

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ (Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Genesis 14:18-20
<i>Response</i>	You are a priest forever, in the line of Melchizedek.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalms 110:1, 2, 3, 4
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 11:23-26
<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>	Luke 9:11B-17

A second great solemnity in Ordinary Time is the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, commonly called Corpus Christi or The Body of Christ Sunday. On this day the Church commemorates the great gift of the Eucharist; the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ that was given to us for the first time at the Last Supper, and then is given to us every time the mass is celebrated throughout the world.

So today's gospel is going to be taken from the Gospel of Luke because it is Year C, however, somewhat surprisingly, you might think, "oh, well, Corpus Christi, we should look at the Last Supper". The Church doesn't do that; it actually goes back to the public ministry of Jesus, and we look at the feeding of the five thousand, at Luke's account of that. So let's walk through that passage together, we'll unpack it and then we'll go back to the Old Testament, see how they relate to one another, and how all of this ties to the Eucharist, which Vatican II called the source and the summit of the Christian life. So, Luke 9:11-17 says this:

When the crowds learned it, they followed him; and he welcomed them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God, and cured those who had need of healing. Now the day began to wear away; and the twelve came and said to him, "Send the crowd away, to go into the villages and country round about, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a lonely place." But he said to them, "You give them something to eat." They said, "We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people." For there were about five thousand men. And he said

to his disciples, “Make them sit down in companies, about fifty each.” And they did so, and made them all sit down. And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And all ate and were satisfied. And they took up what was left over, twelve baskets of broken pieces.¹

Okay, so a few things first. The feeding of the five thousand; you’ve heard this one before because it’s the one miracle of Jesus that’s recorded in all four gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all testify to this magnificent miracle that Jesus performs of feeding five thousand people from five loaves and two fish. In one of my other lectures on this video I actually walk through how this is indeed a miracle (it’s not a miracle of sharing), it’s a miracle of multiplication, especially in John’s account which makes very clear that the food that the people eat is derived from the five loaves and the two fish. The twelve baskets that are filled up after (this is in John) come from those original elements. So I’m not going to go into that today, just suffice it to say here that no matter how tiny you break the pieces up into, you can’t get enough bread and fish to feed five thousand people from five loaves and two fish unless there is a miracle of multiplication. So that’s what’s taking place here.

Another aspect you might notice as you’re reading through it is that in Luke’s account — it’s very similar to the other accounts — you have the five thousand people, you have the five loaves and two fish, but there are some distinctive elements that are worth highlighting here. Number 1, first, Luke emphasizes that it takes place in a lonely place. Now that’s the Revised Standard Version’s translation. The Greek word there is actually *erēmos*, which can also be translated as “a deserted place”, or it’s actually just the word for a desert, meaning the wilderness. So, for example, when Jesus goes out into the desert to be tempted by the devil for forty days and forty nights, the Greek word there is the same word, *erēmos*. If you’re a 1st Century Jew and you’re reading this account, or you’re hearing about Jesus doing this miracle in the *erēmos*, in the desert or in the wilderness, it’s going to echo or call to mind for you the wilderness wandering in the desert at the time of the exodus from Egypt. So the setting of the feeding of the five thousand in the wilder-

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.

ness is itself already your first clue that this miracle is pointing back to the exodus from Egypt, and it doesn't take a biblical scholar to know that in the exodus from Egypt, one of the great miracles was the miraculous feeding of the twelve tribes of Israel through the gift of the manna from heaven, this miraculous bread from heaven.

So what we have here in the feeding of the five thousand, just the very setting itself, in a lonely place (or in a desert), is an echo of the miracle of the manna. Which is, by the way, another reason for showing that this isn't a miracle of sharing, because the miracle of the manna in the Old Testament didn't have anything to do with sharing, it had to do with God miraculously and supernaturally supplying his people with food while they were in the wilderness so that they could journey to the Promised Land. So if the feeding of the five thousand is a recapitulation of the manna, if Jesus is like a new Moses in a new wilderness feeding the new Israel, then it wouldn't make any sense for the first one to be miraculous, but this new and greater feeding to be a simple, natural act of sharing. It's a preposterous suggestion, there's no biblical foundation for it in the text, and it just (basically) is groundless. It has no basis in the text, or (and frankly) in the tradition too, it was made up about 150 years ago by a German rationalist who didn't believe in miracles. So he tried to come up with some other way to explain the text. Here, what we see is, an echo of the exodus from Egypt.

A second element here has to do with something that is common to Luke and the other gospels, namely, the five loaves and the two fish. So there's a dramatic difference between the amount of food they have and the number of people that need to be fed. I mean, if you've ever given a party for fifty people at your house, you know how much food fifty people can eat. So, this is five thousand people, and all they have is five loaves and two fish. So it's going to take a miracle to feed them. Now, a third element of Luke's account that really is striking is the fact that Jesus makes them sit down in companies of about fifty each. That's something I know for me, I blew right past year after year of reading the text. I never really noticed that. But if you pause and think about it for a second in real time, when the Apostles asked Jesus what are we going to do, and Jesus says you give them something to eat, and the Apostles say, "are we going to go buy food for them? That's not possible." What does Jesus command them do? He tells the twelve, "make them all sit down in companies of fifty each". Now, how long would that take? How long would that take the twelve disciples to get five thousand people to sit down in companies of fifty each? I mean, as a professor, it's hard sometimes to get thirty-

five people to sit down and be quiet so we can start the class. So you know it can be difficult to bring a group to order and to make them all calm down and sit down, much less to arrange them in groups of fifty each.

So why does Jesus do that? It's a little weird. Why doesn't he just multiply the loaves and the fish like in the movies? He always does that in the movies. In the movies, they never show the Apostles going around "Ok, now, fifty of you here, and fifty here" — what's going on? Well I'll never forget, one day I was reading the Dead Sea Scrolls and there's a famous Dead Sea Scroll called the Damascus Document. The Dead Sea Scrolls were these ancient Hebrew writings from the time of Jesus that describe the beliefs of a Jewish group, probably, most likely, identified as the Essenes. And one of the things the Damascus Document does is it's looking forward to the time of the Messiah as like a new exodus — "When a prophet will arise like Moses...", and there will be events that parallel the exodus from Egypt. In that document (in chapter 12) it describes how in the time of the Messiah, the new Israel, the people of Israel, are going to sit down in companies of fifty and a hundred, and things like that. And I thought, "oh wow", it reminded me of the feeding of the five thousand, which brought me back to the book of Exodus, because in the book of Exodus 18, there's an image of "the twelve tribes being arranged into specific groups of fifty." It is actually a biblical image. So why does Jesus make the Apostles do this thing that would have taken time and effort? Well it's because he is arranging the people at the feeding of the five thousand according to the same kind of groupings that you'd find in the first exodus from Egypt. Listen to the words of Exodus 18:25-26, it says this:

Moses chose able men out of all Israel...

That means all twelve tribes

...and made them heads over the people, rulers of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and tens. And those men, they judged the people at all times

That's Exodus 18:25-26. So what Moses is describing here is not an exact parallel with Jesus but it's significant. It's Moses basically choosing what were called *phylarchs*, these men who (kind of) rule over the different tribes and judge them. And they are divided up into thousands, hundreds, and fifties, and tens. Now that division of the people of the twelve tribes of Israel underneath these twelve judges, these twelve *phylarchs*, it's picked up, and in Jewish tradition, by the time you get to the 1st Century, the idea of twelve judges organizing the people of Israel into dif-

ferent groups (the one that gets highlighted in the Dead Sea Scrolls is groups of fifty), becomes a kind of image associated with the (so-to-speak) the hierarchy (or the organizational structure) of the Exodus from Egypt. So when Jesus does something similar with his Apostles, he takes twelve men and appoints them to arrange the people (the five thousand men) into groups of fifty each...One scholar pointed this out that it's kind of a military exercise as well. Setting people up into divisions, so to speak, according to numerical units. What's he doing? He's implicitly revealing his identity as the new Moses. The twelve Apostles are like the new twelve judges, and then the people (the five thousand people) are like a new Israel, because this is the new Exodus. He's revealing through this sign that the new exodus is at hand. And of course, later on in Luke's gospel this will become very clear at the Last Supper when Jesus says (in Luke 22), "I have chosen you twelve, and you will sit on twelve thrones..." doing what? "Judging the twelve tribes of Israel", exactly what Exodus 18 just said about these men that were chosen by Moses to lead. So Luke here is revealing Jesus as a new Moses, the disciples are the new leaders of the new Israel, and so this new miracle that Jesus is performing is a sign of the new Exodus.

Alright, with that in mind, that's how the miracle points back to the Old Testament. But it doesn't just point backwards, it also points forward to the Last Supper. So if you notice in Luke's account of the feeding of the five thousand, he emphasizes four actions of Jesus with the bread. What does he say? After Jesus makes everybody sit down, it says, "and taking the five loaves and two fish, he blessed them and broke them and gave them to the disciples" and then they give them to the people. So in the Greek, those four verbs, Jesus *takes* the bread, he *blesses* the bread, he *breaks* the bread and he *gives* the bread," are the same four Greek words that re-occur at the Last Supper, when Jesus is seated with the twelve Apostles, and he *takes* the bread, *blesses* the bread, *breaks* it, and *gives* the bread to them and says, "this is my body, given for you," and then, "this is the cup of the new covenant and my blood poured out for you". So the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves (the feeding of the five thousand), is also a Eucharistic miracle. It's not just an exodus miracle, it's a Eucharistic miracle; it points back to the Exodus from Egypt, but also anticipates what Jesus is going to do at the Last Supper, which will also be (in a sense) miraculous, in so far as he will change bread and wine into his body and his blood and give it to the new Israel of the Apostles.

So, in other words, the gospel for today is about a Eucharistic miracle, and that's why we're reading it on the Feast of Corpus Christi. Okay, so with that in mind,

let's go back to the Old Testament. Now you might think (given everything I've just said) that the Old Testament reading for today would be from the book of Exodus and from the story of the manna, but it isn't. The Church chose a different anticipation of the Eucharist from the Old Testament for this year, in Year C, and that is the account of the mysterious figure of Melchizedek in Genesis 14. So let's read through that well-known passage together and then we'll unpack it. So the first reading for today, Genesis 14:18 says this:

And Melchiz'edek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said,

“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
maker of heaven and earth;
and blessed be God Most High,
who has delivered your enemies into your hand!”

And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

End of story, sand frankly, end of Melchizedek. He appears in these two verses (in the Old Testament), and he never appears again except for one other time, in Psalm 110. That's it. So he's a very mysterious figure. So who is he and what's going on here? Well in order to identify him we have to look at a few elements of the context. So the context of the reading for today is the aftermath of a battle between Abram (who is Abraham, before his name was changed), and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah and some of the people from the land of Canaan, pagan kings that had kidnapped Lot and with whom Abraham had to go into battle in order to rescue his nephew (who frankly, if I were Abram, would not have felt so inclined to rescue). If you remember, Abram and Lot divided the land and Lot takes the really good real estate by the river Jordan, which put him as a neighbor to Sodom and Gomorrah and some of those other kings. So they end up conquering him and capturing him and Abram has to go rescue him, even though Abram's in his eighties at this point. But he's leading, he's a warrior, he's not just a father in faith, he's a warrior, and he gets Lot back. And after he defeats the kings of the land, what happens is the king of Sodom comes out to meet Abram in the valley of *Shaveh* and there, this mysterious figure Melchiz'edek arises. Now Melchiz'edek, in Hebrew, the name means “King of Righteousness”; *melchi* means king, *z'edek* means righteous. So he's the King of Righteousness. And Genesis tells us that he was the king of Salem as well. Now where is Salem? It's not in Massachusetts, it is the ancient, archaic Hebrew name of Jerusalem. So you can even hear it at the end of the name,

“Jeru-Salem”. You can see this in Psalm 76:1-2, in which the psalm identifies Zion (which is another name for Jerusalem) as the same mountain, the same place as “Salem”, the word used here to name the city over which Melchizedek is king. So what we have here is an ancient king of righteousness who is also king of Jerusalem, and who comes out and in thanksgiving to God for Abram’s victory over his enemies, offers an unbloody sacrifice of bread and wine (very important).

Although sometimes we think of all sacrifices in the Old Testament as animal sacrifice, because that’s the one that’s most repugnant to us modern people (it sticks in our memory), in the Old Testament there were many kinds of sacrifices. Some of them were bloody, but some were unbloody, like the thanksgiving sacrifice known as the *Todah*. And the *Todah* (in Hebrew) just means thanksgiving. And one of the elements of a “thank offering” were to sacrifice bread and to sacrifice wine. It’s a kind of meal that you would celebrate with God to express your communion with him (your covenant relationship) and to give thanks to Him for whatever blessings he may have given you; in this case, the blessing of victory over the enemies of Abram. So the King of Jerusalem comes out to offer an unbloody, thanksgiving sacrifice of bread and wine in Jerusalem for Abram, and he’s the King of Righteousness.

And there’s one last element of Melchizedek that’s really crucial, and it’s that he was priest of God most High. Now the Hebrew word here for Priest, *Kohen*, only occurs here (for the first time) in Genesis, so this is the first occurrence in which a person in the Old Testament is explicitly called a priest (a *Kohen*). And the essence of priesthood is the offering of sacrifice, to offer sacrifice to God in mediation between God and humanity. And although there were other people who were priests before Melchizedek; Adam is depicted as a priest, Noah is depicted as a priest, because they offer sacrifice, Abel offers a sacrifice to God. Melchizedek’s important because he’s the first man to be called priest in the Old Testament explicitly. And the first explicit priestly sacrifice is bread and wine in Jerusalem, in thanksgiving to God for victory over his enemies. And you can see that he’s a priest here because what does Abram do? Well, he gives them a tithe. So, an essential part of being a priest is offering sacrifice. After that, it’s taking up a collection. Now that’s biblical, right here, it goes all the way back to the Old Testament. Even Melchizedek couldn’t resist the temptation to take up a collection during the sacrifice of bread and wine after the battle of the kings of *Shaveh*. Anyway (sorry), little joke there. But actually it’s important because tithing is tied up to the priesthood all the way

back to the Old Testament. And so when Abram gives him a tithe, what that means is he gives him a tenth of the spoils of war.

And that's something that happens over and over again. You give a tithe to God (in the Old Testament), but you do it through the priesthood. It's a way of offering another unbloody sacrifice, the sacrifice of money or sheep or cattle, whatever it might be, there are different ways to tithe. The first fruit of your land, you can give a tithe of grapes, or a tithe of grain, but you give them to God through the priesthood. So, sorry if I've soapboxed here, but for Catholics who complain about the idea of giving, taking up a collection during mass, that's a liturgical act that is fundamentally rooted in scripture, and is something that people shouldn't have a problem with. In fact, Jesus (if you recall), he praises the widow in the Gospel of Luke, who gives her last two coins to the temple as a tithe. Because when you give the tithe to the temple and the priesthood, you're not giving it to them, ultimately you're giving it to God through the priesthood and through the temple.

So generosity with tithes (and with tithing) is something biblical that goes all the way back to the patriarchal period. This is pre-Mosaic law, its pre-Ten Commandments, so it's a very foundational, fundamental way of offering sacrifice; because as Jesus says, "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." So if you're unwilling to give any of your treasure to God, you're probably unwilling to give any of your heart to God too. That's a pretty good index. So end of soapbox. That's what's going on in Genesis 14. I bring it up (one last point, sorry – back up on soapbox one last time) just to show that this is Corpus Christi, and the connection between the Eucharist and the tithe, between the Eucharist and the collection, between the Eucharist and monetary sacrifice, isn't a medieval invention or modern invention, it's just biblical. That's what we do in the liturgy, we're offering ourselves to God in all kinds of ways and one of them is through monetary offering.

So Abram does it to the priest Melchiz'edek. Melchiz'edek offers the sacrifice to God as mediator. And with this all in mind (this background), you can see why the psalm for today is (surprise, surprise) Psalm 110, the only other place where Melchizedek is mentioned in the Old Testament. If we read the psalm, you'll see, it's attributed to David, so it's set during the Davidic kingdom, and in this case though, what does it say? Psalm 110:4:

The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchiz'edek."

Now what does that mean? Well in context, you'll remember, from the time of Moses to the time of David, the only people who could be priests were Levites. So at the time of the exodus from Egypt, although before the exodus, any member of any tribe of Israel could be a priest, after the sacrifice to the golden calf in Exodus 32, in a sense God "laicizes", he defrocks eleven of the twelve tribes and he gives the priesthood just to one. It shrinks, and it's only now for anyone who's a member of the tribe of Levi. You have to be a descendant of Aaron, who was a Levite. But then when David comes along, a thousand years later, around 1,000 B.C., he starts acting as if he himself is a priest. He offers sacrifice in 2 Samuel 6. In the book of Chronicles it even says that David's sons were priests. So it's kind of mysterious. What is David doing? He's acting like he's both king and priest. Well, why? Why's he doing that? Well think about it. What city is David king over? Zion. Well, what is Zion? It's Jerusalem. Well, what's Jerusalem? It's Salem. Who was the first king of Salem? Melchizedek. Was he just a king? No, he was both king and priest. So David, when he comes and he brings the ark up to Jerusalem, he's acting like he is a new kind of priest, or actually, an old kind of priest. He's in a sense restoring the priesthood, not after the order of Levi (that's a later thing, at Moses time), but after the order of Melchizedek. And unlike the priests of Levi who only serve for a few decades, priest of Melchizedek is going to be a priest forever.

Now that all falls apart and the temple gets destroyed within a few hundred years and the monarchy falls apart, it all kind of crumbles; but David is an anticipation of another priest-king in Jerusalem who will also restore the priesthood to all 12 tribes. It's not going to be a Levitical priesthood, it's going to be a Melchizedekian priesthood. And that priest is (of course) Jesus Christ, who will come to Jerusalem at the end of his life as the true King of Righteousness, who will gather twelve Apostles, who represent the twelve tribes around him, and unlike those twelve tribes who were laicized in the book of Exodus, Jesus is going to ordain them. He's going to consecrate them in Luke 22: "As the Lord covenanted a kingdom to me, so I covenant to you, that you might sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel". And he takes bread, and he takes wine, he identifies it as his body and his blood, and in Luke he says, "Do this in remembrance of me." He commands the twelve to offer a sacrifice of his body and blood and thereby constitutes them priests, not after the order of Levi, but according to the order of Melchizedek, because Jesus is the new Melchizedek, he's the new (and the true) King of Righteousness, the king of Jerusalem. And if you have any doubts, what kind of sacrifice does he offer in Jerusalem? It's bread and wine, an unbloody sacrifice of bread and wine in thanksgiving for the victory over his enemies; not not earthly kings, like

Sodom and Gomorrah, but the principalities and the powers of the darkness, over the angelic powers of the kingdom of Satan with which Jesus is at war throughout the Gospel of Luke, throughout the gospel account of his public ministry.

That's why for today the second reading is from 1st Corinthians 11. So what the Church does is she gives us both the feeding of the five thousand and through Paul gives us the words of institution, so that we have this kind of full portrait of the Eucharistic mystery. In closing then, I would just like to end with a quote from the living tradition, from St. Cyprian of Carthage, a very famous Church Father in the 3rd Century who was a great witness to the Church's living tradition in Egypt and in Alexandria. He's regarded as one of the most respected of the early Church Fathers. And this is what he says in one of his letters about Melchizedek and the mystery of the Eucharist.

...in the priest Melchizedek, we see *the sacrament of the sacrifice of the Lord prefigured* according to what the divine Scripture testifies and says: "And Melchizedek, the king of Salem, brought out bread and wine, for he was a priest of the most high God, and he blessed Abraham." [Gen 14:18]... For who is more a priest of the most high God than our Lord Jesus Christ, who offered sacrifice to God the Father and offered the very same thing that Melchizedek had offered, bread and wine, that is, *actually, his body and blood?*²

So there we have it. If you've never seen this connection between Melchizedek and Jesus before very clearly, it's certainly not something I made up. This is just the ancient tradition of the Church. It goes all the way back to the earliest centuries of Christianity, and in fact, you'll actually hear that if you're a priest, maybe on the Feast of Corpus Christi, if your priest says Eucharistic Prayer 1, the Roman Canon, listen to the prayers very carefully and you'll hear that as the priest is offering the Eucharist to God (in the person of Christ), he will ask God to accept the offering, like the offering of your high priest, Melchizedek.

² Cyprian of Carthage, *Letters* 63.4; translation Sr. Rose Bernard Donna