

During Lent we're devoting our sermons to exploring different aspects of the liturgy of our Sunday service together. Next week we'll be thinking about the role Scripture plays, then the gifts of bread and wine, what it means when we receive Communion, and finally how as we're sent out - dismissed - at the end of Mass what it means for the rest of our daily life - how receiving Communion changes us and sends out transformed to transform our homes, our lives and our communities.

This first sermon is about the start of our service and some points in the service you may have noticed and wondered what they mean. When we were planning these sermons, we initially gave this week the title: 'Three Kisses and some Incense'. Sounds like a perfect Sunday...

Three Kisses and some incense - the kiss at the altar, the kissing of the Gospel book, the kiss of peace, and the role of incense in our worship. These actions remind us of the physicality of our worship - how we use the whole of our selves and all of our senses in worship. Sight, sound, smell, taste, touch. Worship engages our hearts and minds and bodies.

The physicality of our worship reminds us of a truth at the heart of Christian life: our bodies matter. The Christian life isn't just a life of values or ideas. We matter. Our bodies matter. As we were reminded on Ash Wednesday, 'We are dust and to dust we shall return'. We are stuff saved through stuff, saved by stuff. When God came to save us, God didn't save us at a distance or through a belief or idea. God saved us by becoming one of us in Jesus. God saved us by becoming incarnate in a body, in human *stuff*.

As our readings remind us, our entry into Church also reminds us of this - we are stuff saved by stuff. We join the Church through baptism, a physical act - as our bodies are grafted on to the body of Christ with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. As water is poured over our bodies, our bodies come to share in Christ's death so that those same bodies might come to share in Christ's Resurrection, as God delivers on his covenant with all people.

Bodies are physical.

They're stuff.

Our bodies are also locations of intimacy. What we do with our bodies shows who and what we value. Our hugs, our handshakes, our gestures, our kisses, show whom and what we love and value. The three kisses that take place in our worship each Sunday are a similar physical sign of love and value.

At the beginning of the service, Mthr Buki and I kiss the altar. We're showing with our bodies, in this case our lips, what we love and value. We're pointing forward to the centre of our worship, the centre of our lives, acknowledging what will take place on the altar in a few moments - that on this holy table God will be made present in bread and wine. The miracle of the Eucharist, the closest glimpse of heaven we share on earth will take place here - and our kiss at the beginning and end of each Mass points forward to this reality, it demonstrates our love of the Lord and what takes place on this altar and every altar throughout the world.

Our second kiss, is at the end of the Gospel. We stand for the Gospel reading as a sign that through the words of the Gospel we meet Christ.

When the Deacon proclaims 'This is the Gospel of the Lord', the Deacon kisses the Gospel book.

Again, a sign of intimacy with the one we have met through the words of the Gospel. At this point, as we make this gesture, we whisper a private prayer 'Through the words of the Gospel, may our sins be wiped away'. Our act of devotion is a sign of love for the Christ we meet in the Gospel, and of thankfulness for what Christ has done for us, the forgiveness of sins.

Our final kiss in each Eucharist is one we all share. The kiss of peace. When the Deacon invites us all to share with each other a sign of Christ's peace, this was originally shown with a kiss. We, however, are British. And our kiss has become an acknowledgement of each other, a bow or a handshake, or maybe a hug with a close friend or family member. Our greeting, our handshakes, our hugs, our bodies becomes signs of us being reconciled with each other as we together prepare to meet the Lord in bread and wine.

The kiss of the altar, the kiss of the Gospel book, the kiss of peace. Three physical signs of our love for Christ, for our redemption, for each other.

And finally, incense. In the book of Revelation, incense symbolises the prayer of the saints around the altar of God. In our worship each week incense symbolises our prayer mixing with the prayers of the saints and the worship of the angels. Our prayer reminds us that what we celebrate in this place are not justly earthly rituals but heavenly realities. That in the bread and wine of the eucharist, earth and heaven are united as Christ is made known.

Again this too is physical.

The sight of the light streaming through the clouds,  
the sweet fragrance of frankincense,  
our bowing to the thurifer as we are censed and  
reminded of our infinite value in God's eyes is a  
reminder that our response to this reality requires the  
whole of our selves,

that every single bit of us is called to share in this  
heavenly reality,

that every single one of us are invited to meet Christ  
here and now in bread and wine, that each and  
everyone of us is loved by God and called to love,

and to show that love with the our whole selves, with all of our sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell,

with every ounce of our being.

Because God loves every last bit of the stuff that God's formed and made, the stuff that is you and me, the stuff that God's call to love, the stuff that God loves more than we can ever dare to believe, the stuff that God believes can love just the same.