A Sermon

Preached

in the Chapel

of

ALL SOULS COLLEGE

by

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on

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Corpus Christi. The Body of Christ.

Those here present may well wonder whether this is a wisely-chosen theme for today's sermon in the All Souls Chapel. 'Has the preacher,' you may ask, 'Has the preacher confused this College with the other one over the road?' And haven't we just missed the feast of Corpus Christi? Whereas Catholic churches in Oxford celebrate the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of the Lord today, College Chapels that celebrate this feast have already done so a few days ago, at its right and proper time, the Thursday after Trinity Sunday.

But, a more serious reason for hesitation about my theme is that Corpus Christi may call to mind contentious Reformation and Counter-Reformation disputes about the Holy Eucharist. At the core of those arguments is the doctrine of the Real Presence: the idea that Jesus Christ is really present, body, soul and divinity, in the Blessed Sacrament. According to the Council of Trent, 'the whole Christ is contained, *vere, realiter et substantialiter*, truly, really and substantially, in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist under the appearance of sensible things.' Hence the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, by which Christ is thought to become substantially present under the species of bread and wine. The Book of Common Prayer, on the contrary, protests that transubstantiation 'cannot be proved by Holy Writ; but is repugnant to the plain words of scripture'. According to the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, 'The Body of Christ is given, taken and eaten in the Supper, only after an Heavenly and spiritual manner.' For many, then, the question is not *whether* Christ is really present in the Eucharist, but *how*, in what manner. For some, Christ is spiritually present in the Eucharist; for others, he is so objectively present as to warrant hanging sanctuary lamps to reverence the presence of Christ. Nevertheless, like bringing up politics or religion at a dinner party, a Catholic preacher - and a Jesuit to boot - reviving a potentially divisive point of doctrine in chapel whose worship is conducted according to the Common Book of Prayer may not seem entirely polite.

Despite these legitimate worries, I do dare to discourse on the theme of Corpus Christi and the Real Presence: not indeed to exhume a centuries-old occasion of contention, but to reflect in the first place on what today it means for us to be really present to nature, to each other, and yes, finally, to God. For we shall find little sense in God's True Presence if we ourselves are truly absent.

Whatever our personal faith, the question of real presence and absence was raised for us all sharply during the Coronavirus pandemic. Social distancing, masking up, working from home, zoom. I do not need to count the ways real, corporeal presence was interrupted. It was as though, for ourselves and others, we collectively uttered a great *Noli Me Tangere*, Do Not Touch Me. Thanks to email and Zoom we remained connected to family, friends and colleagues. Yet *digital* presence did not quite substitute for *real* presence, that is, being in person, face to face, in the flesh. Relying on communication through digital media, we ceased to be bodies, and became all souls.

Perhaps that is not quite true. One happy accident of lockdown was the rediscovery, for many, of true presence to nature. In that sunniest of Springs, May 2020, it was as though the natural world became like the creation on the first Sabbath day, when 'God rested … in his creation,' as we heard in our first reading. Nature became like Aslan's Country in the Chronicles of Narnia: 'a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more.' Was it that the grass was indeed greener, the birdsong clearer, the scent of the flowers more aromatic? Or was the difference, rather, in our own quality of perception: for a short while, we became really present.

The challenge of the digital world to such bodied presence is so pervasive that we often fail to notice it. One notable example is James Cameron's glaringly self-defeating film *Avatar*, the highest-grossing film in history. You may have noticed that the sequel appeared recently in the cinemas. The original film was widely received by critics as sneding a positive and even radical ecological message, lauding the nature-wisdom of indigenous traditions and advocating environmental activism against destructive

industrial and commercial interests. Yet James Cameron's film merely asks us to wake up and smell the virtual roses. The movie's extraordinary special effects were enabled by what was then a novel technology called a 'simulacrum', a means of mixing CGI with live action. The name, 'simulacrum' should put us on alert. There is hardly a *real* organism portrayed in the entire film. Even the main protagonist enters the imaginary world of Pandora, not in person, but via an 'avatar', a body genetically engineered to serve as a remotely controlled vehicle for a human consciousness. The virtual, in this film, has displaced the corporeal. To the critics who laud Avatar for its 'deep green' message, the thought does not seem to have occurred that to be converted to nature we might need sometimes to show up in our own bodies.

No doubt, once again, I overstate my case. An apology for bodily presence risks undervaluing digital presence. I do not deny the advantages of new and evolving technologies, and I would be hypocritical to do so. Even the spiritual life can benefit from cyberspace. I confess that I meet with my own spiritual director, who lives in Birmingham, almost always on zoom rather than in person. For many whose mobility is restricted, it is a great consolation to be able to attend religious services online. But it is surely an even greater consolation to be able to turn up in person. The Christian sacraments are, by definition, tangible signs of an incarnate God. Water, oil, bread and wine. They are full-body experiences, embracing all the senses. Online, sight and hearing are engaged, but smell, touch, and taste are not. Online sacraments risk being oxymorons: *in*tangible signs of a *dis*incarnate God.

Psychologists now speak of 'therapeutic presence' as uniquely important in the therapeutic process. Therapeutic presence is the state of being present with one's whole self in the encounter with a client, being entirely in the moment: physically, emotionally, cognitively, even spiritually. More important in any talk therapy than a particular technique, it turns out, is the quality of the relationship, and the most important factor in the quality of relationship is the quality of presence. Nothing is so therapeutic as

being with another person present *vere, realiter, substantialiter*, truly, really, substantially, with their whole self, body, soul, and spirit.

In Oxford, I hope I hardly need press my case for corporeality and true presence in the process of learning. In-person tutorials and seminars are, here at least, a non-negotiable part of the curriculum. And while we benefit from the extraordinary tools of digital research, we also rightly value the physicality of a book or a manuscript, its texture, its smell, its weight, its feel. When we are reading online, we are always susceptible to distraction, to surfing, to remaining always on the surface. A book helps us sit still, with undivided attention; a book helps us to find depth.

There is a Jesuit tag, *non multa sed multum*. Not many things but much. If we are to attain not merely a mass of information but understanding and even wisdom, our goal must be to know *non multa sed multum*, not many things but much. It is not the consumption of a multiplicity of ideas or facts that satisfies the soul, but to *savour* within oneself. To do that, we sometimes need to turn the search engine off, and linger long enough to be really present to what is physically before us.

Christians sometimes forget that the incarnate God is also the most incarnate of human beings. Could we ever have expected such a fleshy saviour? Jesus is a wonderful examplar of bodily presence, almost unsettlingly immersed in the messy business of bodily interaction. In the gospel accounts we find Jesus touching a leper, putting his fingers in the ears of a deaf man, and smearing saliva mud on a blind man's eyes. We encounter him relaxed enough to allow a woman to weep on his feet and dry them with her hair. He is so sensitized to touch that he senses, even though surrounded by a crowd, when the woman with the hemorrhage touches his cloak, he knows. In a bodily task normally reserved to servants or the intimacy of marriage, Jesus washes his disciples' feet. We find him embracing children; we witness him breathing on his disciples. We stand by in astonishment as he invites Thomas to place his hand into his bodily wounds. We hear Jesus sighing and groaning deeply when deeply, viscerally moved. We see him weep.

When Jesus prays, he prays with his body, standing and looking up to heaven, or throwing himself to the ground, prostrate in supplication. Jesus is really, bodily present to those he encounters; Jesus is truly, bodily present to God.

It has been a great delight to me these last months daily entering the Chapel at Campion Hall, and seeing Anton Raphael Mengs' *Noli Me Tangere* hanging behind the altar, generously on loan from All Souls College. Yet ironically Mengs' painting may call into question everything I have been saying about a tactile way of living the Christian faith. Christ's muscular outstretched arm and hand convey a firm, 'Noli Me Tangere'. Do not touch me – or even more literally, do not desire to touch me. For all its doctrines of creation, incarnation, and bodily resurrection, is Christianity finally a spiritualised religion, suspicious of body, of the desire for touch?

Of course, I do not believe so. Jesus forbids the Magdalene to touch him because he has not yet ascended to his Father: the risen Christ must now become individually absent in order to be universally present in a new way, through his Spirit, in all living bodies. Mary must therefore let this single body go, and seek to find and to embrace her Lord in all human bodies. As the Jesuit martyr and poet, Robert Southwell, imagines Jesus saying to Mary, 'if I be true in any one, believe me in all, and embrace me first in a firm faith, and then thou shalt touch me with more worthy hands.' If I be true in any one, believe me in all. Mary must now express her love for her Lord by loving the least of his brothers and sisters, bodies as well as souls.

Corpus Christi, then, celebrates God becoming really present, bodily present to us all. "And the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us" (Jn 1:14). God shows up, not by zoom, not remotely, not virtually, but face to face, in person, in the flesh. And so we, in our turn, are asked to be present *vere, realiter, substantialiter*, truly, really, substantially, with our whole selves. And then we might become mediators of God's true presence to the world, and the Church itself might again deserve the name given it in scripture: *Corpus Christi*.

I end with another Jesuit poet, not this time Southwell, but Gerard Manley Hopkins, and some words of his imbued with a mystical sense of the real, bodily presence of Christ in all.

I say móre: the just man justices;

Keeps grace: thát keeps all his goings graces;

Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —

Chríst — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,

Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his

To the Father through the features of men's faces.