

the Sunday Readings



This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.

(John 6 : 58)

Body & Blood of Christ (a)

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a body broken; blood poured out. ¹

introduction

We come to the second fundamental doctrine that shapes our faith, worship and mission as Jesus' disciples; the doctrine of the holy Eucharist on the feastday of the Body and Blood of Christ. The WORD of GOD proposes a different world from that which dominates our contemporary lives. Jesus spoke out against a buy-bread-with-money ethos, that was characteristic of the temple traders of Jesus' time, and the user-pays Economic Rationalists of the modern era, with a contribution ethos. Jesus led by example. He urged his disciples to make acts of self-giving and when doing so, to remember his own self-giving; his body and blood; that is, his person given freely for others.

We gather to celebrate Jesus' giving himself completely and freely for us. Our task is to replace the consumerist market economy with, a give-what-you-have economy. This is the programme Jesus set out for us in giving his life for others. He shows the way to restore the use-value (utility-value) of the things we possess. His example implies we share this use-value with all. The texts engage us afresh with extending Jesus' task of building an alternative world. Faith in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist is central to our task.

first reading: Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 14-16 ²

[a warning not to forget GOD in prosperity]

Remember the long way that the LORD your GOD has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments.(2) He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.(3)

The preacher reminds us of the stunning evidence of divine protection while the Israelites were in the desert. With such a reminder, its impossible for anyone to credit themselves with their own salvation. But as the Israelites became secure and comfortable in their new land, such thoughts arose. That's a constant danger afflicting the comfortable class in any age. The Deuteronomist's concern is that the Israelites will be tempted by the exploitative religion and the oppressive politics which hold sway in the land of Canaan. If the liberated community no longer remembers how they came to where they are, they will lose hope and

¹ Cover Image: [the Last Supper](#) – painting by Juan de Juanes, after Leonardo de Vinci.(16th-century).

² The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

succumb too easily to the power of Canaanite ideology and be seduced by Canaanite idolatry. Memory is their defence against this sort of faithlessness. The preacher reminds them to live by the people-creating WORD, spoken by their people-creating GOD, the LORD. They are to remember to live by a transformative WORD – not just by bread. They live by what is given and not by what they control. They were subjected to the worst thinkable conditions, but they were sustained and protected. Because GOD is with them, the desert place has become a place where they lack nothing:

Then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your GOD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,(14) who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock,(15) and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you and in the end to do you good. (16)

Wilderness and landedness are quite separate and distinct realities. The Israelites experienced that the former was controlled by the LORD GOD, but the new land is 'governed' by the gods of the Canaanites. The promised new reality is delivered to a people who have been shaped by their wilderness experience. The preacher suggests that the new land they are to inherit, does not have to be managed in Canaanite ways. In other words, they can live in a new land and still live by the people-creating Word of Yhwh. In fact, they will be lost without the WORD (vv.14-16).

Then preacher reminds them that they have been living already by what is divinely given and not by what is humanly managed. In the wilderness, the surprise of manna; the unexpectedness of quail; and the surging of water; all hint of the miracle of the LORD's power for life-giving or grace. Because God is in these places, gifts are given, healings emerge, newness governs and nothing grows old!

In GOD's presence, life-giving resources are adequate. Now the promise of the desert experience is to be fulfilled somewhere else; in a place of their own; in a good land given by GOD's good WORD. Such a land makes possible the living of a less exposed, less vulnerable life – the kind of life for which the Israelites yearned while oppressed in Egypt, and again when they lacked everything in the desert. Those now satisfied and happy, were once enslaved and lacking everything. Only GOD could and did change that. The preacher offers the Israelites a covenantal understanding of power. Power is not vested in them as a people, but in GOD, who meets them at their point of need. GOD's power for life-giving is the guiding image out of which bold, concrete decisions flow. They mustn't forget the Source of this people-creating power.

response: Psalm 147 : 12 – 15, 19 – 20

[praise for GOD's care for Jerusalem]

*Praise the LORD, O Jerusalem!
 Praise your GOD, O Zion!(12)
 For He strengthens the bars of your gates;
 He blesses your children within you.(13)
 The LORD grants peace within your borders;
 He fills you with the finest of wheat.
 The LORD sends out His command to the Earth;
 His WORD runs swiftly.(15) . . .
 The LORD declares His WORD to Jacob,
 His statutes and ordinances to Israel.(19)
 The LORD has not dealt thus with any other nation
 they do not know His ordinances. Praise the LORD!(20)*

The speaker calls people to praise GOD. GOD strengthens the city's defences and blesses the people within; not the free-market system. GOD maintains peace on the borders and provides the best food with benevolent creative acts; not with the politics of favouritism. The psalmist starts with a summons to praise the LORD. The LORD GOD maintains peace on the borders and provides the best food with benevolent creative acts (vv.14-15) – and not our favourite political or economic persuasion. The speaker focuses on GOD's creative generosity and judgement for the Israelite nation (vv.19-20). The specific activities of GOD that brought this situation about aren't mentioned.

As the speaker repeats the memory of the transforming actions attributed to GOD, the speech becomes increasingly preoccupied with the goodness of the present order. Such a lapse into generalities is not typical of the Psalmist. The goodness of present well-being, experienced with gratitude, without context, without memory, without critical awareness, in the end overrides the memory of other times of vulnerability and need. When the memory of a former time of need is nullified, people are less likely to notice present needs and the vulnerability that contradicts their present abundance. GOD then becomes the guarantor of their world, which is now uncritically legitimated.

second reading: 1 Corinthians 10 : 16 – 17

[a sharing of the body and blood of Christ]

*The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?
 The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?(16)
 Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all
 partake of the one bread.(17)*

As with the Israelite experience of GOD's faithfulness and their duty to remember their reliance on the covenant relationship in new circumstances (see the first reading and psalm), the Christians at Corinth were taking the reception of the Eucharist as a guarantee of personal salvation. Paul links Eucharist to Jesus;

to one's neighbour; and to the Christian community. The Eucharist includes all the spiritual and material obligations that those links entail.

The apostle quotes a traditional Eucharistic formula (v.16). By sharing in the blood and body of Christ, Christians are united to Christ and to one another. The physical action of eating and drinking at the Christian sacred meal, has the effect of bringing into being, a new Body, which is the physical presence of Christ in the world. Since all share in the one drink, which is Christ; and in the one bread, which is Christ, Christ becomes a possession which all hold in common. The Eucharist thus makes the unity of the Church in Christ, a reality.

The idea of '*sharing*', or '*participation*' (*koinonia*) in the body and blood, is more than a symbolic meaning. It has a strong realistic sense. Body and blood refer not to things in themselves, but to an event and a person. Jesus gives himself in his redemptive death. In the holy Eucharist he offers real participation in himself as he gives himself to his sacrificial death.

This language draws out the meaning of Jesus' words and actions at his Last Supper with his disciples. The body is now not the bread, but we – the community – that participates in Christ's sacramental body in the Supper. Participation in Jesus and his (sacramental) body, becomes identical with embodiment into the Church as the Body of Christ. The warning against idolatry from earlier (v.7) is repeated (see v.14) and explained in terms of the effect of sacrifices: all sacrifices, Christian (vv.16-17), Jewish (v.18), or pagan (v.20), establish communion. But communion with Christ is exclusive and incompatible with any other such communion (cf. v.21).

gospel reading: John 6 : 51 – 58³

[the true Bread from Heaven]

Jesus said to the Jews, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."(51)

Jesus' original audience ask Jesus about the signs he will give. Would he be like Moses? (A liberating messenger from GOD). Jesus' reply shocks his listeners (and us), when he declares the manna or bread of Moses was not truly a loaf from heaven but that his flesh and blood was! The crowd had asked Jesus what they should do to carry out GOD's purpose. Jesus doesn't answer their question. Instead he tells them that GOD's plan is that they believe that GOD sent him.⁴

His listeners ask what signs will he show them that he is a liberating messenger from GOD. He replies that the manna, or bread of Moses, was not truly a loaf, from heaven (v.32 & v.49). It is understood today, that the manna was really a sweet syrup that drips from the tamarind tree. The desert Bedouins of that

3 *Jn.* 6:35-59 Up to v.50 "*bread of life*" is a figure for GOD's revelation in Jesus; in *Jn.*6:51-58, the eucharistic theme comes to the fore.

4 Cf. *Jn.*6:29

region to this day, still eat it. Jesus was saying that there isn't any bread like that, which has come down from heaven. The only true bread that comes down from heaven is the WORD of Love.

Jesus is transmitting that WORD of Love. It will give new life to those who believe (v.51). He is the true bread from heaven, because he is GOD's WORD (v.32) and because he is a victim, whose body and blood are offered in sacrifice for the life of the world. The word '*flesh*' suggests a link between the Holy Eucharist and Incarnation. '*The Word made flesh*' is the food of the people.

The 'bread' Jesus talks about is love. He has come to bring love here to the Earth through his message. Those who believe in him give up self-interest and seek communion. That WORD is the '*real bread*' brought down from heaven to nourish us. Jesus chose the image of a community supper to represent the union of people that satisfies this human hunger and thirst for love. In the Christian Scriptures the same Greek word, '*koinonia*' describes: the Eucharist; the community of shared possessions; and the union that exists between people and GOD. When we share the bread and wine of the Eucharist, we share in the body and blood of Jesus and we unite with the people with whom he is identified and we unite with GOD. The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying:

"How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"(52) So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.(53) Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day;(54) for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.(55) Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.(56)

When Jesus speaks to the crowd he insists on the genuine value of '*his flesh*' and '*blood*' as food and drink. '*Flesh and blood*' is an Israelite expression for the whole person. Jesus promises the gift of eternal life to those who, '*feed on his flesh and drink his blood*' (v.53). This promise follows the discussion on '*the bread of life*', which insists on the need to believe in Jesus as GOD's messenger of liberation – the WORD of GOD. The believer not only listens to Jesus' message (*the Eternal WORD*) but consumes the WORD as real food and real drink (i.e. internalising the WORD as food in the Eucharist).

When we share the bread of the Eucharist, we share a real union of people with each other and GOD. That's '*eternal life*'. This '*eternal life*' (*the resurrection*) has already begun. To have eternal life is to be in close communion with Jesus. Jesus is united with GOD and shares the life of GOD. If we are united with Jesus, (which means being united with others) we form a part of his body and we share in his life – which is the life of GOD – that life is the resurrection of Jesus; of us; of the whole body.

Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.(57) This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."(58)

The gift of eternal life comes through a believing reception of the Holy Eucharist (vv.57-58). The food that doesn't last is like an election promise to win people over, but which is not going to get anybody out of their misery. Jesus also tells his audience that the miraculous food they had (from Moses) hasn't solved any of their problems. Believing the WORD and internalising that WORD as food and drink, is about changing the world; it is about replacing the system of injustice with a system of love. Researchers have discovered that the greatest human need – the one that all other needs come from – is the need for sociability; the need for co-operation. In other words, the greatest hunger and thirst of people is the hunger and thirst for love; for communion; for community.

for sharing:⁵

- *The evidence of divine protection in the desert made it impossible for the Israelites to credit themselves with their own salvation. Only when they were secure and comfortable in the land, could such thoughts arise. **Comment on Deuteronomy 8 : 2 - 16***
- *When speaking about his body and blood, (that is; his person), Jesus asked Christians to make their own acts of self-giving and to do such acts remembering his self-giving. In the bread that is broken and the cup that is poured out, Jesus presents the Eucharist as proclaiming his death; his ultimate act of self-giving. **Comment on 1 Corinthians 10 : 16 – 17.***
- *The Eucharists is an invitation to us, to focus on the secret the world knows in it's heart, but has trouble admitting – that, 'to love is to suffer.' **Comment on John 6 : 51 – 58***

5 Lectio Divina: reading GOD'S WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio* (reading) – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio* (reflection) – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in GOD'S presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio* (prayer) – allow your heart to speak to GOD, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio* (rest) – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of GOD, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'

prayer:⁶

*The bread You give, O GOD,
is Christ's flesh for the life of the world;
the cup of his blood is Your covenant for our salvation.
Grant that we who worship Christ
in this holy mystery may reverence him
in the needy of this world by lives poured out
for the sake of that kingdom
where he lives and reigns with You
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, GOD, now and always. Amen.*

review:⁷

In gathering to celebrate the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, we have remembered Jesus' complete and free giving of himself for others. Trusting in the Father's faithfulness is the mark of Christian life. We dishonour the Father's faithfulness by ignoring the commandments and failing to be a blessing to others.

Jesus renewed the ancient covenant through his giving himself completely. We forget the new covenant by pursuing our personal agendas. Jesus is present among us in the sharing of the bread with the poor and in the telling of his liberating practice. We spiritualise GOD's reigning and we fail to contribute to building GOD's new world.

This feast day is the second major constitutive feast of discipleship. When disciples work together; where each has a contribution to make to the welfare of all; such an economy would be different to our present economy, but it would be a very good economy.

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6 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

7 The review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.