

Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ – Cycle B (Corpus Christi)

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

The purpose of the feast of Corpus Christi is to instruct the people in the mystery, faith, and devotion surrounding the Eucharist. The celebration of the feast evolved during the 13th and 14th centuries, having been preceded by the mid-11th century Berengarian heresy. Berengar of Tours was an archdeacon who taught that the presence of Christ in the Eucharist was more symbolic than real.

By the 13th century reception of communion was less emphasized and was to some extent superseded by merely seeing the Host. At this time (1209) Juliana of Liège, an Augustinian nun, had a vision which demanded a feast for the Eucharist. After much persuasion the feast was celebrated for the first time in 1247, and extended to the whole Church in 1264. Resistance to the feast was found in Rome and Liège, but by 1317 its celebration had spread throughout the world.

There is trustworthy evidence that Saint Thomas Aquinas composed two offices for the feast, but it is not at all clear that the office now used is one of them.

1st Reading - Exodus 24:3-8

Today's first reading takes place at the foot of Mount Sinai. Moses has gone up on the mountain and received verbally the ten commandments as well as the rules concerning Hebrew servants, personal injuries, protection of property, social responsibility, and justice and mercy (Exodus 20 through 23). Moses then comes to the people and tells them of the covenant which God has offered them. A covenant is a family bond, entered into freely, binding perpetually, and sealed in blood. The Sinai covenant was between God and Israel. God promised to be the God of Israel; Israel promised to keep all the commands of the Lord. Moses took the blood of animals which had been sacrificed and sprinkled it on the altar (representing the presence of God) and the people (indicating their participation in the covenant).

It is after this reading that Moses ascends the mountain to receive the first set of stone tablets.

3 When Moses came to the people and related all the words and ordinances of the LORD,

Moses immediately reports the words (the ten commandments) and the ordinances (the covenant code) to all the people.

they all answered with one voice, “We will do everything that the LORD has told us.”

The people assent to the terms and conditions of the covenant.

4 Moses then wrote down all the words of the LORD and, rising early the next day, he erected at the foot of the mountain an altar and twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel.

The solemn covenant ritual is prepared: the words are written down, the altar and pillars are set up, sacrifices are offered. A covenant ritual includes a sacrifice and a covenant community sharing of the sacrifice.

5 Then, having sent certain young men of the Israelites to offer holocausts and sacrifice young bulls as peace offerings to the LORD,

Prior to the golden calf (which instituted the Levitical priesthood), each family had a priest; usually the elder of the family.

6 Moses took half of the blood and put it in large bowls; the other half he splashed on the altar. 7 Taking the book of the covenant, he read it aloud to the people,

The terms (blessing and curses) of the covenant

who answered, “All that the LORD has said, we will heed and do.”

The people accept the covenant and swear the oath which binds them to it.

8 Then he took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, saying, “This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words of his.”

The half of the blood of the sacrifice which had been put in large bowls is sprinkled on the people; the other half having already been given to God by splashing it on the altar. The people and God now share in the sacrifice. The word and the rite are inseparably united.

2nd Reading - Hebrews 9:11-15

It is very likely that the Hebrews to whom this epistle is addressed were Christians of Jewish background, possibly former priests. Thus, they are familiar with the ceremonies of Mosaic worship. The main purpose of this epistle is to show the superiority of Christianity over the Old Covenant – and how the New Covenant fulfills the old. It focuses on Christ’s priesthood and shows how this priesthood and His sacrifices are superior to those of the Levitical priesthood.

11 But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that have come to be,

passing through the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made by hands, that is, not belonging to this creation, ¹² he entered once for all into the sanctuary,

His risen body – the temple raised up in three days. Now in the heavenly Jerusalem, it takes its place in the Holy of Holies.

not with the blood of goats and calves

Leviticus 9:2-4 prescribes the offering which Aaron, the first high priest is to offer every year upon entering the Holy of Holies.

but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

Jesus' life, offered in sacrifice, gives Him the right of access to the heavenly sanctuary just as the Levitical High Priest had to bring the blood of the sacrificial animals; but Jesus does this only once.

¹³ For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of a heifer's ashes can sanctify those who are defiled

The ashes were mixed with water and used to cleanse those who had become defiled by contact with corpses, human bones, or graves (Numbers 19:9-21).

so that their flesh is cleansed,

An external ritual washing/cleansing

¹⁴ how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from dead works to worship the living God.

The Holy Spirit acted in a special way in assisting the fully human Jesus to make His perfect self-giving sacrifice which transformed His suffering into redemptive love. Christ's sacrifice purifies us completely, thereby rendering us fit to worship the living God. It is through sharing in Jesus; sacrificial worship that we have access to God.

¹⁵ For this reason he is mediator of a new covenant: since a death has taken place for deliverance from transgressions under the first covenant, those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.

Through His sacrifice Jesus has brought redemption from the sins committed under the old covenant, sins that were not taken away by old covenant sacrifices. As long as the sins remained, man could not possess the inheritance promised by God. The eternal inheritance is eternal life in God's presence.

Gospel - Mark 14:12-16, 22-26

Today's gospel reading is familiar – we heard it as part of the passion narrative on Palm Sunday. What we hear today are some of the events leading up to Jesus' eating the Passover meal with His disciples in the upper room.

12 On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb,

The sacrifice took place on the 14th of Nisan before the first day began at sunset.

his disciples said to him, "Where do you want us to go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?" 13 He sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the city and a man will meet you, carrying a jar of water. Follow him.

What makes this unique? Men didn't carry water in jars – that was woman's work – men carried it in skins. This man would have stood out in a city crowded with pilgrims.

14 Wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, "The Teacher says, "Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?" 15 Then he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready. Make the preparations for us there." 16 The disciples then went off, entered the city, and found it just as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover.

The fact that no amazement is expressed by the disciples causes some commentators to believe that everything had been prearranged (like dialing ahead for reservations at 1-800-PASSOVER). It is more likely that divine intervention is involved.

22 While they were eating, he took bread, said the blessing,

Blessing for the Jew involves a dual aspect: thanks, which is a God-ward action; and blessing, which is a world-ward action. The Hebrew word is *barak*, and the Greek is *eucharisteo* [made up of *eu* (good) and *charis* (gift)].

broke it, and gave it to them, and said, "Take it; this is my body."

Just as the elder of the family during the Passover liturgy explained the "bread of affliction" (unleavened bread, *afikomen*), so Jesus explains the bread He is about to distribute. It is at this point that John 13:30 tells us that Judas left to betray Jesus.

23 Then he took a cup,

This would be the 3rd cup of the Passover liturgy, the cup of blessing (see 1 Corinthians 10:16).

gave thanks, and gave it to them, and they all drank from it. 24 He said to them, "This

is my blood of the covenant,

The only time that Jesus speaks of “covenant” is at the Last Supper. A covenant is a family bond which is sealed in blood and the sharing of a communal meal.

which will be shed for many.

The Semitic sense of “many” is a great number without restriction.

²⁵ Amen, I say to you, I shall not drink again the fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

The Passover liturgy is incomplete. The complete Passover liturgy requires that four cups of wine (the fourth being the cup of completion) be consumed.

²⁶ Then, after singing a hymn,

After the third cup of the Passover liturgy, and before the fourth cup, the Great Hallel (Psalms 114 through 118) are sung. The apostles are leaving the upper room without completing the Passover liturgy they all had come to Jerusalem to celebrate. Can they all have forgotten the liturgy? Exodus 12:22 prescribed that no Israelite was to leave his house after the Passover meal until morning. Deuteronomy 16:7 applied this to the Jerusalem temple precincts.

they went out to the Mount of Olives.

The hill east of Jerusalem beyond the Kidron Valley.

Mark 15:36 tells us that Jesus, while on the cross, is given sour wine to drink [from a sponge on a hyssop branch – the same branch used to sprinkle the blood on the doorpost at the first Passover (Exodus 12:22)]. When Jesus drank the sour wine He said “It is finished” (John 19:30) – the same words which consummated the Passover meal – and gave up His spirit.