



## The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

### Homily for Corpus Christi (3<sup>rd</sup> June) 2021

Contrary to what is sometimes suggested, the persecutions of the Church were not unremitting in the early centuries. In particular for half a century before the final bout of hostility, our forebears in the Faith had lived in peace. They were even able to recover property confiscated under previous crackdowns - and in a manner, which accorded them legal status as the Church.

In AD303, the calm was disrupted once again. However, Christianity was really only collateral damage in the Emperor Diocletian's efforts to clean up the morals of the Empire - which, of course, was to be achieved in part by the restoration of the traditional religious practices. Unfortunately for him, hearts and minds had already drifted too far for the restoration to be secured.

During the fifty years at the end of the third century, persecution was replaced by debate; and pagan philosophers were very familiar with Christianity and its documents. This meant that lots of people knew about this new religion chewing at the heels of the old practices.

In particular, for a significant number of people, there was information about the way in which we worshipped. This was of interest, because there had been for some time a growing disenchantment with the animal sacrifices characteristic of religion in the Roman temples. Where once there were accusations of cannibalism in response to whispered rumours of the Eucharist, now there was attraction to the idea of the *un-bloody Sacrifice of the Mass*.

This, together with the fact that many Christians conspicuously lived the principles inhering in the Mass - a spirit of self-sacrifice, mutuality of care and concern, generosity of spirit and so on, made Christianity increasingly compelling. A decade of persecution could not suppress this attraction and in AD 313, the Emperor Constantine issued the *Edict of Milan*, often called the *Peace of the Church*.

Whilst his victory at the *Battle of the Milvian Bridge* might have been a proximate cause of his decision to issue the Edict, a huge momentum had built in this direction over the preceding decades.

The Mass played a significant part in the lead up to the Edict of Milan both in the very fact of its form and also in the character of the community fashioned by its regular celebration. Of course, it all took time for the initial revulsion at what uninformed hearsay reported about the Christian Eucharist to abate and more positive attitude to develop. The Eucharist carried the first generations of Christians through adversity and persecution before presenting a more receptive audience with an attractive vision of religious life.

In this, we see a vindication of Saint Paul's dictum that the Eucharist is the proclamation of Christ's Death - not just in the narrow sense of commemorating the event, but in the broader sense of conveying all that was bound up in Christ's work and Sacrifice. The Mass was and is, therefore, not just something that Christians do amongst themselves, but is a key element in our mission - our proclamation of Christ.

Today, of course, the context is different in many ways; but, perhaps, there is a comparable malaise with the philosophical framework in which society functions. We may be living through a period not of persecution, but of lean times for the life of the Church. As with the first generations of Christians, the Mass can carry us through these challenging times and fashion our character into a compelling vision for human society, rebuilding momentum and vigour in our mission.