

## **Donnybrook**

8 August 2021

### **Introduction**

Welcome again, everybody. As we all know, religious customs can stay in place long after faith has vanished.

### **Illustration**

An obvious example would be Christmas – widely celebrated, perfectly enjoyable and generally without reference to the person whose birth the feast marks. In parts of Asia, apparently, some people think it marks the birth of Santa Claus. It does have a certain logic! A more local example might be the survival of godmothers and godfathers, even if there has been no baptism. It does indicate a special link with the child, which is lovely, but has nothing to do with the sponsor at baptism. Finally, a very current example would be the fuss over baptism and confirmations. What no one is saying is that these celebrations have developed into family days, a kind of event for one day, but generally neither event has much to do with faith in reality. A cultural shell continues long after faith has evaporated. We all know this but don't really like to say it out loud. The real question is not when should we return to such practices but why do it at all in the first place.

### **Steps**

It so happens that John 6 was written with just such a situation in mind. The Gospel was written about the end of the first century. Already by then there were people taking part in the Eucharist without an adequate grasp of who Jesus is and what happened for us in his death and resurrection. Into that concrete situation, the evangelist shaped his writing in order to challenge and enrich.

So who is Jesus, according to the Fourth Gospel? In this Gospel, he comes across as a real human being, who gets tired, who has friends, can be angry and suffers when his friend Lazarus dies. At the same time, he is the only begotten Son, the one who makes the Father known, the Word made flesh. In this Gospel, he uses the divine name, I AM WHO I AM, from the burning bush to describe himself – in our Gospel today I AM the bread of life. Believers want to affirm both about Jesus – but together these are extraordinary claims.

Central to that Gospel is what happened "for us" in Jesus' death and resurrection. Today, many believers might be hard put to say what they think happened for us on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. In the Fourth Gospel, the death of Jesus is not the payment of a price for Adam's sin, but rather the disclosure, the unveiling, of the breath-taking love of God, in human suffering, brokenness and even death. The love of God has brought him this close to us. Again, extraordinary claims, made – in terms of world religions – only by the Christians.

According to the Fourth Gospel, to take part in the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, requires such a grown-up faith in Jesus and a grown-up understanding of his death and resurrection. Only then does it make sense to take part. It *is* demanding, but so is anything really worthwhile .

### **Conclusion**

The question of what I am doing when I take part in the Eucharist is not confined to 8 year-olds and their parents. The pandemic cut us all off from the worshipping community and the Mass. Some people may never return. But for those of us who have returned to Eucharist, there are things to be pondered:

What did I miss?

Why am I back at Mass?

What do I believe about Jesus?

How would I put words on what happened for us in his death and resurrection?

Again, not easy things to think about – but essential if we are to hear the words of today's Gospel:

'I am the living bread which has come down from heaven.

Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever;

and the bread that I shall give is my flesh,

for the life of the world.'