

## WE LOVE THINE ALTAR LORD

Today is one of my favourite days of the year,  
or – at least – it usually is:  
the feast of Corpus Christi,  
When we give thanks for the Holy Eucharist,  
And when we have our Open Air Mass  
(every year blessed with almost too much sunshine!)  
and a gorgeous Choral Evensong and Benediction  
The nave scattered with rose petals.  
Both services witnessing to our Christian faith,  
in the presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar,  
however we might understand what that means.

But this Corpus Christ isn't like any other, it isn't normal,  
And neither of these services can take place.  
So how can we give thanks for something that we can't be present at?  
For bread and wine that we can't receive?  
Many of you have told me how very hard it is  
to be separated from the Sacrament.

One person said:

*'Since my Confirmation 73 years ago I have received Communion at least once a week'*

And that has been *'the most difficult thing'* about the lockdown.

But we can turn this pain into a blessing.

As someone else said to me:

*'I miss church so much. I never realised how important it was to me.'*

This time can show us how much we are missing  
and increase our desire to draw near to God.

By coincidence,

Today is also the day when we are allowed to reopen the church for personal prayer.

Just as being unable to come to Mass has been a privation,

So also being unable even to come into church has been a hardship.

Because this place is essential to our Christian faith.

This is the place where you have prayed.

It is where we come together to rejoice, to grieve, to give thanks,

And the accumulation of all these prayers over many years makes it more than special,

It makes it holy.

As we will sing later in this service:

*'We love the place O God,  
Wherein thine honour dwells.  
The joy of thine abode,  
All earthly joy excels'*

A church building,

far from being a burden,

Is one of the greatest gifts we have –

not only for those who worship here,

but for everyone in the parish.

This building points to the eternal on both the inside and the out.

On the outside it is a visible sign in bricks and mortar

of Jesus Christ the Word-made-flesh, God-with-us.

It stands here to say that life is more than we think it is,

And something really matters.

On the inside it helps to make faith more real.

We can all pray at home

And so we should,

But here –

In this place –

With its beauty and its peace,

Prayer comes more naturally

And God feels nearer.

In fact, he **IS** nearer.

There is one very simple reason for that.  
You'll find it just beyond the High Altar,  
(right behind where I'm standing)  
Where a candle burns night and day,  
to indicate the presence of the Blessed Sacrament –  
The bread and wine consecrated at Mass  
As the Body and Blood of Christ,  
Kept in the Tabernacle  
For communion of the sick  
And the devotion of the faithful.  
It is Christ present and with us,  
In the Mass  
In this community,  
in our lives.

As the hymn goes on to say:

*'We love thine altar, Lord;  
O what on earth so dear!  
For there, in faith adored,  
We find thy presence near.*

It is the Eucharist  
that brings us closer to Christ  
than anything else on earth.  
For as St Pauls says in writing to the Corinthians:  
*'I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you,  
That the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed  
took a loaf of bread,  
and when he had given thanks,  
he broke it and said,  
'This is my body that is for you.  
Do this in remembrance of me'*

Did you know,  
this passage is the oldest description of the Eucharist?  
And this written account in Corinthians is a reminder of something Paul has  
already told them verbally -  
So it predates the letter itself,  
which was written as early as 50AD,  
much earlier than the Gospels,  
so these words are closer to Jesus himself than almost anything else in  
scripture.

When Saint Paul writes to the Corinthians  
He is recalling them to an understanding of the Eucharist  
as something given to us by Christ that directly connects us to him.  
This is also the purpose of the feast of Corpus Christi,  
A purpose *enhanced* by our current situation  
In which we cannot share it together,  
But we can renew our desire to receive Him.

For every time the Mass takes place,  
No matter how simple or how splendid the occasion,  
When bread is broken  
And wine is poured,  
And we hear those words:  
*'This is my body'*  
*'This is my blood'*  
The centuries fall away,  
And we are back in that Upper Room with Christ.  
He is present to us  
And we are present to him.

And although the Sacrament is always in the Tabernacle,  
Today, on this feast of Corpus Christi,  
it will be displayed on the Altar all day for your personal devotion.  
By showing the Sacrament in this way,  
We can offer our prayers to Christ in his Sacramental presence more directly.  
It gives a focus to our prayers,  
And draws us more fully into the mystery of his Body and Blood,  
Which as St Paul says  
*'proclaims the Lord's death until he comes'*

We long to celebrate the Mass together again,  
But as this verse reminds us,  
We long just as much for the day  
When Sacraments shall cease,  
When we shall no longer see Christ under signs and symbols,  
But face to face in the glory of heaven.  
Until then, the Eucharist proclaims his death,  
Or to put it another way,  
his total self-offering of love,  
for you and for me,  
and for everyone.