

# THE WILDEST FAITH OF ALL:

a sermon praught by the Rev'd Dr Richard Major  
to the Anglican church in Zagreb  
(meeting at St Joseph's Chapel, in the Jesuit seminary of the Immaculate Heart of Mary),  
for the Sunday after Corpus Christi, 26<sup>th</sup> June, 2011.

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4

Deuteronomy viii<sup>2-3, 14-16</sup>; Psalm cxlvii; I Corinthians x<sup>16-17</sup>; John vi<sup>51-59</sup>.  
From the Gospel:



*My flesh is true food and My blood is true drink.*

In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost: Amen.

**Introit**

Psalm lxxx<sup>17,2</sup>

*Cibavit eos*

**H**E FED THEM with the fat of wheat, alleluia;  
and filled them with honey out of the rock,  
alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

Rejoice in God our helper; sing aloud to the God of Jacob.

Glory be to the Father . . .

He fed them with the fat of wheat, alleluia;  
and filled them with honey out of the rock,  
alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

**The Holy Gospel**

**I**AM THE LIVING BREAD that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is My flesh.'

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?'

So Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat My flesh and drink My blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for My flesh is true food and My blood is true drink. Those who eat My flesh and drink My blood abide in Me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent Me (and I live because of the Father), so whoever eats Me will live because of Me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.'

He said these things while He was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

### **Communion Proper**

**A**S OFTEN AS YOU EAT this Bread, and drink the Cup,  
you shall show the death of the Lord, until He come:  
therefore whosoever shall eat this Bread  
or drink the Cup of the Lord unworthily,  
shall be guilty of the Body and Blood of the Lord. Alleluia.

### **Postcommunion Proper**

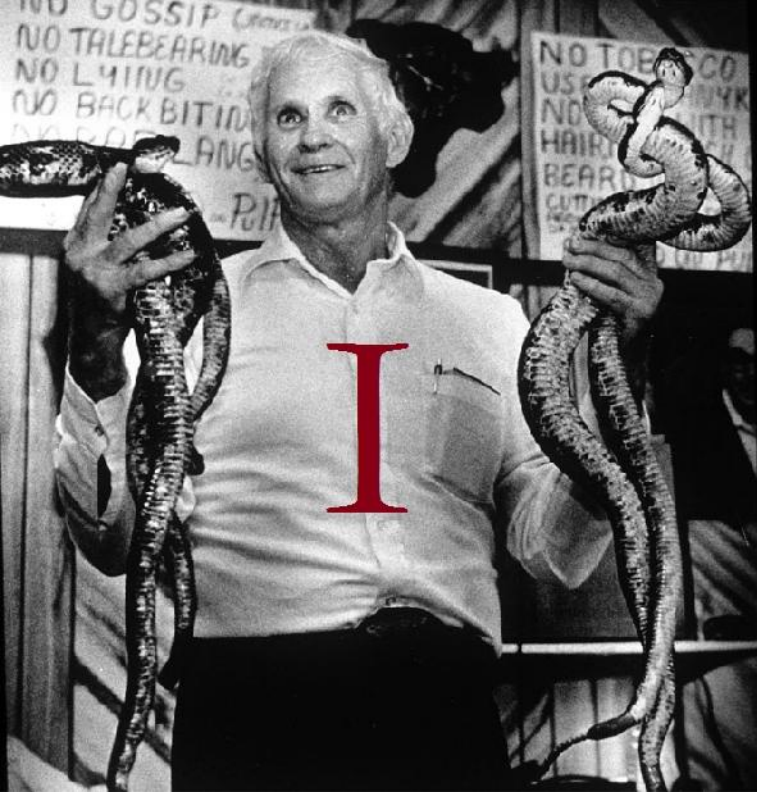
**M**AKE US, WE BESEECH THEE, O Lord,  
to be filled with the eternal enjoyment of Thy Divinity,  
which is prefigured by the reception in this life  
of Thy precious Body and Blood;  
Who livest and reignest, with God the Father,  
in the unity of the Holy Ghost,  
eve r One God, wolrd without end. Amen.

Pieter Claesz,  
*Still Life with Stoneware Jug Wine Glass Herring and Bread* (1642),  
now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

**D**EEP IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH, deep down in the mysterious and lovely American lands of doom – high up in the Appalachians, or in the wild hills of Arkansas and West Virginia, or in the craggy valleys where there used to be coal-mines and now there is nothing but dying villages, or down on the flats, where the hill people have come to live in trailerparks on the edge of highways – there is a small tribe of Protestants who call themselves The Church Of Jesus With Signs Following. But they are known everywhere as the snake-handling cult. You cannot get more Protestant than these people; you can scarcely get more tribal. They are secretive. They despise not only the modern world and everything beyond the South, but most Southerners too. Theirs is a hard contempt. History has been a bitter run of defeats for them: the defeat of emigration to America, the defeat of the Civil War, the defeat of Depression and unrelieved poverty. But the defeats don't matter so much to these backwoodsman. They do not care what the outside world thinks. Even in their old countries, in the Scotch Highlands, or the Welsh mountain, or on damp hills in Ulster, these were backwoodsmen, self-reliant, almost beyond the reach of law, contemptuous of the soft folk in the towns and lowland villages. When they came across the Atlantic they ignored the civilised communities on the coast and disappeared inland, up into the misty high country of the New World to their remote life.

This little hillbilly sect, The Church of Jesus with Signs Following, is called the snake-handling sect because they handle snakes. Their services consist of extempore prayer, of people babbling in what they think are foreign languages, of red-hot preaching about the end of the world and the vengeance of God on townfolk. Up in the Protestant mountains of America such things are almost normal. What is abnormal comes at the climax of their services. When everyone has got excited enough, a big flat wooden box is opened, and out come rattlesnakes, cottonmouths, canebrakes, little copperheads. They play with them; they hand them about. The snakes are generally dull with cold and hunger, and dangle like strings of sausages, but they look horrifically dangerous, and the odd thing is, they are horrifically dangerous. Quite often these people are bitten and die, their furious preachers more often than the laity. I should say that the Spirit also inspires them to drink strychnine, and put their fingers in power sockets. Usually they survive these activities, but sometimes they don't. Getting hurt or killed quaffing poison or holding a fanged serpent doesn't shake them, or turn them sceptical; they keep up these stupefying practices, and occasionally go to prison over them. For they have reached the limits even of American religious tolerance. Snake-handlers are weirder than anything you imagined possible in religion. They about as extreme as any religious group can be. They are frankly creepy.

But sometimes even snake-handling cults strive for respectability; and that means that they very occasionally celebrate the Christian Eucharist, or something like it.



IT'S THE CHRISTIAN EUCHARIST I WANT TO TALK about this evening, at this Eucharist of ours. We're so used to it, to its order and dignity and calm, that I'd like us to shake our imaginations by picturing what a snake-handling communion service is like.

We don't have to guess: there is an account of it in a book I've been reading about snakehandling cults, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, by a Southern journalist sympathetic to the snake-handlers, a man named Dennis Covington. Here's what happens. After the snakes have been toyed

with and put away, the shrieking and dancing die away, and Carl, an 'elder', in a plaid shirt and bolero tie, climbs onto the stage.

*Carl opened his Bible to a passage in Matthew. "And as they were eating," he read, "Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body."*

*Carl looked up from the book. "Now, he didn't mean it was really his body."*

*Amen [cry the congregation of hillbillies].*

*"They weren't cannibals."*

*Thank God [shout the people].*

*"Can you imagine me taking a big bite of Brother Junior over there, and him not even cooked? He's forty something years old. He'd be tough as foot leather!" ....*

*Carl looked back at the book. "And he took the cup, he read, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood. . . ."*

*Again, he glanced up. "I sure ain't gonna drink nobody's blood. . . . I ain't no vampire."*

*Then [Carl] blessed the grape juice . . . and unleavened bread. . . . [A]nother snake-handling preacher from . . . Georgia helped Carl serve the Communion in Dixie cups. . . . The men threw their [drink] back right where they stood, then crumpled the cups and looked around for a trash can.*

Now, there are a lot of things about the snake-handlers' rite to astound us. But what amazes me most is this – *that the Eucharist amazes them.*

Here we have a group as bizarre as any religious group can be. Their staple religious activity is toying with venomous snakes. They are extremely extreme. And yet, even for these fanatics, the central truth of the Eucharist – that we eat and drink Christ – is too much. They sport with snakes, but the Eucharist scandalises them as an excess. It makes these shocking zealots blush; it's too wild for strychnine-drinkers. They'd be more bemused by what we get up to here each Eucharist than we can be about what they get up to. They rant; but when Carl, in his cowboy get-up, has to read out Christ's lucid, explicit Eucharistic words, he immediately starts denying them and allegorising them away, cracking wretched jokes to protect his flock from them. These words are too uncanny for them to bear. Yet they are not too uncanny for us. Carl's tiny anti-Eucharistic anti-sermon doesn't appall me as much as this Eucharistic sermon would appall him. The snake-handlers have a wild faith, but ours is wilder.

From the warm, crowded centre of the Christian tradition we can gaze far off and salute these few mountain rustics, in their lonely weirdness beyond the frontiers of Christendom, remote and elevated on their frozen periphery. We can admire the way they are so tremendously, sublimely and consistently wrong – so wrong that they have a clearer perspective on what mainstream Christianity is about than those who only err from it a little, and whose gaze is befuddled by foreshortening. The snakehandlers at least have a distinct, frontal view of the Eucharistic idea, that Christ is physically present in bread and wine. They know how utterly they disbelieve it. They can see what a vast and staggering thing it would be were they to believe it. They find their snakes less disquieting.

**T**HIS EVENING, AT THIS EUCHARIST OF OURS, I want to talk about the Eucharist: I mean, I want to talk explicitly about the nitty-gritty of the sacrament itself. What is going on when that long, grand prayer is recited over bread and wine? What is being put in your hand when you come to this altar? What do you drink? Of course you know – at the moment of eating, at the moment of drinking, you are reminded: The Body of Christ; The Blood of Christ; there is no evasion. But we do need reminding how staggering, what a strange idea, how disturbing this is. For if we take it seriously, it alarms us; it rocks our life to the foundations, it shakes it into new patterns. For this is no play-acting, or symbolism or sham that we're about here. Eucharist by Eucharist we confront God by eating Christ, who is really present in what we eat. If this miracle is our regular experience, how can anything in life stay the same?

With Christ's real presence in the Eucharist we come near the heart of Christian faith. And it is almost too splendid to bear. It causes scandal, and not only to a wildfire Appalachian preacher like Carl (*I ain't no cannibal; I ain't no vampire*). It scandalises people trying to follow Christ in every age.

The scandal of the Eucharist began even before the Eucharist itself. Even before Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper, He was turning it over in His mind; and one afternoon He aired His Eucharistic teaching with His followers. They were not all pleased. In fact, Christ's Eucharistic teaching caused an instant crisis, a schism: the first of, alas, uncountable schisms amongst Christ's followers.

We've just heard the beginning of the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, and chapter six is where St John describes that crisis. First Jesus takes a few loaves, blesses them, and parcels them out to His hungry followers: on and on, until all five thousand are fed. It is remarkable; but it is only an introduction, for Christ goes on to explain what this miracle points to. It points to the Eucharist. *Don't come after Me for these mere loaves, which do not last*, He says: *seek the everlasting bread, the living bread. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is My flesh.*<sup>1</sup> And then the crisis; for just like Carl, Jesus' followers strove,

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<sup>1</sup> John vi<sup>52b-53, 55-56, 59-60, 66</sup>.

and recoiled, and demanded: *How can this Man give us his flesh to eat?* Jesus told them, *Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you... for My flesh is true food and My blood is true drink. Those who eat My flesh and drink My blood abide in Me, and I in them.* And then came the crisis. *Many therefore of His disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is a hard saying; who can hear it? . . . From that time many of His disciples went back, and walked no more with Him.*

Well, yes, that is a hard saying: *My flesh is meat indeed: My flesh is really food, your food, your necessary food.* It is a scandal to us to hear this, and anyway a great and standing surprise, or what the Church calls a mystery.

Why, precisely, is it so hard? Because we are fastidious (*who can hear it? I sure ain't gonna drink nobody's blood*). And what makes us fastidious? Arrogance: the arrogance of the mind, despising the fact of our fleshiness. We are snobbish about being animals. Our religious sensibility is particularly haughty about flesh, and our commonest religious sickness is contempt for material reality. Our commonest and most twisted religious fantasy is to escape from the physical. Many religions promote that fantasy, but Christianity does not. Christianity is drastically materialist. The mode of our salvation is the visible Church (an organisation, with taxes to pay and photocopiers to service), the physical sacraments (salt, oil, wine, water, bread, each weighing so many ounces). The source of our hope is Incarnation: God as a certain squawking Levantine infant weighing about six pounds. There's no point in being a Christian and then shying from that carnal mystery.

Every morning at Mattins, praising Christ in the Te Deum, the Church throughout the world tells Him outright – *When Thou tookest upon Thee to deliver man: Thou did not despise the Virgin's womb.*

What is said or sung in the Te Deum oughtn't to be unimaginable to us. Let us picture for a moment how the womb of Mary might appear from the viewpoint of pure Spirit. We flinch, because we are twisted and squeamish. But Christ did not flinch from that womb, and in that womb divinity was united forever with the flesh. *Prorsus credibile est, quia ineptum est,* says Tertullian: this is to be uttered believed, because it is so triumphally awkward; *certum est, quia impossibile est,* it's certain because it is inapt.

What Christ did not despise we can hardly despise – not here, where our Eucharist continues His Incarnation in a thoroughly material way. Our highest possible spiritual act is to crouch semi-recumbent on a plush or needle-worked cushion, and receive a wafer on our palms and in our mouths. So much for contempt of the material. (So much, too, for the contempt for our own bodies, which runs through a good deal of modern culture. Those godlike bodies on the magazine covers are meant as an aide-mémoire for despising our own. Our increasingly austere and joyless diet is about punishing our bodies for existing. This sacrament is among many other things a cure for the dreary loathing you feel for your own flesh. Christ is our cousin 'after the flesh', and to venerate His Body is to come to affectionate terms with our own.) The Christian Eucharist is about literal carnality; and of course it must be like that. We are not angelic spirits trapped inside bodies. We are really creatures of flesh, intrinsically bodied. The Church insists that even in Paradise we aren't to be prised out of bodily life and set 'free', but given perfected flesh – this is what 'resurrection' means. It is a higher sort of freedom. The Church teaches that the Incarnation of Christ is not reversible: that now, and forever, deep in the middle of Godhead is humanity, that

fleshly thing. Christ is eternally One with God, and yet we taste Him bodily, now, in time. Of course, it must be like that. How could it be otherwise? If we didn't taste Him bodily, the Eucharist wouldn't answer to what we are.

John Donne, the great Dean of St Paul's in London, began by perceiving this in erotic love. There's only one possible pinnacle to sexual love: an act in which the will is so caught up it seems to shatter and vanish, reabsorbed into the animal; an act which makes two one in an almost grotesquely literal fashion (*the beast with two backs*, growls Iago). Lovers may be as mystical and spiritual and elevated as they like (writes Donne, witty Iago's wittier contemporary). They may sit all day motionless and silent, their souls melding as their eyebeams twist. But in the end, at the heights of love as in the depths, is body, which soul transcends only so it can move freely return,

*Because such fingers need to knit  
That subtle knot that makes us man:  
So must pure lovers' souls descend  
To affections, and to faculties  
Which sense may reach and apprehend.*

This is true about erotic love not because of the nature of eros so much as because of the nature of man. It applies to the endless love affair of God and man as much as to sex. Divine love may seem to sweep us beyond the visible world and up, up to where even language fails. But in the end, the height of love is the absolute intimacy of flesh with flesh, the utter physical literalism, mysteries unutterable which, nonetheless, the senses may reach and apprehend: wafer on tongue.

*To our bodies turn we then, that so  
Weak men on love revealed may look;  
Love's mysteries in souls do grow,  
But yet the body is his book.*

God the Son didn't leave us writings with all the answers, nor a code of rules, nor a knack of miracle-working (as the snake-handlers think), nor even an interior Spirit to tell us what to do. He gave us Himself. He became human, literally taking on human flesh. And that wasn't an event in history: it goes on and on, Christ handing Himself out to His hungry followers, more and more of us, as on that hillside in this evening's Gospel, when He fed five thousand. And what He gives is physical bread that is physically Himself.

*To our bodies turn we then, that so  
Weak men on love revealed may look.<sup>2</sup>*

His gift's not a cold symbol of something else. It's what He says It is. He is bodily present, Body for bodies.

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<sup>2</sup> John Donne, 'The Ecstasie' (1631).

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**A**FTER THAT FIRST EUCHARISTIC SERMON at the synagogue of Capernaum many of Christ's disciples walked no more with him. But those who did keep walking with Him, and stayed on to received the Eucharist Itself from Him at the Last Supper a few months later, discovered what He meant. They tasted Him in the Eucharist. And they went on tasting Him for the rest of their lives. Celebrating the Eucharist became at once, and has always been, the central act of the Church. We gather and reënact the Last Supper, venerating and tasting the bread which is Christ's flesh. The early Church rejoiced over this huge gift, quite unspeakably vast, quite indescribable. They didn't try to define how it happened – why should they? How could they? But all the early Christian teachers insisted, and all the early Christians rejoiced, that Christ was truly, and really, and physically, and literally their food when they ate the Eucharist.

*My flesh is meat indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He that eateth My flesh, and drinketh My blood, dwelleth in Me.* It is a hard saying. Our imagination swims; our hackles rise; our pride is offended; human propriety is stung, even the rough propriety of the Appalachian valleys. We are sometimes tempted to turn it into mere metaphor, or symbolism, or whimsy. But Christ says *This is my Body*. To our bodies turn we then. If we can put aside our fastidiousness, our bogus high-mindedness, our metaphysical primness, and accept it for what He says It is – well, here is the beginning of out exultation, the start of out joy, our bridge into illimitable life.

In the Name of God,  
the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost,  
ever One, world without end:  
Amen.

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