

Revd Michael Burns
Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon :
August 12, 2018 ~ “Eleventh Sunday of Trinity”

A question for you to ponder – can you recall your first memory of the use of bread in a church service? Like many, my church upbringing was a bit of a hybrid. When I was a youngster I went to the local congregational church – because that was where the cubs met – and the communion service was only very occasional. Then when I went to an Anglican church it was Matins as the main service. It was only when I started at boarding school at the age of 12 that I became truly aware of the Communion service. In those days, in the late 60’s and early 70’s, the church was beginning to experiment away from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer to Series 1, 2 and 3 – as those early new services were imaginatively labelled. So for me my first real memory of the use of bread was at the weekly School Communion Service – attended voluntarily by about a third of the school – some 250 boys. What I vividly remember is the clever way in which the numbers of wafers required was counted. As we entered the Chapel, each of us would pick up a wafer from a dish and place it in the ciborium – so that exactly the right number of wafers would be consecrated. Of course that couldn’t possibly happen today – for health and safety reasons alone – but then it made perfect sense and was done with great reverence and care. I clearly remember this symbol of each of us quietly offering our bread in this deceptively simple way.

One of the many ways in which the Communion Service has changed over the years has been to include the bringing up of the bread and wine from amongst the people – which is why the offertory procession is such an important visual symbol in our liturgy. Ordinary bread wafers and wine are brought up from amongst the congregation to be blessed and broken and shared – and we, the people of God, then leave our seats and move to kneel together at the altar to receive the mysteries of bread and wine, the body and blood. We can

ponder and discuss and debate this mystery, as did the Jews in the time of Jesus – but for us it is surely enough to recall the words of Jesus ‘I am the bread of life – and whoever believes in me has eternal life’. Wherever Communion is celebrated, God is present through Jesus. When I take the sacrament to people in their home, in hospital or in a nursing home – something special happens. It is the most extraordinarily moving thing to see older people, many with their faculties impaired, instinctively placing their hands out to receive the body of Christ as they have done for decades before.

One final thing to remember – when we kneel to receive communion or be given God’s blessing, we do it alongside our fellow Christians. We may know some but we won’t know everyone. But the impact is the same. For the last few months, we’ve been joined Sunday by Sunday by Emanuele, an Italian student here to learn English. After going back home last week, he wrote this to me: “Although I was a visitor from overseas it was like living in my small town. I’ve seen a fantastic community at Christ Church. When the first day I came for the service I was really surprised because 3 or 4 people came up and asked me something. To be honest, this is something that for us in Italy is pretty strange and I really appreciated it. What is more, there was a fantastic atmosphere particularly thanks to the magnificent choir and organist (I love music and it was amazing). I send my best wishes to your community”. For Emanuele it is clear that the community of Christians in his home town in Italy are doing exactly the same as are the community of Christians in this community where he has lodged temporarily for these past few weeks.

One of the definitions of the word ‘Community’ is a group of people having something in common. For us we are all striving to live out our lives as Christians, sharing in common the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth – and following his command ‘Do this in remembrance of me’. So we give thanks for our community joining together as the people of God, sharing in our Communion together.

To receive the bread and wine or to receive God’s blessing at the altar is the most precious gift, truly the pearl beyond all price – and for that, thanks be to God.