

Christmas 1 2012

I Samuel 2 vv 18-26 p273, Psalm 148, Colossians 3 vv 12-17 p1184, Luke 2 vv 41-52 p1029

For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. (Col 2⁹)

At the 9.30 service on Christmas Day, we nearly ran out of consecrated wafers, having underestimated the number of communicants. We could, of course, have consecrated more bread, but I don't really like doing that. It interrupts the flow of the service, something to avoid if possible, because interruptions distract worshippers from concentrating on their devotions.

In principle, I'm quite happy to share broken wafers because of the symbolism of sharing the bread. As St Paul says in I Corinthians 10^{16&17}, *The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body, for we are all partakers of that one bread.* When we participate in Holy Communion, we both symbolise and effect our unity with Christ and with one another within His Body the Church. *Though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread.* Moreover, St Paul also tells us (in I Corinthians 11²⁴) that when Jesus broke the bread at the Last Supper, He said, *Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me.* So breaking communion wafers and sharing them between communicants is powerfully symbolic both of Christ's broken Body on the Cross and of the oneness of His Body the Church in Him.

Of course dividing up a scant supply of consecrated wafers may leave some people getting very small pieces of consecrated bread. But it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter how much bread and wine you receive in Holy Communion. What matters is that you receive Holy Communion – the Body and Blood of Christ, as a member of His Body, the Church. The verse which always come to my mind when people only get a small piece of consecrated bread or a little drop of Communion wine is my text for today's sermon, Colossians 2⁹. *For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.* In Christ there is the fulness of God. When we receive Jesus we receive the One Who sent Jesus. The Holy Spirit is not given to Jesus by measure. God is not weighed out in tiny parcels. Where God is present, He is present in all His fulness. No matter how much bread we receive in Holy Communion, or how little, we receive Christ; we receive God. This is why we ought both to be eager to participate in Holy Communion and also fearful of receiving unworthily, *not discerning the Body*, as St Paul says. Holy Communion is a foretaste of the End of Time. We experience the Presence of God. We experience His all-consuming holiness. We are judged – either to be welcomed into the joy of our Lord or to be cast out into the outer darkness. So St Paul warns us to examine ourselves before coming to the Lord's Supper – to repent of the sins which divide us from God and from one another, to be sure that we are in love and charity with all our neighbours. God is *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. God is the Mystery Whom we fear but to Whom we are inexorably drawn. We cannot live without God but we cannot come into His Presence in our sinfulness. We can only enter into the Presence of God through faith in what Jesus has accomplished for us on the Cross, the forgiveness of our sins. *Repent ye: for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.*

For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. The baby in the manger. Isn't that the theme of so many of our Christmas carols? We think of Mary giving birth in those appalling conditions. We contemplate a new born baby laid in the farm animals' feeding trough. And when we have got over the strangeness of it all, we worship the Baby Jesus *for in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.* Some people say that the way we clasp our hands to receive Holy Communion is meant to create a cradle in which the Christ is laid, present in the consecrated bread. *For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.* The name of the little town, Bethlehem, means *house of bread*, the place where Jesus the Bread of Life was born.

We might well say at every Communion service, *O holy child of Bethlehem, Descend to us we pray; Cast our sin and enter in, Be born in us today.*

For me there are two points in today's Gospel reading about the twelve year old Jesus in the Temple. One is Who Jesus is, the very Son of God, and the other that the children of God must put God before everything else in their lives. May I quote Henry Alford on the significance of this story and the following eighteen years until our Lord's Baptism at the age of 30? *During these eighteen mysterious years we may, by the light of what is here revealed, view the holy Child advancing to that fulness of wisdom and divine approval which was indicated at His Baptism by In thee I am well pleased. We are apt to forget, that it was during this time that much of the great work of the second Adam was done. The growing up through infancy, childhood, youth, manhood, from grace to grace, holiness to holiness, in subjection, self-denial and love, without one polluting touch of sin, - this it was, which consummated by the three years of active ministry, by the Passion, and by the Cross, constituted "the obedience of one man" by which many were made righteous. We must fully appreciate this verse in order to think rightly of Christ. He had emptied Himself of His glory: His infancy and childhood were no mere pretence, but the Divine personality was in Him carried through these states of weakness and inexperience, and gathered round itself the ordinary accessions and experiences of the sons of men. All the time, the consciousness of His mission on earth was ripening, 'the things heard of the Father' (John 15¹⁵) were continually imparted to Him; the Spirit, which was not given by measure to Him, was abiding more and more upon Him; till the day when He was fully ripe for his official manifestation.* In other words in the normal human childhood, youth and manhood of Jesus Christ we see that *in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.*

And of course the same is true of all the stories we read about Jesus in the Gospels – His teaching and His miracles. *For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.* When we contemplate His broken Body dying on the Cross, we see the full significance of the words *For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.* We only too cheerfully sing, *Myrrh is mine, it's bitter perfume; Breathes a life of gathering gloom; Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding dying, Sealed in a stone cold tomb.* What a thought, that a new born infant will one day die on a cross! *For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.*

In Holy Communion we proclaim His Death. As St Paul says, *For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death.* We proclaim His death until He

comes again. *When we eat this bread (the Bread of Life, born in Bethlehem, the House of Bread) and drink this cup, we proclaim your death, Lord Jesus, until you come in glory. As St Paul says, For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till he come.*

For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. Christ comes to us in so many ways – the Baby in the manger, the Teacher, the Healer, the crucified King, the One Who reveals His Risen Body to the disciples, the One Who sends the Holy Spirit, the One Who will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. He comes to us in the pages of the Bible. He comes to us in bread and wine. He comes to us in the wonders of nature. He comes to us in the faces of other people, especially the faces of those who most need our love. *For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.*

Samuel faithfully ministered to God in the shrine at Shiloh, the place where God dwelt in the Ark of the Covenant. Eli's sons, Hophni and Phineas, abused their position as servants of God. In the New Testament, it is revealed that God dwells in Christ, that He dwells in Christ's Body the Church. It is revealed further that all Christian people are God's ministers, His servants, Christ's disciples. Like Samuel, Eli, Hophni and Phineas we are privileged to dwell in the presence of God, to participate in the sacrificial meal, to share the offerings with God and with God's people. Christ is present with us, His Body and His Blood, His Word, His Spirit, His Grace. *For in Christ dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.*

Therefore in the Church *dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.* Therefore in you and me *dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.* So are we to be like Hophni and Phineas, who let God down and let God's people down and let themselves down by their selfish misappropriation of God's gifts, or are we to be like Samuel, who *ministered before the LORD?* I can't do better than to repeat our New Testament lesson as an indication of what it means for us to fulfil our Christian calling as those in whom, by grace, *dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.*

Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by Him.

Hymn 420/32: O Little Town of Bethlehem.