

The Real Presence

Living here in Whitby and being a fan of the television series *Heartbeat* (which, sadly, may now have stopped beating), it is always interesting to walk past locations in town where scenes have been filmed and, therefore, where well-known actors have worked. I think we all find celebrity interesting – and I don't mean personal fame but just the extra interest that we find in visiting places that are famous or where famous people have been.

Maybe this is what motivates people to visit the Holy Land, though I can't honestly say I share their motivation. Having previously lived and worked in the Middle East for seven years, a visit there wouldn't have quite the same cultural novelty for me. But I also think potential visitors in these charged political days need to give very serious consideration to the very real risk of terrorist bombings and indiscriminate rocket attacks. Do we really need to put ourselves, not to mention tour guides and drivers, at such risk? However, people do still go there and in considerable numbers and presumably their motivation, as pilgrims, is to see the places mentioned in the gospels and that are associated with Jesus.

To begin with I think we would have to go there with a certain degree of scepticism in the sense that, in many cases, we can't be absolutely certain that particular sites are what they claim to be – they *might* be but we can't always know for certain. For example, at the time when Jesus was born no one had any idea of the significance of that event or of who the baby was going to become and therefore why would anyone have made any particular note of exactly where it happened? We know it was in Bethlehem, but how could anyone these days know anything more accurately than that? So, wherever we might be in the Holy Land, for someone to say this is the exact spot where Jesus stood or where such-and-such a thing happened, well, I think realistically we might have to take that with more than a pinch of salt unless, of course, there is some specific archaeological or historical evidence to back up the claim.

Even with that awareness in mind, people still go there because they want to see the places they have heard about and visit the locations (though perhaps not the exact spots) associated with Jesus. It's that same thing we just mentioned: the attraction of standing somewhere where someone famous has stood - though, because in this case it is Jesus we are talking about, there is a lot more involved than just celebrity and such visits are actually pilgrimages.

But surely this should give us pause to think. Why would we want to travel all the way to the Holy Land in order to see the places Jesus may have known (though they are now completely changed and modernised), even to walk where he may have walked (though the paths and streets are now paved over), when

we can see *Jesus himself* at Mass? And I say “pause to think” because we probably do need to stop and ask ourselves whether that is indeed what we do believe – and we *should* believe it because Jesus has said that’s how it is.

St Matthew records that at the Last Supper:

Jesus took some bread, and when he had said the blessing he broke it and gave it to his disciples. ‘Take it and eat,’ he said ‘this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and when he had returned thanks he gave it to them. ‘Drink all of you from this,’ he said ‘for this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, which is to be poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’

Jesus didn’t say the bread and wine *represented* his body and blood, but that they *were* (and *are*) his body and blood. He himself said this and so to claim that the bread and wine are less than his body and blood is to call his word into question. In one of the Easter Week texts in the Office of Readings, an unknown writer, setting down instructions for the newly baptized at Jerusalem wrote:

Do not, then, regard the bread and wine as nothing but bread and wine, for they are the body and blood of Christ as the master himself has proclaimed. Though your senses suggest otherwise, let faith reassure you.

When the priest says the words that Jesus said at the Last Supper and does what Jesus did, as Catholics we believe that through the consecration of the Holy Spirit the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. They continue to look like bread and wine, but they become his body and blood through the mystery we call *transubstantiation*. There is no rational explanation (that’s why we call it a mystery - in the theological sense) but we accept it in faith because Jesus asks us to.

At communion, we *hold* Jesus, the real Jesus, really and truly in our hands, receiving him in the form of the host¹ and in his precious blood from the chalice. Similarly when priests, deacons and ministers take communion to the sick and housebound, they are carrying Jesus with them. Therefore they should do so reverently, praying to Jesus who is with them and ensuring that the Sacrament is being carried appropriately. If they are driving it may be an additional reason for keeping to the speed limit and driving courteously – Jesus is their passenger!

Understandably the very fact that, in faith, we accept the enormity of the reality of Christ’s real presence, may make us feel we can’t possibly be worthy to hold him as surely as Mary held him, and yet we are and we can precisely because he invites us to “Take and eat... (and) take and drink” and, for ministers, that they are called and commissioned to their ministry. All the more reason, therefore,

¹ And we are invited to receive the host in our hand - do we think we never sin with our tongue?

to recollect every time what it is we are doing, who it is we are receiving, even if it overawes us (as it should - every time) and therefore that we ensure that we do so worthily in terms of preparation and reverence (every time).

It lends a tremendous gravity to our response “Amen” to the invitation to affirm this is “The body of Christ” and “The blood of Christ” we are about to receive. That single small word is a profound act of faith: that we truly do believe. “This is Jesus, the Lamb of God” - who then needs the Holy Land?² We don’t really need to see where he once was when, at every Mass, we can see where he now *is* - yes, in heaven where we can’t yet see him, but at the same time really and truly present in the Blessed Sacrament on our altar where we can.

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Fr Neil McNicholas

² I am being a little facetious, of course, because such a visit might be of interest in the sense of putting Our Lord’s earthly life into its geographical content. Also, as I have said, such a visit takes on a very different dimension as a pilgrimage.