

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 lift up 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 which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 14:12-16, 22-26

The second reading for the feast of Corpus Christi, the Body of Christ, comes to us from the letter to the Hebrews 9:11-15. And this is a very powerful passage, very famous passage from the epistle to the Hebrews on the high priesthood of Jesus Christ and on the redemptive power of the blood of Christ, which is why it's chosen for this particular solemnity. So let's read through those verses together, and then I'll try to unpack them. And as you might imagine, it's the letter to the Hebrews, so there are going to be some Jewish roots in here that we need to highlight. So it says, chapter 9, verse 11:

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred which redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant.¹

Alright, so you might already have noticed just from that one sampling, if you haven't read Hebrews before, that Hebrews is complex. It is one of the most sophisticated writings in the New Testament. It's the most difficult Greek — widely regarded as the most difficult Greek — in the New Testament. And it's dense. There's a lot going on here.

For our purposes here, I just want to unpack a few elements of it that are essential to understanding the basic idea of what the letter is referring to. The first point is the identification of Jesus as a high priest. What does that mean to identify Him as a high priest? Well, any first century Hebrew, any first century Jew, would have been familiar with the fact that in Pentateuch, in the books of Moses in the Old Testament, Aaron (Moses' brother) is set apart to be the high priest over the people of Israel.

In other words, he was the leading officiant in the sacrificial worship of God that was conducted in the tabernacle of Moses, which was a portable sanctuary that was designed by God, given to God and revealed to Israel through Moses in the book of Exodus, as the place and in the manner in which God wanted to be worshipped in the time of the exodus. And Aaron is set apart as the chief priest or the high priest. And his sons of the tribe of Aaron are actually going to be eventually (the family of Aaron) are going to be designated as his successors in that high priesthood.

So the difference between a high priest and a regular priest in the Old Testament — and actually, all the way up until the time of Jesus Himself — is that whereas a regular ordinary Aaronic priest could enter into the tabernacle or the temple in the court of sacrifice and offer burnt offerings and bulls and goats and lambs... and could even enter into the holy place and offer the Bread of the Presence and incense and things like that that were offered in the tabernacle. The high priest and

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 high priest alone could enter into the innermost sanctum of the temple, known as the Holy of Holies, and that he could only do once a year.

And once a year he would enter into that sanctuary, that inner sanctum, and he would offer the blood of the sacrifice for the Day of Atonement — in Hebrew, known as *Yom Kippur*. And this was the day that the sacrifice would be offered by the high priest, a special sacrifice in order to atone or reconcile for all of the sins committed by himself, all the priests, and all of the people for the entire year.

So you could offer sacrifices for yourself or for your family. If you committed a sin, you'd offer a sin offering. In order to make reparation, you'd offer a guilt offering. Throughout the year, individual people could offer sacrifices. That was what the temple did.

But every year, once a year, the high priest would enter into the Holy of Holies, the innermost sanctuary, and he would offer a sacrifice to atone for all of the sins of all of the people for the entire year. So it was like an annual corporate or universal sin offering. So when the letter of Hebrews identifies Christ as the:

...high priest of the good things that have come...

What he's doing is he's drawing a typological parallel between the high priest in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament. And this would have been shocking to a first-century Jewish reader on one level, because Jesus is not a member of the tribe of Aaron. Jesus is not a member of the tribe of Levi. Jesus comes from the tribe of Judah, as His genealogy tells us. So He's part of the royal tribe, but He would have been.... mysteriously, Jesus would have been a layman just on a historical, earthly level. This is one of the mysteries of Jesus. He's both a layman and a priest — kind of like the Blessed Mother is both virgin and mother. They encompass these different mysteries in themselves.

So what Hebrews here is describing is Jesus acting as the true high priest of — second point:

...the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation)...

Now what is that referring to? Well, the word tent there, *skéné*, is the word that is used for the tabernacle in the Old Testament. So the tabernacle was just a portable sanctuary. It's like a big tent that would be erected by the Levites — put it together, they'd put it up. And in this tent which was divided into three parts... you had the sanctuary, the outer court of sacrifice. Then you'd have an inner tent, the holy place where you had the Bread of the Presence, you had a golden Menorah, you had the golden Altar of Incense of prayers going up to God.

And then you had the third innermost sanctuary of that tent, which was the Holy of Holies. And that housed the famous Ark of the Covenant — the golden box containing the Ten Commandments, topped with golden statues of cherubim which was called the Mercy Seat. It would be the place where the high priest would go in and pour out the blood of the sacrifice for the Day of Atonement once a year — every year in the fall, by the way. That's when that would happen. Between September and October was when the Day of Atonement would take place and still takes place to this day — not in the the temple, but Jews celebrate *Yom Kippur* to this day as an annual festival.

So what Hebrews is saying here is that Jesus is a true high priest, and He enters into not the holy place in the temple on Earth. He enters into a:

...greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation)...

Well, where is this tent? Where is this tabernacle Hebrews is talking about? Well, the letter of Hebrews is referring here to the heavenly tabernacle, to the heavenly Holy of Holies, the heavenly dwelling place of God. And in making this argument, Hebrews here is assuming pretty standard Jewish understanding from the first century AD that goes all the way back to the book of Exodus. When God, in the book of Exodus, gives Moses those absolutely boring instructions that everyone stops reading — anytime people try to read the Bible and they get through Genesis. “Wow, it's fascinating, even a little racy.” Then they get to Exodus: “Wow” — the

story of the exodus from Egypt. But when they hit Exodus 24-25, that's when a lot of people fall off the Bible reading wagon, because the detailed instructions about how to build a tabernacle are very tedious to read. So a lot of people just... it's like reading an Ikea manual for building a piece of furniture. It's just dry. But it's very important, because God actually tells Moses in Exodus 25:40, when He's giving them instructions for the tabernacle, He says:

And see that you make them after the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain.

And there are some other verses too. In other words, Moses models the earthly tabernacle on the heavenly tabernacle that he sees when he goes up to the top of Mount Sinai and has a vision of Heaven. So from that time on in Judaism, there was always this understanding that the earthly temple was like a visible icon of the heavenly temple. The earthly tabernacle was like a material shadow of the invisible tabernacle of God's dwelling place in Heaven.

And so what the letter to Hebrews is saying here is that Christ was not the high priest of the earthly tabernacle. He didn't go like Aaron into the Holy of Holies once a year to offer the blood of bulls and goats and lambs. But He entered into the heavenly tabernacle not made with hands, not of this creation. And He brought with Him His own blood to secure not an annual redemption but an eternal redemption, an eternal sacrifice that atones for sin.

So you can, this is really a powerful argument. He says:

...he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh....

That would be the old covenant sacrifice of the Day of Atonement.

...how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God. (Hebrews 9:12-14)

This is an argument from the lesser to the greater. It's saying if the blood of bulls and goats had the power to atone and cleanse the flesh from external impurities, how much more does the blood of Christ have the power to cleanse our conscience from dead works (that means sin) to serve the living God? And that's what we mean (verse 15) when we say:

Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant... (Hebrews 8:15a)

So in the Old Testament, remember, a covenant is a sacred family bond between God and Israel. It establishes a relationship between Him and His people. And that relationship is renewed through acts of love we call sacrifice — acts of offering to God that would take place daily and annually in that earthly temple. But at the end of the day, all of those sacrifices of the blood of bulls and goats — which many modern people find repugnant. Actually, not just modern people — even some ancient people found this stuff strange, pagan converts to Christianity. What was all this about? Why would the God of the universe care if I slaughter a bull or a goat? What is that about?

Well, what Hebrews is revealing here is that the earthly material blood of those bulls and goats was a sign or shadow of the blood of Christ — the infinitely valuable blood of Christ, which is poured out in love, in order to atone not just for the sins of all of the people in one year, but for the sins of all humanity and for all of human history. That's what we mean when we say Christ is the mediator. He's the go-between between humanity and God. He ushers humanity into God's heavenly sanctuary, where He pours out His blood for our salvation and for the sake of the whole world.

Now you might be thinking, "Well, wait a second. When does that happen?" Because for most of us, we think of the sacrifice of Christ as primarily (if not exclusively) Him pouring out His blood on Calvary in time and space and in history. And that's absolutely right. Calvary is the fulfillment of the Day of

Atonement in the sense that Christ pours out His blood to atone for the sins of the world.

However, remember that Good Friday is not the end of the Paschal Mystery, because what's going to happen is Christ is going to die, be buried, then He will rise again with the wounds of His crucified body, and then He ascends into Heaven. And I don't know about you, but for years I used to wonder, "Well, why did Jesus ascend into Heaven? Why did He leave us behind? Why didn't He just stay here? We could use some help, right?"

The answer lies in the typology that Hebrews is giving us here. Jesus fulfills the Day of Atonement not only in His death on Calvary, but in His Ascension into the heavenly tabernacle where He will offer Himself to the Father through the Spirit (in the Spirit), not just on one day, but for all eternity — once and for all time, as Hebrews says here and elsewhere, in chapters 8, 9 and 10.

And it's precisely the eternal nature of that redemption — this is important, listen to me, this is very important — that makes it possible for us to understand how, on the feast of Corpus Christi, when the priest says the words of consecration, "This is my body" and "This is my blood", how is it that the body and blood of Christ are made truly and really present?

I mean, Christ died two thousand years ago. How does His body and blood that were broken on Calvary come to me today on the altar? Well, it's because the very same body that was crucified, Christ has brought up into eternity. He's now outside of time and from the heavenly tabernacle, He is offering Himself for all time and can now pour Himself out on every altar, every sanctuary throughout the world, every time the holy sacrifice of the Mass is offered.

That's what we mean when we say that the Eucharist is a re-presentation. It makes present the mystery of Christ's sacrifice. That's why we call the Mass a sacrifice, because the sacrifice of Jesus did not end on Calvary. It was consummated there, but as Hebrews makes clear, insofar as the sacrifice involves offering, what does it say?

...how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God. (Hebrews 9:14)

Remember here... on the day of Atonement, what would the high priest do? He would go into the Holy of Holies, and he would sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice on the mercy seat on the Ark of the Covenant seven times. So just as the Old Testament priest enters into the Holy of Holies to offer the blood of the sacrifice of the Day of Atonement, so Christ, the high priest of the good things to come, enters into the heavenly Holy of Holies to offer the perfect sacrifice — Himself, to the Father, in the Spirit, for an eternal redemption. And that is why Hebrews continues:

...so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred which redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant. (Hebrews 9:15b)

In other words, just as the people under Aaron, at the time of Exodus, entered into the earthly inheritance of the Promised Land, so too now Christ secures for us the eternal inheritance not of an earthly Promised Land but of the heavenly kingdom of God, of the heavenly Promised Land.

So it's a powerful, powerful description not focused so much on the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, which is what we tend to think about when we think of Corpus Christi, but rather on the eternal nature of the sacrifice and of Christ's self-offering that is prefigured on the Day of Atonement through the blood of the bulls and goats, and then fulfilled in Calvary and in Christ's Ascension into the heavenly tabernacle.

So in closing, you don't have to take my word for this. Ha, ha... I always say that. But you can take St. Thomas Aquinas' word for it in his little *Commentary on Hebrews* —just a small, short little commentary. St. Thomas Aquinas explains this relationship between Christ and the heavenly tabernacle as follows:

Christ is *the high priest of heavenly goods*...

And then Aquinas goes on to give several points in support of this. I'm just going to give you a few of them. He says:

Second, he shows the dignity of the inner tabernacle when he says, “by a greater” [Heb 9:11]... But this is *the tabernacle of heavenly glory*... [I]t is of a different condition because the Old was made by human hands, but this by the hand of God... Third, he shows how he entered, because not without blood, but with the blood of calves and goats, as it says in Leviticus (Lev 16): but Christ not so, i.e., not with another's blood... “but by his own blood,” *which he offered on the cross for our salvation*... Fourth, when he entered, because once a year. *But Christ throughout all of time... “entered into the holies” and poured out his blood once: “Christ died once for our sins” (1 Pet 3:18)... Furthermore, he entered once, for from the fact that he entered heaven, he is there always.*²

Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Hebrews*, paragraph 436-440. Now that quote might sound a little confusing, because I kind of selected key paragraphs and key lines from it. But I can summarize it for you and just say these things.

First, what Thomas is saying here is that Christ is the high priest of the heavenly tabernacle. You can see this because when Hebrews describes Him entering into the greater tabernacle, he's not talking about the earthly one. He's talking about a tabernacle of glory.

Second, it also tells us how He entered, because when it describes the fact that the high priest had to bring blood into the tabernacle — in Leviticus 16, the Day of Atonement — Christ is going to enter into the heavenly tabernacle not with an animal's blood but with His own that He offered on the cross for our salvation.

Now you might be thinking, “Well, wait, is Jesus pouring out His blood in Heaven?” No. He dies only once, but when He rises from the dead, remember what He says to the apostles when they think He is a ghost. In Luke 24, He says:

² Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Hebrews* nos. 436-440 (trans. F. Larcher)

“Have you anything here to eat?” (Luke 24:41b)

He asks them for something to eat and He says:

See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have.” (Luke 24:39)

In other words, the body that’s raised with Jesus is a fully human body, even though it’s in a glorified state. He has flesh and blood and bones, and so He brings that very body that He offered once on the cross of Calvary on Good Friday into eternity in order to offer it in an unbloody way for all time in the perfect sacrifice of Himself.

Finally, Thomas says — this is important — that the high priest only enters once a year into the tabernacle in order to prefigure the fact that when Christ enters into Heaven, He does it once and for all time. So He is there always, and that is crucial for us to understand.

In order to understand the mystery of the Eucharist, it’s very important for us to remember that the resurrected Christ has entered into Heaven *bodily* and that He remains there *in His body* and will be there, as Thomas says, in His body always.

And that’s what we celebrate today on the feast of Corpus Christi — the fact that Christ once and for all died for our sins and that He now offers on our behalf to the Father in the Spirit for all time, the precious blood that secures for us an eternal redemption.