

This homily begins with a big sigh. Of all the Church celebrations we've 'missed' this year, this one is perhaps particularly gutting.

The readings are all about feeding, - and manna, - and bread, - and being together as one people sharing one loaf. In other words, what has been denied to us for very nearly three months, - and counting.

I could give you some flannel about Spiritual Communion, or passively remind you about Catholics in remote areas who only get to see a priest a few times a year. But that's a cop-out.

I will point to a very important point in Catholic sacramental theology: that is God's commitment and promise within the Sacraments in no way constrains his freedom to act outside of those Sacraments. That's a bit indigestible so let's break it down a bit.

In confession we are forgiven by God. Jesus promised us this. But God can also choose to forgive whomsoever He chooses outside of the confessional. Likewise, in Holy Communion we receive the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ. Again, he promised us this. But that doesn't mean that Jesus can't give himself to whomsoever He chooses in any way He chooses.

In other words, the Sacraments are, if you like, guaranteed, but not in a way that denies God's presence elsewhere. They are truly an outward sign of an inward grace. It "does what it says on the tin". But that doesn't mean that God is trapped "in the tin" and can't be found outside it.

This isn't just theological waffle, it has real consequences. It underpins all we've been doing recently, praying at home, listening or watching Mass on the computer, joining in as best we can and asking the Lord to be with us. It also underpins our ecumenical and interfaith positioning too. We claim a fullness of truth in Catholic teaching, but we do so with humility. The council fathers at Vatican II taught that there are many elements of sanctification and truth to be found outside the visible confines of the Catholic Church.

But even knowing this doesn't fill the gaping hole that is left for us attempting to celebrate today, Corpus Christi, without Mass, without Holy Communion. One reflection is that it's precisely because the practice of our religion is so bound up with our deep human needs that we

can't do it properly in lock-down or socially distanced. As human beings we are made for communion with one another and for Holy Communion with Jesus. It's not an individual act. We share 'one loaf'.

The term 'new normal' has been used to describe our current socially distanced reality; indeed we've used it in the bidding prayers. But deep within I rebel against the term. If this is normal then you can – politely – “shove it”.

Using World War II as a parallel: the blackout, sleeping in shelters or tube stations, sending children to the countryside – these were not, and never were, 'normal'. The new normal brought by the War was what happened after 1945: the welfare state, the NHS, computing, the nuclear age, and so on.

We won't know what the post-COVID19 new normal is going to be until we can open the blackout curtains and exit the bunker. Until then we survive as best we can, gaining what sustenance we can from Word, Prayer, Silence and Technology. Grace will find a way, and the human spirit will adapt. But simple survival is not true flourishing, sleeping in a tube station is not a home, and distancing can never be the communion for which we are made. God has not called us out of darkness into his wonderful light to live like this. And so, I choose to remain awkward, unsettled in these conditions. I will not make my peace with this so-called 'new normal'. If we get too comfortable with what we have now, we might start forgetting to pray for God to release us.