We may even be willing to give up our own lives for others. May we honour, revere and love the sacrament that builds up our humanity by conforming us more and more to the body of Christ.

Sunday Homily

11TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

13 JUNE 2021

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK III

"Once it is sown it grows into
the biggest shrub of them all."

Illustration

In 1973 E.F. Schumacher published his famous book called *Small is Beautiful*, with the subtitle *Economics as if People Mattered*, in which he examined the economic structure of the Western world. The book became highly popular and sold over 700,000 copies. Its title became a catchphrase and was applied to all sorts of things besides economics. The phrase was also used to imply that, because something was small, it didn't mean that it was either unimportant or without influence – quite the contrary.

It is certainly a phrase that could be used in relation to the shepherd boy David in the Bible and especially in the famous story of his defeat of the giant Goliath. Down the centuries countless painters have shown the small but sturdy David, armed only with a sling and five smooth stones, going out to meet the Philistine Goliath. Many have shown the wounded Goliath, felled by a stone to the forehead, lying on the ground, and the boy David drawing Goliath's own sword to cut off his head. Others have portrayed David either holding up Goliath's head or carrying it to Jerusalem in triumph. From the outset, however, David himself made it clear that it was God who gave him the victory.

Small may not always be beautiful, but it is frequently either impressive or effective. This is often the case with people who are small of stature. It could be said to be true not only of David, but also for example of Mother Teresa or St Paul, whose very name in Greek, Paulos, means "small". St Paul may have been small, but the effectiveness of his preaching and writing was enormous. It largely accounts, in the beginning, for the spread of the Gospel throughout the Roman empire.

Gospel Teaching

In today's Gospel Jesus first speaks of how the kingdom of God grows through the activity of providence, like seed scattered on the land. Although people may sow and scatter the seed, it is not they who enable the seed to grow in the earth, but God. Jesus goes on to compare the kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed, which, though he calls it "the smallest of all the seeds on earth", grows into the largest shrub that exists. In other words, one cannot judge by the initial size of anything, least of all the kingdom, how it will ultimately turn out at the final harvest.

Just as the physical size of a person does not bear any relation to that person's quality, or influence on the world, so the kingdom of God is not dependent on such things. Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like the small mustard seed, which, once it has grown to maturity, will have "the birds of the air" coming to find shelter in its shade. So the nations of the world will be gathered together into the kingdom.

St Mark tells us that, whereas Jesus spoke to the crowds who came to hear him only in parables, he was careful to explain their meaning to his disciples when they were alone. Teaching and explanation have always been vital if we are to comprehend the full meaning of the parables.

Application

There are times when we might feel discouraged by the slow growth or even apparent decline of the kingdom of God throughout the world. In the West, for example, there are whole areas that have become completely secular in outlook. If we despair about this, however, we have forgotten that the growth of God's kingdom does not depend on us. It is God who is the sower; and it is God's providence, not our efforts alone, that enables the kingdom to grow.

On our own it's easy for us to feel dispirited, disillusioned, or simply confused. The Gospels reveal that the disciples in Jesus' day often felt the same. They needed the teaching of Jesus to help them begin to understand the kingdom. It is one of the tasks of the Church today to help interpret the parables of Jesus to us, just as he once explained them to his disciples.

Even if the kingdom may have the appearance of being small and insignificant, Jesus tells us that like the mustard seed it will eventually become large and will contain people from all the nations of the world. We are called to be a people of hope and to trust in the providence of God.

Sunday Homily

12TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

20 JUNE 2021

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK IV

Who can this be?
Even the wind and the sea obey him."

Illustration

We underestimate the sea at our peril. One day it can be so calm and flat that we are convinced we can cross its immensity in a rowing boat. The next day it can be whipped up to such boiling fury that even taking a step near its breakers may have us swept away and drowned. Down through the ages we have fought it, befriended it, feared it, even loved it. Island nations appreciate the security it offers them, but it still needs to be kept in check as it gnaws away at cliffs and beaches.

We have learnt to understand its ways through long experience, and tried to contain its storms and tantrums. But we are human. We forget, and we allow our hopes of material gain or economy to undermine the wisdom of the past. In some of the great flood disasters of recent years, for example the tsunami in eastern Asia and the hurricanes on the American Atlantic seaboard, the coastal defences had been weakened. The mango swamps had been removed to enable tourist beaches to be built. The ramparts protecting the land below sea level had not been soundly maintained. But the sea does not forget and it takes advantage of every weakness, whether of land or shipping. It just awaits its moment, perhaps encouraged by global warming or perhaps just following the natural rhythms of the tides and seasons. We ignore its immense powers and resources at our peril.

Gospel Teaching

There is not much love for the sea in the Old Testament. It is its unruly nature that is uppermost in the awareness of the writers. At the very beginning of Genesis the sea is identified with the formless void of the deep, and it is only through the action of the creator God that the heavens and earth are formed and the deep is held in check. The same theme is taken up by the book of Job. When the Lord wishes to answer Job's questions about his suffering, he begins by contrasting Job's finite lot with God's own superhuman powers. The Lord's first illustration is of how he has put bounds on the sea and controlled it. The message is quite clearly that only God can control the sea, as had been shown in the parting of the Red Sea as the Israelites made their way to the promised land.

But in the Gospel story Jesus controls the sea. The language of the story reflects that of the book of Job. The sea is told to be quiet and calm, and its accomplice the wind is rebuked and drops its force in obedience to the command. But Jesus is a

human being. How can it be that he has such powers? Once again the question on the lips of both the disciples and others is: "Who can this be?" What sort of man is this who by his own power does what only God can do? This is the scandalous question that runs through this part of Mark's Gospel. What are we to make of such a man?

Application

A big question for any sailor is: "Do you trust your skipper?" If you don't, you should not be entrusting your life to this person. Sometimes it can seem that we have no choice. On the whole, we don't choose our employers. They choose us. In the old days sailors were press-ganged into employment, and we may still feel the same has happened to us. Trying to survive bad management is no easy matter.

In addition to whatever skills we can bring to bear on changing such situations, we are also asked to find the deeper centre in ourselves. In the midst of our sense of being overwhelmed by the depths of life's problems, Christ offers us a way forward. We put our trust in him. Elsewhere he will offer his disciples the inner peace that the world cannot give, and here we are asked to let go of our fears and accept that same gift. It does not mean that we will not experience life's storms and challenges. It does mean that we will be able to ride such encounters like a good sailor, accumulating the wisdom that centres us on what matters, what is true. Even when Jesus seems asleep in the boat, our trust in him can bring about the quietening of the wind and the calming of the sea. We need not be afraid.

Sunday Homily

13TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

27 JUNE 2021

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK I

"Do not be afraid; only have faith."

Illustration

In August 2005 Pope Benedict XVI made a special visit to Germany on the occasion of the World Youth Day, held in Cologne. In a scene reminiscent of Jesus at the Sea of Galilee, the Holy Father spoke to the throng of young people from a boat, moored beside the banks of the River Rhine. On the following day he spoke to them again at the Sunday Mass at Marienfeld. On that occasion he spoke about the power of Jesus to change the world.

A crowd of around one million young people had gathered for that Mass, and they listened willingly as the Pope addressed their concerns for a renewed and better world. While nation fights against nation, and while terror threatens to engulf us all, Pope Benedict pointed to the love of Jesus and to a different way of being in the world.

At the Last Supper Jesus faced the hour of his own death, and transformed that violent deed into his own act of love. By giving himself to us in bread and wine Jesus makes his death into our life. He makes his suffering into our joy. As the Holy Father put it, "Death as such is already conquered from within, the resurrection is already present in it. Death is, so to speak, mortally wounded, so that it can no longer have the last word."

As Pope Benedict said on an earlier occasion, in the first days of his pontificate, "The world is redeemed by the crucified, not by those who crucify."

Gospel Teaching

When Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee and came to its western shore, he found a great crowd of people there to welcome him. They, too, were a willing crowd, eager to listen to the young preacher of Nazareth. But very quickly the demands of life make themselves felt. A desperate father, eager for the welfare of his daughter, comes and begs for help. An equally desperate woman, weary of medical interventions and failures, seeks out the healer of Galilee. They are looking for someone to change their worlds, from sickness to health, from death to life. They recognise in Jesus someone who has the power to change the world.

Jesus responds to these requests, no questions asked. It is God's will that everyone should be saved, that all should be well. The years of weariness that the woman has endured are brought to an end. Her suffering is over. Her story is

an inspiration for all who struggle over time with personal sorrow. Seek out the Lord of life, and pray to be well. "If I can touch even his clothes..."

When Jesus turns to help the desperate father, he is met with news of death, the death of the little girl and the death of hope. To the grief-stricken father he gives words of life: "Do not be afraid; only have faith." What Jesus does then transforms a world of darkness into glorious light. "Little girl, I tell you to get up."

The people at the bedside are overcome with astonishment. Jesus has restored a girl to life, yes, but something more is happening here. Jesus is showing us something of his own identity. He is Lord of life. He is also showing us something of the mystery of the world to come: that death is not the end. There is something greater, something stronger than death, and it is here in the person of this preacher of Galilee.

Application

When Jesus was nailed to the cross, people taunted him with the comment, "He saved others, but he cannot save himself." When death came to Jesus, and violent death at that, he was not saved from its torment. But he was saved from its seeming power. God raised him high, and gave him the name of "the Lord of life".

Let us then approach this Lord of life. In the midst of the crowd, like that woman of long ago, let us humbly ask to be free of our afflictions. When the death of a loved one comes close to us, let us not be afraid. Look to the Lord of life, and have faith. And like the crowd that welcomed Jesus to the shore, let us set ourselves to listen to the Lord, and to follow him.

When darkness threatens to engulf us, hear the voice of the Lord, saying, "The world is not dead, but asleep." Let us set ourselves to wake the world to the love of God.