

The Feast of Corpus Christi (Year A) 2014
Forty Martyrs'; St Bede

The Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ arose from the devotions of a Belgian canoness and visionary of the 13th century, Juliana of Liege. She desired a feast in honour of the Blessed Sacrament which would be celebrated outside Lent (Maundy Thursday being a sort of feast of Holy Communion but within Lent). Juliana had visions about it which she kept private for decades.

That the origins of today's feast are found in Belgium will come as a surprise to the people of Orvieto in Umbria in central Italy where there is a magnificent procession each year to commemorate the Feast proclaimed by Pope Urban IV in 1264 following, it is said, a miracle of a host bleeding at the Mass of a priest who was having doubts as to the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Wherever lie its beginnings the Feast naturally continues the theme of last Sunday's celebration of the Blessed Trinity. Last week we reflected on the nature of God as revealed to us by Christ, True God and true man. Christ did not come among us in human form with the trappings of power and might. He was not kingly. He had no authority. He had no army to lead; he had no means to impose his will. He was a poor man; a worker with his hands; a wandering preacher with no place to lay his head; dependent on charitable women who provided for him and the disciples from their resources. He died, alone, with no possessions even to give away. This is our God. It could not be more different from the adjectives that we think should go with 'God' – descriptions like, 'almighty', 'great', 'Lord of hosts', 'king of kings', 'majestic', 'glorious'.

God in Christ emptied himself to assume our human form and become like us in all things but sin, and to accept death, the death of a slave. God in Christ continues to empty himself, coming among us in the form of bread and wine, the basics of human need: bread to sustain us and wine to make our hearts glad.

Carlo Carretto was a very popular spiritual writer in my days as a student. He used to spend six months in a cave in Spoleto and six months in the desert. In one of his books 'Letters from the Desert' he reflected on the thinking of the founder of his order, Charles de Foucauld, about Jesus.

"That Jesus had voluntarily lost himself in an obscure Middle Eastern village; annihilated himself in the daily monotony of thirty years rough, miserable work; separated himself from the society that 'counts' - all this confused the noble convert. Why hadn't Jesus become a scribe, he wondered. Why hadn't he been born into one of those families destined for command, responsibility, social and political influence? [The answer} Jesus has so diligently searched for the lowest place that it would be very difficult for anyone to tear it from him. Nazareth was the lowest place: the place of the poor, the unknown, of those who don't count, of the mass of workers, of men

*subjected to work's grim demands just for a scrap of bread. But there is more: Jesus is 'the holy One of God'. But the Holy One of God realized his sanctity not in an extraordinary life, but in one impregnated with ordinary things: work, family and social life, obscure activities, simple things shared by all men. The perfection of God is cast in a material that men almost despise, which they don't consider worth searching for because of its simplicity, its lack of interest, because it is common to all men."**

Something analogous can be said about the Eucharist, which is therefore of a piece with Jesus in his life among us.

Jesus came among us in obscurity, living in a nowhere place that people despised. 'Can anything good come from Nazareth?' joked Nathanael. Jesus today and for always comes among us in a manner that is easily despised, dismissed as absurd. He comes among us as common bread, the food of peasants; and wine, though not refined, expensive Chardonnay reserve, kept for years in fine French oak barrels. He comes in the coarse, rough wine of the labourers. He comes in basic food so that he is available to all. It is easy to take this gift for granted for we so easily undervalue what is readily available; and fail to treasure what we could not do without.

*Carlo Caretto, *Letters from the Desert*, DLT, London,