

The Body and Blood of Christ (*Corpus Christi*)
The twelve approached Jesus and said: "Dismiss the crowd so that they can go to the neighbouring villages and farms to find lodging and provisions, for we are in a deserted place here." He said to them: "Give them something to eat yourselves." They replied: "Five loaves and two fish are all we have, unless we ourselves go and buy food for all these people."...Then, taking the five loaves and two fish, and looking up to heaven, Jesus blessed them, broke them and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd.



Luke 9, 11-17

Le Chambon-sur-Lignon is a smallish mountain village in the Auvergne region of France. It has a population which is largely Huguenot. Having endured persecution themselves, the Huguenots, who were the very first Protestants in Catholic France, were able to appreciate the plight of the Jews who were being systematically exterminated by the Nazis all over occupied Europe during the years of the Second World War. Under the leadership of their pastor, Andre Trocme and his assistant, Edouard Theis, the people of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon saved more than 5000 Jews, most of them children, from the gas-chamber. In defiance of the Vichy government which was collaborating with the Nazis to round up and transport Jews to concentration camps, the villagers sheltered Jewish refugees in their homes for years. They provided them with forged identification papers and ration cards, put the children into their schools and smuggled many adult Jews into the safety of Switzerland. It all began when a cold and hungry Jewish woman knocked on Andre Trocme's door and asked if she could come in. She was made most welcome. Through this act of kindness, repeated over and over, Trocme became a moral compass for the whole village and, eventually, for the whole of France. Jews came to be welcomed without question and without hesitation. They were sheltered in private homes, on farms and in the public institutions of the town. Whenever Nazi patrols wound their way up the mountain roads to the village, the refugees were hidden in the surrounding countryside. When the Nazis left, the villagers would go into the forests and start singing. This was a signal to the Jews that it was safe to come out of hiding. In the course of the war, no resident of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon ever turned away, denounced or betrayed a single Jewish refugee. Authorities in the Vichy government knew that Trocme was a pacifist and were aware of what he was doing to protect Jews. They ordered him to cease his activities. His response was fearless: *"These people came here for help and shelter. I am their shepherd. A shepherd does not forsake his flock. I do not know what a Jew is. I know only human beings."* Trocme was arrested and held for several weeks before being released. However, he was eventually forced into hiding. His wife and children took over from him. His cousin, Daniel, who was the principal of one of the village elementary schools was arrested and executed in the concentration camp at Maidanek, Eastern Poland for refusing to divulge to the authorities information about Jews who were being sheltered. A child survivor of the Holocaust, Emmy Award-winning documentary film-maker, Pierre Sauvage, was born in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in 1944. It was not until he was 18 years old that he learned that he and his family were Jewish. He later wrote: *"The*

Holocaust occurred in Christian Europe aided by the apathy of Christians and a tradition of anti-Semitism infesting the soul of Christianity.”

Andre Trocme and the villagers of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon imitated the actions of Jesus and the disciples recorded in today’s gospel reading. They *took* what they had (food and shelter), *blessed* it by their attitudes of Christ-like selflessness and compassion, *broke* it open in welcome, despite risk to their own safety, and *gave* it to strangers. Not surprisingly, early Christians understood the story of the feeding of the large crowd as a metaphor for Eucharist. Those very same verbs - *took, broke, blessed and gave* - are picked up again by Luke in chapter 22 of his Gospel where he describes the actions of Jesus in instituting the Eucharist at the Last Supper (Luke 22, 17-20)

In today’s gospel story, Jesus issues a challenge to the disciples when they realise the difficulty of catering for a large crowd in an isolated place: “Give them something to eat yourselves.” They searched around and came up with five loaves of bread and two fish which turned out to be sufficient. The people of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon responded to the very same challenge. They put the needs of people in distress ahead of their own and extended to those people the warm hospitality of their obscure and isolated village.

In his incisive explanation of the Eucharist in a little book entitled *Eucharist: Participating in the Mystery*, Fr. Frank Andersen msc reminds us that the Eucharist is incomplete so long as people in the world go hungry, without adequate shelter, neglected and forgotten. If what we do in our churches when we celebrate Eucharist on Sundays is to have any real meaning, it has to translate into what we do during the rest of the week. Frank Andersen restates that challenge to us in his song *Bound in Truth*: “*Take your bread and feed God’s hungry, open wide your welcome door.*”

Surely that’s the message we as Christians should be giving with some vigour to our Australian politicians whose heartless policies regarding asylum seekers are playing with the lives of people fleeing from religious and racial persecution. That’s a practical way of living Eucharist.