

It doesn't take long for a tale to be garbled. It just needs to be transmitted from one person to another and-voilà!- noise is added to the signal. By the time it's been passed on to person number five even it's own mother wouldn't recognise it. This shouldn't surprise any of us if the tale is transmitted in the usual way: one person face to face then tells it to someone else on the phone who emails the news to person four who tells it to number five in Costa Coffee. It's not a process one usually gets to actually see happening, in front of your eyes, in real time. As so much else about Mission Action Planning meetings is out of the bounds of usual experience I don't suppose I should have been too surprised to see the process of tale transformation occurring in mere seconds right under my nose.

Almost too fast to notice a prosaic description of school visit to St Mary's which involved showing year 1 the eucharistic vestments became 'the Rector took his clothes off' before morphing into an unlikely anecdote involving lacey underwear, pole dancing and something somebody once bought at an Ann Summers party. I hope you don't have a visual imagination: you might just lose your breakfast.

Just in case this is all old news to you- and I hasten to add it is fake news (especially if you're the Bishop reading the sermon on the web site)- I wish to establish once and for all that the point of the Rector putting on and then taking off the eucharistic vestments- while remaining at all times fully clothed- was to show what happens in church, starting with the dressing up bit. *That* bit started with guess how many buttons there are on the cassock. The first answer is almost 'one hundred' which would make it closer to a gothic pearly king & queen costume than something you might wear in church. The answer, almost never guessed, is that Anglo-Catholic cassocks usually have 39 buttons down the front. This not only makes getting in and out of them a lengthy process almost universally shortened by undoing the minimal number of buttons necessary and then inelegantly clambering out; it also sometimes occasions acute embarrassment to their wearers if it is suggested that these buttons represent not the 39 lashes that Jesus received on his scourging- which is of course what they do represent- but instead, the 39 articles of religion of the Church of England.

Back in the days when there was a Prayerbook in every pew, it was fairly common during a long and dull sermon for one's attention to wander to the back of the book and to those pithy little vignettes of faith. That's why they're no longer in the pews here, because sermons are no longer long and dull. Nowadays the 39 articles are much less well known but any level of familiarity with them would quickly make

obvious why those Anglican clergy likely to be found wearing a 39 button cassock will look aghast if you suggest they are wearing those snippets of doctrine on the front of their coat.

It is a salutary exercise to read the Articles, and shocking if you haven't done it before to read what are supposed to be the bedrock beliefs of the Church of England. Largely, this is because they were compiled in that couple of months when we were card-carrying Puritans. The language is in turns prim and prickly then polemical and petulant: a window into the deeply unattractive Edwardian Protestant world of sobriety and industry, ducking-stools and turnips. More saliently, more often than not these articles do not declaim what the Church believed, but what in that unhappy period of her history she did *not* believe. Some articles, of course, no Christian could possibly disagree with: number one for example speaks of faith in the Holy Trinity; and some, no self-respecting Anglo-Catholic could ever possibly agree with. If you would like to reacquaint yourself with these quaint historical joys- perhaps if there is a long and dull sermon when I'm away- there are quite a few copies of the BCP in the shelves where we keep the hymn books.

Now today we are celebrating the feast of Corpus Christi, a feast that you will search long and fruitlessly to find in the Book of Common Prayer. Indeed the 39 articles are very rude, as only the self-righteous can be, about the very notion of the Eucharist. Instead, they speak, as virtually no-one else does of 'the Lords Supper'. So let us hear what article 28 of our 39 tells us about this:

*The Supper of the Lord is not only a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves one to another, but rather it is a Sacrament of our Redemption by Christ's death: insomuch that to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith, receive the same, the Bread which we break is a partaking of the Body of Christ; and likewise the Cup of Blessing is a partaking of the Blood of Christ.*

Hmm. But from now on Anglo-Catholics get worried.

*Transubstantiation (or the change of the substance of Bread and Wine) in the Supper of the Lord, cannot be proved by Holy Writ; but is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, overthroweth the nature of a Sacrament, and hath given occasion to many superstitions.*

Reeling from the the sting of that censorious slap you might not have noticed that that sentence contains the crux of the Protestant problem: it is the Reformers'

cornerstone and their Achilles heel. It is also a point of some importance to this feast of Corpus Christi. If the Reformers are right, then we here today are very, very wrong.

*Transubstantiation ... we are told... cannot be proved by Holy Writ; but is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture,*

Well let us lay aside the obvious rejoinder that you can't get much plainer than 'This is my body'. We've been there & done that in previous years. Let us lay that aside. Let us concentrate instead on the idea expressed there, very much still alive that 'all you need is scripture'. For the Reformed Churches it begins with the Bible, it ends with the Bible, and, you've guessed it, there's a lot of the Bible in the middle. Anything a Christian must believe must be able to be 'proved by Holy Writ': anything which can be 'proved by Holy Writ' it is therefore incumbent upon all good God-fearing folk to believe.

Scripture is of course a foundation of our faith. The Church is founded on Scripture. But that attitude to the Bible that says everything of worth must be 'proved by wholly writ' is a profound *misunderstanding* of the very thing it elevates to the rôle of final arbiter in faith; it expects of Scripture something it simply cannot give.

"If God made us in His own image", Voltaire quipped "we have certainly returned the complement." Which is precisely where the 'plain words of scripture' argument gets us: searching in a scriptural mirror and reflecting back ourselves.

*Transubstantiation cannot be proved by Holy Writ; but is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture*

But if we hear the word of God as plain words, do we really hear it at all? "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" ask the Jewish crowd of Jesus? They have heard the plain words Jesus has spoken and are profoundly shocked, as well they should be. They have heard the plain words, but they have not heard the Word capital 'W' in those words.

'Plain words' is language one might use of a lecture, a sermon or a haranguing speech; an instruction manual, a telephone directory or indeed the 39 articles. One would never use such language to describe a conversation. Yet this is *precisely* what Scripture is: it is a conversation, with all the imprecision, all the creativity, all the

ambiguities, all the joys, all the tos and fros, all the relationship, all the art of that activity. The Church has been in conversation with Scripture since the Church came into being: from that conversation it decided what was truly talking the words of Scripture and what wasn't; what were right practices and beliefs and what aren't, and it continues to natter away to this day. But more, the conversation continues when we hear the word proclaimed in Church; the conversation continues whenever we pick up a Bible and read. We - you and me, here and now- are part of that chat. And when we open that book we find that far from starting with *us* opening our mouths, the conversation is there bubbling away before we ever decide to join it: we eavesdrop on the babbling voices of God and his people, captured in ink-black till the end of the age.

We're like children evesdropping on adult conversation in full swing. How do we understand what is being said? How do we make sense of that conversation? How do we equip ourselves to enter fully into that conversation rather than remaining stood on the edges listening in? Through the sacraments. There is no sense in Scripture without Sacrament: without that presence of God with us, without our communion with him in the body & blood, without that supreme legacy of the incarnation which the sacraments are, without that most intimate and profound of languages, how can we interpret scripture? Without that mystical and real presence, the plain words of Scripture may ring in our ears but they will never burn in our hearts. We will always garble the tale.

On the road to Emmaus Jesus explained scripture to his disciples; when they arrived at Emmaus he broke the bread. There is no point in making much of which came first: sometimes we put the most important thing first, sometimes last. But for all they had heard, the disciples did not recognise Jesus until the breaking of the bread. They had heard a very eloquent expositor of the Scriptures on the road: they met their God at table. Only then did they truly understand.

A church without the eucharist would quickly become little more than a book club, with a very short reading list. With the sacramental presence at its heart a church can indeed become the very body of Christ.