

FEAST OF THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

On a hill near Cape Town, South Africa, just below the famed Table Mountain, a gun is fired every day at noon. The hill is known as Signal Hill. The firing of the gun once served a beautiful purpose. It signaled that a ship on its way to or from India, had arrived in the harbour with a cargo of goods, and was in need of supplies of food and fresh water. A beautiful exchange resulted. There was receiving and giving.

But that was a long time ago. The purpose no longer exists. Yet the gun is still fired dutifully every day at noon. However, the firing is now little more than an empty ritual. Once it had a beautiful meaning. Now the meaning has gone out of it. Most of the local people ignore it. Visitors are told “If you hear a loud bang at mid-day, don’t worry. It’s only the gun going off.”

However the ritual still has one thing going for it. Most people know the story behind it. If that story were to be lost, then the ritual would become poorer still.

The Eucharist celebrates a wonderful event – the gift which Jesus made of his life on our behalf. Every time we celebrate the Eucharist we tell that story again. But like anything that is repeated over and over again, there is a danger that it may become just a ritual.

In the Eucharist Jesus nourishes us with the bread of life. But it’s not meant to be one-way traffic. Having received from Jesus, we are expected to give something in return – not to him but to one another. But very often we don’t allow the Eucharist to produce the effect it is meant to produce – unselfish giving of ourselves in the service of others. That’s what it means to be members of this family of Jesus Christ – we are the body of Christ for one another.

We keep giving out the bread and we keep offering the cup. “This is my body, given for you.... This is my blood, poured out for you.” Yet sometimes it seems to have little effect on people. We don’t necessarily see a people who pour out their lives in the service of others. Too often the people who eat the bread and drink the cup are often living self-centred lives.

For the Hebrews, remembering was not a mere recalling. It was the making present to each generation of the saving events of the past. In the same way, the Eucharist is no mere making present of Christ's body and blood, but is a proclamation and memorial of his life-giving death.

The Eucharist is the heart of everything. But it can never be separated from the washing of the feet that happened as the Eucharist itself was created. The two realities are linked – being in communion with Jesus so that we can be in communion with others.

It would be a pity if the Eucharist became just a ritual, an empty ritual. Jesus gives himself to us here, so that we in our turn may give ourselves to others.

The Eucharist is not something we come to watch; rather, it is something we come to do. We gather as a consecrated people to do something together. In the action of the Mass we hold holy the memory of Jesus, we share the bread that is broken, we accept the cup that is held out to us. Week by week throughout the year we strengthen each other by our sharing and our faith, so that all our time is consecrated to the Lord. Until the fullness of the kingdom, when we hope to see the Lord face to face, this simple meal has to be enough for us.