

2008 Corpus Christi

Do this in remembrance of me. No matter what we think happens to bread and wine at the prayer of consecration, these words take us back to Jerusalem two thousand years ago. But these words work the other way, too: they bring Jerusalem of two thousand years ago here today, to this place, in this place. And not just the words, but all the action and the whole occasion: the upper room, the meal, Jesus and the disciples knowing that something nasty was going to happen, and the togetherness of the disciples, even the one who had something to hide. 'Do this in remembrance of me' brings it all into the present.

That is what sacraments do. And they bring with them all the intervening years as well: all the Christians of the past, all the joys and sadnesses of history. The whole of the past concentrated into the words and action of the consecration prayer: we open the door of Dr Who's Tardis and find ourselves in the vastness of history.

Every time the Lord's supper is celebrated, the past is gathered up and presented to us. And then in the heavenly banquet, past and present are refreshed and ejected, launched into the world transformed. In an instant, the caterpillar of the past becomes the butterfly of the future. Rebirth. Or, if you prefer astronomy, the entire universe is compressed, sucked into the infinitely dense black hole of crucifixion, the bloody, dirty hole of the crucifixion, and propelled with infinite acceleration, dispersed to create the glorious new universe.

This is a magnificent vision. All Christian theology and history concentrated into the moment at every Eucharist. No wonder we should celebrate it with all possible splendour and theatre and solemnity and joy. The entire cosmos gathered up and borne for an instant by the priest. You can imagine what a great burden is placed on the priest at that brief moment in the holy mystery.

Each of us is a sacrament, too. Each of us has all our past within us. We are the sum of our memories. All our past is included in our genes – genes from the primeval soup at the moment of creation are in every one of our cells. All this is sanctified in this sacrament. We are cleansed. We are fed. We are, and heaven knows I need this, forgiven. We have the meal set out by the gracious father for the prodigal son. We are accepted, and empowered. And we are launched for future service. That is why we celebrate the institution of the Holy Eucharist.

It is a thing most wonderful.