

The Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Deuteronomy 8:23, 14B-16A
<i>Response</i>	Praise the Lord, Jerusalem
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 147:12-13, 14-15, 19-20
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 10:16-17
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I am the living bread that came down from heaven, says the Lord; whoever eats this bread will live forever.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 6:51-58

This Sunday we turn to yet another great solemnity in the Church's liturgical year. It is the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, commonly known as the Feast Day of Corpus Christi — the Latin for body of Christ. And so what we are going to do today is follow our standard method of beginning with the Gospel and then going back and looking at the Old Testament readings. However, before we read the Gospel, I just want to make one quick point about the Solemnity itself. The Catechism of the Catholic Church in paragraph 1324 has a beautiful line, a very famous line, taken from the Second Vatican Council about the importance of the Eucharist and why we have this great Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ. In paragraph 1324 the Catechism says this about the mystery of the Eucharist:

The Eucharist is "the source and summit of the Christian life." "...For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch."

So before we even get in, why would we have a solemnity dedicated entirely to the Eucharist? Aren't we making too much out of Eucharist? There might be some Christians who have a lower theology of the Lord's supper, where they think of it just as a memorial of Jesus. They might say that "Catholics are too focused on the Eucharist. Why do you make so much out of it?" Well I want to begin by just pointing out that the Catechism gives us the key. The reason the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life, in other words, the reason that the Eucharist is the fount of our life and also the summit of our life as Christians, is

because the Eucharist is not something, the Eucharist is someone, namely Christ himself; because we believe that in the Eucharist Christ is truly, really present, his body, blood, soul, and divinity. Now the question is why do we believe that? Well in this case the Church gives us ample reasons from the Scriptures themselves for the biblical foundations of our belief about the Eucharist. So let's look here. For year A, the reading here comes not from the Gospel of Matthew — this is one of those times we get a reading from the Gospel of St. John. It is one of the most famous verses in John, John 6:51-58, the famous bread of life discourse where Jesus gives his most explicit teaching on his real presence in the Eucharist when he says these words:

I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh."

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me. This is the bread which came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live for ever."¹

Now those of you who know me already, know that I could talk about this passage for a couple hours. It was really, in a sense, the reason I became a Biblical scholar, because I was challenged about the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist by a Christian who said that it wasn't biblical. And this passage was the beginning of my study of Scripture and really looking at it and looking at the biblical roots of

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

the Catholic faith. For our purposes here though I just want to highlight a couple things about this.

First and foremost, number one, Jesus says that he is “the living bread that has come down from heaven; whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and that the bread he's going to give for the life of the world is his flesh.” So Jesus begins this section by identifying himself as bread from heaven, but then by calling us not just to believe in him, but to eat his flesh. And when he says this the Jews respond by saying “how can he give us his flesh to eat?” In other words, they interpret him to be speaking about cannibalism, that they would maybe eat the flesh of his corpse in some way, shape or form. And of course they're naturally horrified by that. It is easy for us if you have grown up Catholic, or if you are a cradle Catholic, to just get used to the idea of eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus. But to his first listeners this would've been unbelievably shocking, inconceivable that a teacher would come out and say you have to eat my flesh and drink my blood.

So when the Jews react to Jesus' interpretation and they take what he's saying realistically and literally, what Jesus does here is important because you'll notice he doesn't back down. He doesn't say “no, no, no, no, you misunderstood me. I was just speaking metaphorically about believing in me” or something like that. No! He actually makes his statement more concrete and he says “Amen, Amen [so be it, so be it]...unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you; and my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.” So the second thing to notice there is that Jesus is emphasizing the realism of his presence under the form of food and drink, that the food and drink he's going to give — which they don't yet understand since he hasn't instituted the Last Supper — is real food and real drink and it's going to really be his body and his blood, and it's going to be necessary for us to receive it in order to have eternal life.

Again, notice here this line where he says “whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. This is a very important verse. Sometimes non-Catholic Christians, our separated brothers and sisters, say “why do you Catholics make so much out of the Eucharist” or “why do you insist on receiving the Eucharist frequently, like daily even with daily Mass.” The answer is simple, because Jesus himself said that “if you eat his flesh and drink his blood, he will abide in you and you will abide in him.” So if you want to abide in Christ you

need to receive his body and his blood in the Eucharist. And if you want Christ to abide in you — and I can't think of any Christian who would say "I don't want Jesus to abide in me" — then we need to receive his body and blood, we need to eat his flesh and drink his blood under the form of food and drink, which is of course the Eucharist.

You might be thinking "well how is it possible for me to eat his flesh and drink his blood? If you think about it, he lived 2000 years ago. He died 2000 years ago. How is his body and blood supposed to come to me today?" And here Jesus gives us the third key when he compares his body and blood to the manna from the Old Testament. A lot of times people miss that, but notice the final lines of this section. "This is the bread which came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live for ever." So what he is referring to there when he talks about "the fathers" or "your ancestors," he is talking about your ancestors in the wilderness. He is talking about the wilderness generation, who when they left Egypt experienced the miracle of the manna from heaven, where God gave them miraculous bread from heaven to feed them during their forty years in the desert. And if you go back to those stories, you will recall that many of the Israelites rejected the manna. They said "we don't want this worthless food" in the book of Numbers and so God took their lives. He said "you're going to die in the desert," and they did. The vast majority of them died in the wilderness in Numbers 14 and they didn't make it into the promised land. Others, like Joshua and Caleb, they ate the manna but they still eventually died, they didn't live forever, they experienced natural death. But what Jesus is saying is "my food that I am going to give is different than the old manna. Whoever eats this manna, the new manna, will live forever; and this bread that I am going to give is my flesh for the life of the world."

Why does that matter? Well it is really simple, and this might be the most important thing I say on this video. If the Eucharist is the new manna from heaven, then it cannot just be a symbol of Jesus' flesh and blood, it has to actually be his flesh and blood, his real flesh and blood. Why? Well because in the Old Testament, the manna was miraculous bread from heaven. Now if the New Testament manna were just a symbol, that would make the old manna greater than the new manna, and that's not how salvation history works. Old Testament prefigurations are never greater than their New Testament fulfillments. If the old

manna was miraculous bread from heaven, then the new manna of the Eucharist also, at the very least, has to be miraculous bread from heaven that we need each day in order to enter into the eternal promised land of heaven.

Now if that sounds like news to you, if you haven't heard of the Eucharist as the New Manna, it shouldn't be a surprise because if you go back to the Old Testament, that's exactly what the reading is about for today. So if you look here, today's reading, it is not taken from the Exodus account of the manna, but it is taken from Deuteronomy 8, where Moses is warning the second generation of Israelites as they are about to enter in to the promised land. So in Deuteronomy 8:2-3, this is what we read:

Moses said to the Israelites: “And you shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments, or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with *manna* [there it is right there], which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD.”

And if you skip down to verse 14 it says:

You forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, who fed you in the wilderness with manna which your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end.

Okay, so what's going on here? Why is this the first reading for the Feast of Corpus Christi? Well it is very simple, it's because it's all about the Exodus and it's all about the manna from heaven. So a couple of points. First, why did they spend 40 years in the wilderness? It doesn't take 40 years to get from Egypt to Israel. Trust me, you could probably ride a bicycle there in a few days. It is not that far away — I don't know that for a fact, I am just making an exaggerated point. Why

does it take 40 years for them to get from Egypt to Israel? It is because they're wandering in the wilderness, because God leads them in to the wilderness in order to humble them. And during that time he causes them to hunger and he causes them to thirst, and then he feeds them with miraculous bread from heaven so that they might understand that human beings don't "live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God's mouth." They live by God's will, by God's word, by his commandments, by being faithful to his will and to his word. So the manna there is a symbol for God's divine provision, that he's going to take care of his people, that he is going to be with them every day, even though they are in the wilderness and they're hungry and they're thirsty and they're being tempted and they're being tested. He is still with them. And the sign of his being with them is that he gives them miraculous bread from heaven every day.

And that's the third main point about this passage from Deuteronomy, it's that the bread that he gives them isn't ordinary food. Sometimes people say that "the manna was just some natural substance or something like that." No! Not according to Deuteronomy and Exodus, because Deuteronomy says "he gave you manna, which your fathers did not know." In other words, Moses was a shepherd in the desert for 40 years, but when they see the manna in Exodus 16 they say "what is this stuff? What is this? We have never seen this before." Because it's unprecedented, it's miraculous bread from heaven. And it only lasts for 40 years. Once they get into the promised land the manna stops because it's a temporary miracle. And notice here in Deuteronomy, the manna is paralleled with the water from the rock, also not natural. If you strike a rock, water doesn't come out of the rock. There is no water inside of the rock, it was a miraculous gift from God for his people in the book of Deuteronomy. So if you look at an ancient Jewish reading of Deuteronomy, they always saw the manna and the water as miraculous gifts from heaven. So when Jesus is talking to his Jewish disciples — remember all the disciples were Jewish — and he compares the Eucharist to the Old Testament manna, he is clearly signaling to them that this is miraculous food from heaven. That the reason he can give his body, blood, soul and divinity under the Eucharist is because the Eucharist isn't just a memorial, it's not just a sign, it's not just a meal, it is, in a real sense, a miracle. A hidden miracle, you can't see the miracle taking place, but it's a miracle nonetheless. And the visible miracles in the Old Testament are meant to give us faith to believe that he performs the invisible miracle of changing the bread and the wine into his body and to his blood, and then

giving it to us under the appearance of food and drink so that we might have eternal life as well.

And that explains the Responsorial Psalm for this week. If you look, the Responsorial Psalm is Psalm 147, with the refrain “God feeds you with the finest wheat.” And that famous line is from Psalm 147:12-14, it says:

Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem!
Praise your God, O Zion!
For he strengthens the bars of your gates;
he blesses your sons within you.
He makes peace in your borders;
he fills you with the finest of the wheat.

So the tradition of the Church has always interpreted that expression “the finest wheat” as a reference to the manna. That the finest wheat was the wheat that came from heaven, the bread that was from heaven. And this Eucharistic theme continues of course into the second reading as well, which is from 1 Corinthians 10:16-17. These are the famous lines from St. Paul where he says:

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

A very important verse here, because we see St. Paul saying quite clearly that the bread and the cup are real participations. The Greek word there is *koinōnia*. It sometimes gets translated as communion. That is where we get the expression Holy Communion from, it is from St. Paul. They are a communion in the body of Christ and a communion in the blood of Christ. In other the words, they are a real sharing, a real participation, a real reception of, not just his body, but also of his blood. And that's why we call this the Feast of Corpus Christi, the body and blood of Christ. One more point about this Pauline passage. I just want to stress this because, again, a lot of times many of our separated brothers and sisters, non-Catholic Christians, have serious doubts or just reject the idea that the Eucharist is really the body and blood of Christ, but notice also that it's a sacrifice as well.

They will sometimes say “it is just a memorial, a remembrance.” But if you look at Paul's words hear in context, he is actually going to go on to talk about the sacrifices of Israel, and even the sacrifices of the pagans in the temple. And what he will say is that when the Israelites offer sacrifice, they are communicants in the altar. He uses the same word *koinōnia*. They have a real participation in the altar. So it shows that Paul not only believes that the Eucharist is really Jesus' body and blood, but he also believes it is a real sacrifice, that it's a real participation in Jesus's sacrifice on the cross of Calvary, when he gave his life for the salvation of the world.

So with all that said then, how can we connect this today to our own lives? Or is this something that I'm just making up for example, because those of you who know me, you know I really get into studying the Jewish roots of the Eucharist. I wrote a whole book on that, *Jewish and the Jewish Roots of Eucharist*, but this isn't something that I just made up or even discovered. This is the tradition of Church. This is how the Church interprets the mystery of the Eucharist. And you can see that actually, especially in the liturgy for Corpus Christi, because for this day there is a special Psalm called a sequence, *Lauda Sion*, that can be sung optionally before the Alleluia. So before we hear the Gospel, the Church allows us on this particular Sunday to sing this special sequence, and I'm not going to sing it — you wouldn't want that — but I will read some of the words to you and I want you to see how the words of the song connect to the readings that we've heard today. So this is the sequence, *Lauda Sion*, which by the way in Latin just means praise Zion or praise the LORD, O Jerusalem, just like we heard from Psalm 147. So it's a sequence that is based on the Psalm, but it takes the words of the Psalm and it runs with them, and this is what it says:

Lo! the angel's food is given

I'm just going to read a few verses. It is a very long sequence, but if you skip down to the end of the sequence, toward the end there are three verses I want to read:

Lo! the angel's food is given
To the pilgrim who has striven;
See the children's bread from heaven,

which on dogs may not be spent.
Truth the ancient types fulfilling,
Isaac bound, a victim willing,
Paschal lamb, its lifeblood spilling,
manna to the fathers sent.
Very bread, good shepherd, tend us,
Jesus, of your love befriend us,
You refresh us, you defend us,
Your eternal goodness send us,
In the land of life to see...

Beautiful lines there. What do they mean? Well notice here, what is the Church doing? First it refers to the angel's food that was given to pilgrims as bread from heaven, well that's a reference to the manna, the bread of the Angels that was given to the Israelites while they were on their pilgrimage to the promised land, the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the city, the capital of the promised land. So the manna is a type of the Eucharist. It's the bread that's given to us today from heaven as we journey through this desert, this valley of tears, this present world, on our way to the new Jerusalem to the new Zion, the city of Angels, the new Jerusalem, the city of the Saints, the heavenly Jerusalem, the heavenly promised land. And you will see there in that second verse, it says "the ancient types fulfilling," this is the Church's practice of typology, of reading the prototypes, you might call them, in the Old Testament as signs and shadows, prefiguration's, of the fulfillment in the New Testament. And the type that it mentions in that verse is the manna that was sent to the fathers. This is one of the principal types of the Eucharist. And then finally the image of the Good Shepherd. We just celebrated good Shepherd Sunday a couple weeks back. What is it saying? Well the shepherd has to feed the sheep so what does he feed them? In this case, our shepherd feeds us bread, the very bread of the good Shepherd that refreshes us, gives us eternal goodness, and leads us to the land of life; not the earthly promised land of Canaan, but rather the heavenly promised land of the new creation, the resurrection and the life of the world to come. And that's really what the Eucharist is. Sometimes we forget that just as the manna tasted like honey in the book of Exodus, it was a foretaste of the promised land, so too the Eucharist is a foretaste of the resurrection, of the life of the world to come. As Jesus said, "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him...and I will raise him up on the last day."