When I was working in London, at the Defra offices in London I used to go to the lunchtime services at St Matthews Westminster, which is just round the corner from Church House and its wonderful bookshop. The church is also wonderful, ancient but largely rebuilt after war damage and very much in the Anglo-Catholic tradition. I am still on their email list and it was an article from them entitled “Rowan Williams got it right about ritual” that set me thinking about the subject for this sermon. We also know that Rowan Williams is shortly to retire as Archbishop of Canterbury and have just learnt he will be succeeded by the Bishop of Durham, Justin Welby. Surprisingly you may think, I was not even considered despite the fact that I have a very impressive walking stick which would look very good as a bishop’s crosier. Perhaps I am just a bit too old?

There is going to be plenty of ritual associated with the enthronement of the new Archbishop, so I thought after reading the article from St Matthew Westminster this was a good time to think about it. Do you think ritual; what we do here, is important or not? Do those who don’t come here think it is unimportant and is that why they don’t come? Or is the fact of our faith in God and what we have in scripture enough? Are we, perhaps, just following meaningless archaic rituals and putting people off in the process?

Well looking at today’s readings we might wonder. Look at the Gospel. As Jesus and the disciples were leaving the Temple they spoke admiringly of the fine buildings and huge stones, and no doubt were equally convinced of the enduring quality of the Jewish rituals that went on inside it. But Jesus seems to dismiss their enthusiasm and attachment by saying: “Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” The epistle to the Hebrews seems even more specific; “Every priest stands performing his service daily and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never remove sins. But Christ offered for all time one sacrifice for sins… by one offering he has perfected for all time those who are thus consecrated.”

This all sounds very much as if ritual really is meaningless and Jesus’ unique sacrifice has removed any further need for it. If that is true then what are we all doing here? Well don’t walk out yet. I think there is more to say.

This is where we come to the article I was sent by St Matthew’s Westminster: Rowan Williams was right about ritual. Now, the very word “ritual” these days seems to have overtones of pointlessness, of fossilised tradition. Many people would say that they think a spiritual dimension is important, perhaps they even believe in God, but they have not time for organized religion and its meaningless rituals. Do they have a point? In this article, a Guardian journalist argues that they do not, and I agree with him. Far from being meaningless the rituals of our religion are very important. They might be more important than some apparently wider vision of spirituality, even one founded on scripture. In truth both are important and one may be no more right than another, but which is the most effective? Far from being outdated and off-putting our ritual may be the most important way of spreading the message of the gospel.

When I talk of ritual here I mean our liturgy, and specifically the Eucharist that we are celebrating today. That is very important to us, or we would not be here. But just what is important about it, or what should we be doing to make it important or significant? The point about our liturgy, or worship services if you prefer, is that it is a sign. It signifies something far more than itself, or it should. This is expressed very well by the American theologian Paul Hoon: *Liturgically, to remember is to experience the historical and eternal, brought together in Jesus Christ. That which happened in time is made the sacrament of that which happened beyond time, and that which is beyond time is known through that which is of time. History is at once affirmed and transcended.* This is particularly obvious in the Eucharist where the bread and wine, the consecrated elements, signify the body and blood of Christ. The importance of this is that it lifts our thoughts towards some, however incomplete, understanding of the true nature of Christ. It shows us how ordinary things can become cosmic and eternal when they are infused by the presence of God, as Christ on earth was.

You may be aware of the differences with our Roman brothers and sisters on the exact significance of the consecrated bread and wine? They believe them to be transformed into the actual flesh and blood of Christ. The Anglican position being that Christ is present in the consecrated elements but without them becoming his real flesh and blood.

One of Rowans’ important contributions has been to show that this debate is somewhat pointless. It is the consecrated elements as a sign of how God has been embodied in and has transformed earthly things which is important, rather than what those things become. The bread and wine of the Eucharist is a sign, **the** sign, of how we relate to God.

Would it not be much simpler just to take these ideas from the Bible or a study group and go on to that personal relationship with God through prayer, which I discussed last month? Well it might be simpler, but it would ultimately be far less effective. This again is the insight of Rowan Williams in his endorsement of the importance of Anglo-Catholic liturgy. For we are far more a people of signs than of sermons. Oh yes we are. I know how much **you** all enjoy sermons, but you are not typical. Similarly we are not, apart from a small minority, led by arguments and discussions. Far more are influenced by books, which is why the Bible is so important. Visual signs and actions are far more influential still, which is why TV is so popular. But perhaps even more influential are when people gather to do things together.

That is why our church liturgy is so important, particularly the visual aspects. Signs and symbols. That is what our vestments, altar frontals, Eucharistic silverware and manual acts that the priest carries out during celebration are. Signs and symbols of the sacrifice of Jesus, his broken body of the mystery and transcendence of God, but also his presence here with us. Exactly how these things are done is a matter of taste and some people prefer something simple. But we are successors of the Catholic tradition which, rightly in my view, places an emphasis on signs and symbols to draw people into the mystery, joy and sharpness of Jesus’ sacrifice in a way that no words or pictures can.

Perhaps this is what the writer of our final hymn was trying to express something of in the words:

*Crown him the Lord of love; behold his hands and side,*

*Those wounds yet visible above in beauty glorified:*

*No angel in the sky can fully bear that sight,*

*But downwards bends his burning eye at mysteries so bright.*

We are trying to glorify those bright mysteries in our worship today.

[Rowan Williams was well aware of these liturgical signs and symbols, but what about our soon to be Archbishop; Justin Welby. He came into the church in a very different tradition; through the alpha course and the strongly evangelical HTB in London. But I understand that he has moved a long way in his ministry and fully appreciates the importance of the Catholic tradition in the C of E].

As you watch and listen to preparation for Communion this morning, the prayer of consecration, Richard’s actions at the altar and receive Communion, allow yourself to be drawn into that mystery of a God who is both the power behind the universe and yet present here with us through the broken body and blood of Jesus Christ.