

The Body and Blood of Christ June 07, 2015

Exodus 24:3-8; Hebrews 9:11-15; Mark 14:12-16, 22-26

Today, we are celebrating the Feast of the Holy Eucharist or the Body and Blood of Christ. Eucharist in the church is understood as a communal sacrificial meal, offered by the community of believers along with the priest, to the Heavenly Father together with Jesus for the remission of sins and as an offering of gratitude and thanksgiving. The Eucharist is essentially and of its very nature a community action in which every person present is expected to be an active participant with the priest presides over it. The Eucharist is a sacrifice offered by the Christian community to the Father. Every sacrifice involves parting with something precious and hence involves pain. Every sacrifice involves an offering. Here in the Eucharist Jesus offers himself and his life out of love for us, his friends. He completes this offering on the cross as he offers himself totally to the Father. This offering is a gift and every gift involves the giver and the receiver. It is sacrifice to the giver and gift to the receiver. Jesus here uses the symbol of a MEAL to make us realize his presence. Every meal has its social dimension. Each and every celebration of ours, religious or secular, ends with a meal. A meal unites people, holds the family together and builds a community. Jesus uses this simple celebration of a meal to give us his closeness to us. It is built up on the idea of a family, where everyone shares the common food and all are equal.

Every Eucharist takes place in the context of a community. In this Communal Sacrificial Meal celebrated by the Community, we have the presence of Jesus who is the victim, the altar and the priest. He offers himself to the Father as a special offering for the reconciliation of the world. The Eucharist is offered and shared in a community as a fulfilment of the final mission of Jesus to save the world. In this communal sharing there is no difference of caste and creed and language as all partakers are equal. Several elements are involved in the word Eucharist. It is symbolic, it is a sacrifice, it is a meal, it is a memorial meal, and it is done in the community and is celebrated by the church. God is present in the world and the universe in several ways that are symbolic. Several images were given in the Old Testament, such as the cloud, mountain, thunder, lightning, wind, tent, Temple, fire and so on. People believed that God was there and they worshipped him. In the Letter to the Hebrews chapter one, we are given the ultimate symbol of God's presence, namely Jesus himself. God is present in creation and in every activity. But he is especially present to us in the Eucharist. As we break the bread at the Eucharistic table we ask the grace to be worthy of the Lord's mystery and be his instruments to bring his unity and charity in the world.

This special Feast of Corpus Christi is celebrated in remembrance of Jesus who gave His life for our salvation and commanded us to celebrate the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist in his memory. The Feast owes its existence to Blessed Juliana of Liege, who began devotion to the Blessed Sacrament in around 1230. Largely through her insistence, in 1264 Pope Urban IV commanded its observance by the universal church. The readings of today emphasize the theme of Eucharist as the sign of the covenant. The idea of the covenant is one that pervades the whole of the Hebrew Testament and is carried on into the Christian Testament. The word 'covenant' and 'testament' are the same in meaning so it is significant that this word is used to describe the two linked traditions. A covenant is an agreement, a solemn agreement between two parties. From the earliest times, God established such covenant or agreements with his people as he promised to protect them and care for them, while the people bound by their fidelity were to remain loyal to him.

Eucharist means thanksgiving and blessing. We express our gratitude to God for all the gratuitous gifts God has given us in Jesus and we offer back to him the gratitude in the form of Bread and wine. Eucharist means a Blessing. Blessing actually means prayer of praise and glorification for all the Lord God has done for us in Jesus. It is a meal shared by the community in the name of Jesus. It is a sacrificial meal, meaning it is an offering to God as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus uses here the symbol of a simple meal to show his presence to us and chooses the simple sign of bread and wine, a poor person's meal to manifest his presence. Here the emphasis is more the community dimension of the celebration of the Eucharist rather than the individual participation. Eucharist indeed is a communal celebration where we all share in the one bread and one cup. A priest as the leader of the group only presides and leads the community in the offering of the sacrifice. The Feast sums up three important confessions about our Faith. First is that God became physically present in the person of Christ, true God and true Man. Secondly, God continues to be present in His people as they form the Mystical Body of Christ in his church. Thirdly, the presence of God under the form of bread and wine is made available to us on the altar at Mass and preserved there for our nourishment and worship. Jesus gives us his Body and Blood so that he might live in us and become life for the world.

One of the most solemn binding of a covenant is described in today's First Reading from the book of the Exodus. Here we have the dramatic account of Israel's covenant bond with God. Moses had just received the Law or the commandments from God on Mount Sinai and he presented them to the people. He explained to them all the terms and expectations of the covenant. He told them of the demand God made of them and the response that was expected from them. With one voice they responded: "We will observe all the commands that the Lord has decreed." This promise was then ratified by a solemn ritual. Moses first built an altar at the foot of the mountain and erected twelve standing stones around it. The altar represented God and the stones the twelve tribes of Israel. Young men were then directed to offer holocausts and to sacrifice bullocks to the Lord. Half of the blood of these animals was sprinkled on the altar and the rest put in basins. Once again Moses read the whole book of the law, the Book of the Covenant, and the people solemnly agreed to observe and obey all that was in it. Moses then took the remainder of the blood and sprinkled it over the people, saying, "This is the blood of the Covenant that the Lord has made with you." The sprinkling of blood represented the bond of life between them and God.

The second reading taken from the letter to the Hebrews tells us that Christ has entered the sanctuary once and for all, taking with him not the blood of goats and bull calves, but his own blood, having won an eternal redemption for us. By shedding his blood Jesus became both the high priest and the sacrifice. Here Jesus brings a new covenant, as the mediator so that the people who were called to an eternal inheritance may actually receive what was promised. His death took place to cancel the sins that infringed the earlier covenant. In the old covenant the blood of animals was sprinkled on those who were unclean to restore them to an external holiness. Now in the new covenant the blood of Jesus is offered as the perfect sacrifice to God through the eternal Spirit that can purify our inner self to rectify our relationship with God. Through this pouring out of his blood, a covenant was sealed between God and the people of God. Now the people commit themselves to an absolute following of God through Jesus and in return he is for them the Way, Truth and Life. To drink his blood is a total identity with Jesus and with his self-giving sacrifice of love. Jesus is now the mediator between God and man who offers the sacrifice of his own body and blood for the sake of humanity.

The Gospel today brings us to the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples. It is the first day of Unleavened Bread, the day when the Passover lamb was sacrificed and the Pasch was celebrated. It was the biggest event in the Hebrew calendar, the celebration of their liberation, under the leadership of Moses, from a life of slavery in Egypt. The night before the Israelites left, they had to kill a lamb and eat it. They had to apply the blood of the lamb on the doorposts of their houses and so the first-born children in each home would be saved from the angel of death. Indeed they had been saved by the blood of the lamb. Jesus and his disciples now prepare to celebrate the Passover meal. But, for them this will be no ordinary Pasch. It will inaugurate a new age, a new covenant with a new people. The preparation for the meal is described in such a way that shows the prophetic abilities of Jesus. He designates where he wants to celebrate the Passover meal by giving the disciples signs that they were to follow to reach the exact place. They follow the signs such as a man carrying a jar of water and go with him to reach the house and celebrate the Passover

The institution of the Lord's Supper is the ultimate act of love of Jesus towards his disciples and all others who believe in him. The irony of this setting is that, previous to this action, Jesus had announced to his disciples that one of them was about to betray him. The intimacy of table fellowship was sharply contrasted with the act of betrayal by one from among them. Jesus had the Passover meal with the disciples but the details are not given to us. But we have the institution of the Eucharist during the meal. Mark tells us that as they were eating, Jesus took some unleavened bread, said the traditional blessing, broke it and distributed it among his disciples. "Take this," he said, "this is my body." It is not just his physical body but his whole person and everything that Jesus stood for through his life, words and actions. As he gave them the bread he identified it with his mission and vision of life. Again, they did not eat as individuals but, as one united group, sharing the one loaf among them all. Similarly, Jesus took the cup of wine, said a prayer of thanksgiving over it, gave it to them and again they all drank from the one cup. He told them that it is his blood, the blood of the covenant, which is to be poured out for many. The word blood expresses the whole person of Jesus. It was not the blood of animals but his blood that Jesus poured out on the altar of the cross for us. By this ritual, Jesus celebrates the new covenant which will be made real by his actual death and the pouring out of his blood on the altar of the cross as the priest and the victim.

Paul provides us with the earliest detailed account of the Lord's Supper and the Institution of the Eucharist. He tells them how Lord Jesus at the Last Supper took bread and broke it and gave it to the disciples saying "This is my Body which is for you. Do it in remembrance of me." He did the same with the cup of wine after the meal telling them: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. As often you do this, do it in remembrance of me." Paul tells them that they are participating in the body and blood of Christ and not their own meal. He informs them that the bread becomes the Body of Jesus and the wine becomes his Blood. He advises them to make Eucharist as the centre of their lives because of practical reasons as the church at Corinth had problems with unity, mainly due to their economic status. When the church came together to celebrate the Eucharist they also had their meal together as a single community. The problem in Corinth was that the rich would go ahead and eat without waiting for others and not even making sure that the poor in the congregation, who were mostly slaves, had eaten or even brought food with them. By eating without the poor, the rich showed utter disdain for their brothers and sisters, an offence against Christian unity. Paul tells them that there is no division in Christ's Community as he shared one bread and one cup and formed a true community. They have their own houses to eat and drink and satisfy

themselves. But at the Lords meal they are all to be one community, truly united to Christ in his sacrifice.

Our liturgy today recalls the scriptural origins of this devotion. All of our readings demonstrate the fidelity and the love of our Lord in his part of the covenant with us. They imply return obligations on our part. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and our participation in the Eucharist is our pre-eminent way of showing our love and worship of God and our attitude towards one another. We relate to him through his Risen Body, which is the whole community bearing his name. Thus there is no place in Christianity for individualism. It is a horizontal faith: we go to God with and through all those around us. That is the reason why Paul asks the community to share the meal together because Jesus broke the bread and shared, saying that it is his body. Same thing he did with wine, saying it is his blood. Through this sharing we become one with him. As we continue with the celebration of the Holy Mass, let us be thankful to the Lord Jesus for His Body and Blood that assures us our salvation. Let us also remember throughout the week that as new creations, we are called to feed on the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist so the Body and Blood of Christ may transform us in His likeness. The feast invites us to remember the connection between communion and community.

Once an elderly Rabbi gathered all his disciples around him and posed them a question. He asked them how they would distinguish between light and darkness and when they feel that there is enough light to see. After a long silence, one of the disciples said that early at dawn, they looked out into the field and could distinguish between an oak tree and a Sycamore tree, then there was light. The Rabbi said no. Another said that in the early morning mist if one looked out and distinguished in the field a cow from a horse, then there was light. The Rabbi again said no. Then the third said that early morning if they looked at the river and could the flow of water clearly then there was light. The Rabbi again did not agree. So they asked him for the answer. He responded saying when you look into the eyes of another person and recognize there is your brother or sister, then there is enough light to see.

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