

# **The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ**

## **(Year B)**

<i>First Reading</i>	Exodus 24:3-8
<i>Response</i>	I will take the cup of salvation, and call on the name of the Lord.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 116:12-13, 15-16, 17-18
<i>Second Reading</i>	Hebrews 9:11-15
<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>	Mark 14:12-16, 22-26

We continue our journey through Ordinary Time with another solemnity. So last week we celebrated the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity and this Sunday we are celebrating the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, commonly known as Corpus Christi, Latin for body of Christ. So today —you are not going to be surprised — it is Year B so we are going to be in the Gospel of Mark and because it is Corpus Christi, the gospel for today is taken straight from the account of the Last Supper in Mark 14:12-26. So let's begin there and we will read it together and unpack it:

And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the passover lamb, his disciples said to him, "Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the passover?" And he sent two of his disciples, and said to them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the householder, 'The Teacher says, Where is my guest room, where I am to eat the passover with my disciples?' And he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; there prepare for us." And the disciples set out and went to the city, and found it as he had told them; and they prepared the passover.

At this point lectionary skips a few verses down to verse 22 and says this:

And as they were eating, he took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly,

I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.<sup>1</sup>

So we will stop there. The first thing I would like to highlight in this account of the Last Supper is that first line in Mark's gospel, "on the first day of Unleavened Bread." This is one of those times where Mark uses an expression from the Old Testament and from Jewish practice and belief, but he doesn't define it for you. So if you don't know what he's talking about or if you are not familiar with that feast then you are not going to have a full sense of what he is about to narrate in the account of the Last Supper. So most Christians are familiar with Passover and the Feast of Passover, but we tend to be less familiar with the Feast of Unleavened Bread because our experience of the Passover today is different than it was in Jesus' day. Today when people celebrate the Passover it is frequently a one day celebration. Usually it takes the form of a Passover Seder, a Passover meal that will be celebrated in the evening with songs and food and festivities and whatnot, but it's just a one day festival. Now that's true today but in Jesus's time things were different, Passover, which was one day according to the Old Testament and according to custom of his day, was followed by a seven day festival call the Festival of Unleavened Bread, Azymes is an older translation that comes from *ázymos*, and it just means unleavened.

So what happened is by the time of the first century A.D. these two biblical festivals, Passover and Unleavened Bread, were fused into one so that what you ended up with was an eight day celebration that commonly came to be referred to simply as Passover or as Unleavened Bread. It is kind of similar to the way we have a Christmas octave today, where Christmas is the initial day but there are also eight days of celebration that follow and so the both the initial date and the final period, the latter period, are one celebration — although you can make distinctions. That was true in the first century A.D. with Passover and Unleavened Bread, although what happened was people would usually pick one name so they would either refer to it as Passover or refer to it as Unleavened Bread, but they were talking about the entire eight-day celebration, because it was experienced as a full octave of sacrifices and offering lambs in the Temple and eating the flesh of lambs and drinking wine. It was an eight day celebration. If you want to find out more about Unleavened Bread you can just go back to the book of Leviticus 23 and there you'll get some details about that feast. For now the main point is this, when Mark says on the first day of Unleavened Bread,

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

he's talking about the full octave, because he specifies in the next verse, “when they sacrifice the Passover lamb.” So that would be on the first day of this eight-day festival, and that first day was commonly known, and still is known, as Passover.

Now in Jesus' day there was another difference that's implicit in this verse. Not only was the entire celebration an octave, eight days long, but it wasn't just a meal, it was a sacrifice. That is very important. Today when people celebrate Passover Seder's, it's just a meal. You don't have a priest, you don't have a Temple — there is no Temple — you can't go to Jerusalem and offer the Passover sacrifice anymore because there is no Temple to do it in; but in Jesus' day what you had to do is go down to Jerusalem for Passover and Unleavened Bread, you had to acquire a lamb, you had to bring that lamb into the city of Jerusalem, into the Temple in Jerusalem, and then you had to slaughter that lamb by slitting its throat, and a priest would catch the blood of that lamb in a bowl and pour it out on the altar of sacrifice in the Temple. That is what preparing the Passover lamb meant in the first century A.D. It involved the Temple, it involved the priesthood, it involved sacrifice; something that is not part of the contemporary Jewish Passover. So in just these first two verses we have to make sure we put ourselves back in time and realize that what's being described here is the night on which the Israelites would not just remember the Exodus from Egypt, but would engage in a Temple sacrifice in Jerusalem that involved not just eating a lamb, but killing a lamb and pouring out its blood on the altar in the Jerusalem Temple.

So what's going on here then in the initial verses is that Jesus is sending two of the disciples into Jerusalem to do all of that; to acquire a Lamb, to bring it up to the Temple, to slit the throat of the lamb, to have its blood poured out by a priest on the altar, and then to bring the lamb back to the upper room in order to skin it, flay it, spit it and roast it so that it can be eaten for the Passover dinner that night. So I bring this up — and notice I said two of the disciples; Mark doesn't say that, that's only in Luke, in Luke's Gospel we discover that it's Peter and John who go into the city of Jerusalem in order to do this — so implicit in that act is the fact that they had to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem — another key difference between ancient Passovers and today. So what's going on here is Jesus is having two of his disciples go in, he's giving them the vital information about what to do and where to go while he stays outside the city until the time has come to celebrate that meal. Now why does he do that? Well as far as we can surmise it's because he already knows that Judas is going to betray him and he doesn't want to reveal the location of where he's going to celebrate Passover that night to Judas. In other words, he has a sacrament to institute before the passion begins so he doesn't want to be betrayed by Judas. He also though is under watch from the authorities so he's going to wait until nightfall and then go into the city and go to this appointed rendezvous, this upper room that has been prepared

and there he is going to keep the Passover with his disciples. So everything I have said so far should tell you that the most important context for the establishment of the Eucharist is the Jewish Feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread. That's the surrounding context that is going to give meaning to all of Jesus's words and deeds that he's going to carry out at the Last Supper.

Okay, with that in mind then just a real quick overview of the ritual acts that preparing the Passover meal would involve, because if you look at that last verse there it says the disciples went into the city, found it as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover. What does that mean, they they prepared the Passover; what exactly did they do? I'd highlight five steps here that we need to think about. Number one, they had to choose an unblemished male lamb. It couldn't be just any kind of lamb, it had to be one that was clean and pure and a male one-year-old, in other words in its prime. So you couldn't pick an old lamb or a sick lamb or a lamb that had some kind of major defect. It had to be perfect, it had to be pure, it had to be holy. Second, they would then sacrifice the lamb by bringing it up into the Temple, bringing it to a low wall according to Jewish tradition, where either Peter or John, one of the layman, would slit the throat of the lamb and then a priest would catch the lamb's blood. Third, they would then pour the blood out on the altar in the Temple — the priest would do this, this was the priests job to pour out the blood — and we know from 1st century Jewish sources, like Josephus, that tens of thousands of lambs would be sacrificed in one day. So the amount of blood being poured out by the priest would've been monumental. It would have been a solemn, somber really unforgettable liturgical service that took place once a year, every year in the spring.

Now this is important, according to the Bible, though, the Passover sacrifice, the preparation of the lamb, did not stop with the death of lamb, you then had to bring the lamb back to wherever you were going to eat it and you would need to spit it and to skin it — you would skin it first. Skin it and spit it and then roast it in order to eat it because the sacrifice of the Lamb in the Temple was completed by a meal that would usually be eaten somewhere within the city. Now you can imagine the practical dimensions of this. If you've got all these pilgrims gathering in Jerusalem and they all have to eat their lambs within the city because the Bible says it has to be eaten in Jerusalem, you are going to have people literally bursting at the seams, coming out of the rooftops. You will have people eating in every room of every house in every building throughout the city in order to celebrate the Passover. So it would have been an amazing and unforgettable evening of feasting within the walls of Jerusalem. And then finally, after that meal was consumed, the Bible says that this was to be done every year as an act of remembrance, remembering what God had done for the people

of Israel in the Old Testament and remembering how he had saved them from Pharaoh at the time of Moses in the Exodus from Egypt.

Ok, with all that in mind, that's all in the Bible, that is all kind of the basic elements of the Bible, but there is one last aspect from Jewish tradition that is really fascinating. I talked about this in my book, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist*, maybe you have read it already, but if you haven't I want to share it with you. What's fascinating about the preparation of the lamb that Mark is describing in this account is that according to both ancient Jewish tradition and ancient Christian tradition, the way they would prepare the lamb in order to roast it was by spitting the lamb in the form of a cross. So St. Justin Martyr, who actually grew up in the second century in Syria, had witnessed certain Jewish Passovers — the Samaritans for example are still doing it up to today, they still do it up to this day — he describes this and this is how he says the Jews prepared their lambs:

For the lamb, which is roasted, is roasted and dressed up *in the form of a cross*. For one spit is transfixed right through from the lower parts up to the head, and one across the back, to which are attached the legs of the lamb.<sup>2</sup>

Now the first time I read that it really blew me away, the idea that of the tens of thousands of Passover lambs sacrificed on Holy Thursday, on the day the Eucharist was instituted, they would all be spitted, they would all be roasted in the form of a cross. So you can imagine Peter and John, they are going up into the city and what would they have seen? They would have seen crowds of men coming out of the Temple with lambs on their shoulders elevated and spitted in the form of a cross. In other words, they would have seen lambs being crucified before being eaten as the passover lamb. So it is a powerful sign, a powerful shadow that we learn about from Jewish tradition of the fact that from the beginning God has the crucifixion in mind, God has the cross in mind, that the Passover lamb and all the sacrifice and all the blood and everything associated with it at the time of the Exodus is really just a shadow of what is going to be accomplished on Calvary on Good Friday. Christ himself would have seen all these crucified lambs coming out of the Temple as he went up to the Passover every year, and in a sense foreseeing a shadow of his own passion and his own death on Calvary. So it's a powerful, powerful expression and it is all kind of hidden in this one little verse, “they prepared the Passover.” What did that mean? Well it meant all of those things.

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<sup>2</sup> Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho, 40; trans. ANF

But the story doesn't stop there because of course we have to move to the Last Supper itself where the Lamb will be consumed. And, so it says "as they were eating" Jesus takes bread, he blesses it, he breaks it and he gives it to them, and then he does something unexpected. Instead of saying this bread represents the affliction that our fathers experienced when they were in the land of Egypt — which would have been the customary Jewish words over the bread — Jesus says "this is my body." And the same thing, he takes the wine, he takes the cup of wine, and instead of speaking about the blood of the lamb that was put on the doorpost and lintel of the home, or the blood of the lamb that had just been poured out on the altar in Jerusalem, he says "this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many." What is going on here? Two things. First, Jesus is revealing to the disciples that he is the true Passover lamb. Just as the body of the lamb was offered as a sacrifice at the time of Moses, just as the body of the lamb was offered in the Temple as a sacrifice, so now he too is going to offer his body in order to set us free not from slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt, but from sin and death itself. Matthew's Gospel will make this real clear when it says "poured out for the forgiveness of sins." The same thing with the blood. Whereas the blood of the lamb was put on the doorpost and lintel of the home to be a sign of God's protection of his people, and whereas the blood of the lamb was poured on the altar of sacrifice in the Temple, now Jesus says "this is my blood of the [new] covenant, which will be poured out for many." Now when he makes that statement, "blood of the covenant," that is an allusion to another Old Testament text. Not the Passover in Exodus 12, but to Mount Sinai and the establishment of a covenant between God and Israel on that mountain.

And in this case, happily, we happen to bring us up to the first reading for today. So this is not a coincidence, if you go back to Exodus 24:3-8, the first reading for today's liturgy of Corpus Christi is the description of the establishment of the covenant on Mount Sinai. The church gives a kind of abbreviated form of this account, but let's read it and you'll see the connection very easily with Jesus' words. So the setting here is Moses and the 12 tribes have arrived at Mount Sinai, they have received the 10 Commandments, but they haven't made the covenant yet with God. This is what happens:

Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do." And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD. And he rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. And Moses took half of the

blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient."

And you are thinking here, "yeah right." If you know the rest of the story, you know that they do not follow the word the Lord and they are certainly not obedient, but I digress. The next verse is the key one:

And Moses took the blood and threw it upon the people, and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

That's the key verse. It's fascinating, that exact expression "the blood of the covenant" occurs twice in the Bible. It occurs here in Exodus 24 and it occurs again at the Last Supper. There's a slight allusion to blood and covenant in Zechariah 9, but these parallels are the two closest ones. So when Moses establishes the blood of the covenant on Mount Sinai, this is in a sense the birth of Israel, it's the beginning of this covenant relationship between God and his people. As Ezekiel will say, "this is the day that Israel is married to God." He enters into a sacred family bond with the Lord through this blood sacrifice, and then Jesus is going to take those words of Moses from Exodus 24 and put them on his own lips, but not with reference to the blood of a lamb or a bull or a goat, but rather to human blood, to his own blood which is going to establish not the Mosaic covenant, but the new and everlasting covenant that was spoken of by the prophets. There is going to be a new marriage, there is going to be a new nuptial covenant. In this case, not between God and Moses and the 12 tribes, but between Christ and the 12 apostles, which are like a new Israel; Christ as the divine bridegroom so to speak of the new Israel.

So in any case, what's going on here is that Moses and the 12 tribes are making this covenant and there are two motions to the covenant. Notice this, there's a book of the covenant and then there is the blood of the covenant. So what do we have? We have a liturgy of the word and then we have a liturgy of sacrifice. Does that sound familiar? Can you think of any other worship services that are two parts: one word, one sacrament. Well obviously I am talking about the Mass. So Moses in a sense anticipates Christ instituting the Eucharist and then the Eucharist of course is the mystery in which we participate whenever we celebrate the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist in the Mass itself. So that is a very powerful reading for Corpus Christi today.

Now with that said, what about the Responsorial Psalm? If we look at the bridge between these two passages: Marks account of the Last Supper and Moses and the institution the covenant, we will see that Psalm 116, which is Responsorial Psalm today, fits perfectly into this broader context of Passover and covenant. Now there are lots of things I could say about this Psalm, it is one of my favorites, but I'll just make a couple of points. First, this is one of a series of Psalms, Psalm 113-118, called the Hallel Psalms, or the Praise Psalms, and they were the Psalms that were sung by Jews not just during the Passover, but it was these psalms that would be sung in the Temple by the Levites while the lambs were being sacrificed. So for example, when Peter and John went into the Temple in order to offer the lamb, they would've heard the Levites chanting psalms, and this would have been one of them. So it is really powerful, taking us back to that very day when the Eucharist was instituted. We are even singing the same psalms that they sung on the night of the Passover. But it wasn't just in the Temple, once you would celebrate your Passover meal, according to Jewish tradition, the leader of the meal and the participants in the meal would sing the psalms that the Levites had sung in the Temple. We actually saw a hint of this in the gospel for today. That last verse from the gospel said that "when they had sung a hymn, they went out into the night." So what hymn was Jesus singing? I will give you a hint, it wasn't Amazing Grace and it wasn't Gather Us In and it wasn't On Eagles Wings or any of those hymns you might be familiar with in your experience of Catholic worship in contemporary times. The hymn that they sung was one of the psalms because the Psalter, the book of Psalms, was the hymnbook of ancient Israel. There wasn't any other book of hymns; this was the book. So Jesus and the Apostles would've sung Psalms 113-118 at the Last Supper itself.

So again, this Responsorial Psalm, Psalm 116, would've been sung by Jesus. Now I want you to think about that. Imagine Jesus singing. Imagine our Lord, the incarnate God, the word made flesh, singing the inspired words of the Holy Spirit from the Psalter. It is powerful to imagine Christ, the Son, singing to the Father in the power of the Spirit with the words inspired by the Spirit in the book of Psalms. It kind of blows your mind to even pray the Psalms in this way, especially to pray this psalm that was sung by our Lord, is really like to enter into the mystery of the Trinity itself. To pray to God with the very words that God himself has given to us through the God-man. Anyway, that is the kind of stuff I think about at night sometimes. On a side note there, with that in mind, Jesus praying the Psalm, imagine Jesus singing these words at the Last Supper. This is Psalm 116:12:

What shall I render to the LORD  
for all his bounty to me?  
I will lift up the cup of salvation

and call on the name of the LORD,  
I will pay my vows to the LORD  
in the presence of all his people.  
Precious in the sight of the LORD  
is the death of his saints.  
O LORD, I am thy servant;  
I am thy servant, the son of thy handmaid.  
Thou hast loosed my bonds.  
I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving

Notice three elements there. First, Jesus would've sung about lifting up the cup of salvation. What has he just done in the Eucharist? Given us the cup of his own blood, the cup of salvation. Second, Jesus sings about being the son of the LORD's handmaid. Well who is that? Well, it is Our Lady. So think about that, Jesus sung about Mary at the Last Supper. How fitting is it then that we sing about Mary at every Mass. We always mention Mary at the Mass. And then third, Jesus sang about offering a sacrifice of thanksgiving. In Hebrew that word is *todah*, it is a special kind of sacrifice, and he does that on the cusp of going to his death. So on the human level it is profound to think about that. If you were about to die would giving thanks be your reflex, would that be your response? That's what Jesus is thinking about, because he is giving thanks for the redemption that is about to be accomplished in his name and through his sacrifice, and then in which we will participate whenever we celebrate the new covenant sacrifice of thanksgiving — and the Greek word for thanksgiving is of course *eucharistia*, the Eucharist, the Thanksgiving. So all of that is swirling together in this beautiful, beautiful Responsorial Psalm for this Feast of Corpus Christi. It is a very powerful, very powerful Psalm.

In closing then just a little final word from the living tradition of the church. The Catechism of the Catholic Church in paragraph 1340 has a great summary of the relationship between the Eucharist and the Jewish Passover. Maybe some of this is new to some of you, maybe you have heard it before, but you might be thinking if you haven't heard it before, “where is this all coming from?” This is just the tradition of the church. This is just the teaching of the church. In paragraph 1340 the Catechism says this about the Last Supper, the Eucharist and the Jewish Passover:

By celebrating the Last Supper with his apostles in the course of the Passover meal, *Jesus gave the Jewish Passover its definitive meaning*. Jesus' passing over to his father by his death and Resurrection, the new Passover, is anticipated in the Supper and celebrated in the Eucharist...

Which of course is why we as Catholics believe that the Eucharist is really the body and blood of Christ. On this Feast of Corpus Christi we want to remember that, that the sacrifice of the Passover lamb wasn't completed by the death of the victim, it was completed by eating the flesh of the lamb, and that is what we do on the Feast of Corpus Christi.