

Corpus Christi – Cycle C

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 feast of Corpus Christi, the Body and Blood of Christ, recalls the institution of the Eucharist on Holy Thursday at the Last Supper. The prime thought during Holy Week is sorrow over the Passion of Jesus so this feast focuses our attention on the joy that comes from that event. This feast honors the Real Presence of Christ and was promoted by the visions of Juliana of Liege (in France), an Augustinian nun who understood from her visions that God wanted a feast to honor the Blessed Sacrament, in response to a controversy that had arisen which had made the presence of Christ in the Eucharist more symbolic than real. First celebrated as a local feast, Pope Urban IV extended it to the Universal Church in 1264. The Mass and office for the feast of Corpus Christi was composed by Saint Thomas Aquinas while he was a member of the Papal court of Urban IV.

1st Reading - Genesis 14:18-20

Today we hear of the appearance of Melchizedek to Abram. The existence of Melchizedek is known only from these three verses in scripture (and referred to in the Letter to the Hebrews), nestled into an account of Abram's meeting with the King of Sodom after Abram has successfully led a battle in which he has defeated the four kings who had defeated five kings and kidnapped Lot. The king of Sodom was one of the five kings who had been freed by Abram.

¹⁸ Melchizedek,

The name Melchizedek means "justice."

king of Salem,

The name Salem means "peace." He is King of Justice and King of Peace. In Jewish tradition as reflected in the targums, Melchizedek is Shem, firstborn son of Noah; the only righteous firstborn in Genesis except for Abram. Reconstruction of the genealogies in Genesis shows that Shem outlived Abraham (Abram) by 35 years. Likewise, Salem is later named "*Yahweh-yireh*" in Genesis 22:14 when Abram takes Isaac there to offer him as sacrifice. Today we know it as "*Yireh-Salem*" (Jerusalem).

brought out bread and wine,

It is not clear that these are brought out as an offering to God rather than for sustenance

but the association with the title “Priest of God Most High” certainly points to that direction. Up until the sin of the golden calf, God did not require animal sacrifices, thus the bread and wine would have been a most suitable offering and serve as a precursor of the Eucharist, a covenant meal.

and being a priest of God Most High,

Melchizedek is not only a king, but a priest as well, a Priest-King. He is the first priest mentioned in the Bible.

he blessed Abram with these words: ¹⁹ “Blessed be Abram by God Most High,

The last time a blessing is mentioned in Holy Scripture is when Noah gives his blessing to Shem. Could this be the priestly blessing which the father gives to the righteous son? I believe that it is. It is the same blessing which Abraham passes on to Isaac, Isaac to Jacob ...

the creator of heaven and earth; ²⁰ And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your foes into your hand.”

Abram’s victory was the result of God’s intervention.

Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

A tithe. Abram, the most powerful warrior, who has defeated the four kings who had defeated the five kings, doesn’t accept a tithe, but gives one showing that he recognizes Melchizedek not as an inferior or equal, but as a superior (or as a representative of one). If in fact Melchizedek is Shem, firstborn son of Noah, he is the priest of the family of Noah then this would be homage by Abram to his elder brother and it all makes sense.

2nd Reading - 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Our second reading contains the words of consecration which we hear at every Mass. This was written about eight years before the Gospel of Mark.

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you,

Saint Paul was a convert; he was not among the twelve at the Last Supper. Saul’s (Paul’s) only encounter directly with Jesus was on the road to Damascus when he was knocked to the ground (Holy Scripture says nothing of a horse) and converted. After that, he spent several days with the disciples and then began preaching (Acts 9:19-20).

that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over,

Holy Thursday. Although the institution of the Eucharist is what is being highlighted here, this was also the night Jesus washed His disciples' feet, prayed over one hour, etc.

took bread,

The *Afikomen*, the unleavened bread which was reserved during the Passover meal until just before the third cup of wine was drunk.

²⁴ and, after he had given thanks,

Greek: *eucharisto*.

broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you.

Recall that a year before the Last Supper Jesus had said "*I am the living bread that comes down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I give for the life of the world*" (John 6:51).

Do this in remembrance of me."

Not the recalling of fond memories, but a memorial sacrifice which makes the person present at the original event. The Passover was such a memorial sacrifice; every time a Jew, even today, celebrates the Passover, he/she makes himself/herself present at the first Passover in Egypt and are joined with all the participants of that original Passover meal. By making a remembrance, they are participating in a covenant renewal ceremony.

²⁵ In the same way also the cup, after supper,

The 3rd cup of the Passover meal, the cup of thanksgiving.

saying, "This cup is the new covenant

The only time in the New Testament when Jesus uses the term "covenant" is at the institution of the Eucharist. It is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:31.

in my blood.

Covenants are sealed by a family meal in which an animal is sacrificed, the blood is drained from the animal and at the temple the blood is placed on the horns of the altar (in the case of the first Passover it was sprinkled on the door posts and at Mount Sinai it was sprinkled on the people).

Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Do what? Have a party for your 12 closest friends? What had Jesus just done? Changed the

wine into His Blood. Jesus is God and when God speaks, it happens (Isaiah 55:10-11). When He said "Let there be light," darkness disappeared. When He said "This is my Body... This is my Blood," the bread and wine became His Body and Blood. Not symbols, but literally His Body and His Blood.

"For not as common bread nor common drink do we receive these; but since Jesus Christ our savior was made incarnate by the word of God and had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so too, as we have been taught, the food which has been made into the Eucharist by the Eucharistic prayer set down by Him, and by the change of which our blood and flesh is nourished, is both the flesh and the blood of that incarnated Jesus." [Saint Justin the Martyr (A.D. 150), *First Apology* 66]

"Do you wish to know how it is consecrated with heavenly words? Accept that the words are. The priest speaks. He says: Perform for us this oblation written, reasonable, acceptable, which is a figure of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. ... Before it is consecrated, it is bread; but when the words of Christ come in, it is the Body of Christ. Finally, hear Him saying: 'All of you take and eat of this; for this is My Body (Luke 22:19).' And before the words of Christ the chalice is full of wine and water; but where the words of Christ have been operative it is made the Blood of Christ which redeems the people." [Saint Ambrose of Milan (A.D. 390), *The Sacraments* 4,5, 21-23]

²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup,

This is renewal of the covenant. Not a one-time thing; just as the Passover was celebrated annually, not to commemorate the event but to relive the event and renew the promises.

you proclaim the death of the Lord

If Jesus hadn't died on the cross, there would be no eternal sacrifice for the new High Priest to offer in Heaven (Hebrews 8:3-4; Revelation 5:6). By proclaiming His death we recognize His sacrifice and re-present (as opposed to represent) it to God.

until he comes.

The parousia at the end of the world.

Gospel - Luke 9:11-17

Our gospel reading today recalls the feeding of the 5,000 - a precursor to the Eucharist. If Jesus can feed 5,000 until they are all full from 5 loaves and 2 fishes, and he can turn bread and wine into His Body and Blood, He certainly can turn as much bread and wine into Himself as would be needed to give the entire world the meal which seals our covenant with God. This is the only miracle story which is common to all four gospels.

The setting is this: Jesus and His disciples are in Galilee and the disciples have just returned from preaching and curing Gods' people. They are now to receive a new charge – to feed the people of Israel.

11 The crowds, meanwhile, learned of this and followed him. He received them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and he healed those who needed to be cured. 12 As the day was drawing to a close, the Twelve approached him and said, "Dismiss the crowd so that they can go to the surrounding villages and farms and find lodging and provisions; for we are in a deserted place here."

In all the gospels, but especially in Luke, the miracles of Jesus occur around food: while going to eat, at table, and just after eating.

13 He said to them, "Give them some food yourselves." They replied, "Five loaves and two fish

Both numbers in Hebrew numerology are incomplete numbers, two representing a few and five, half the basic number; but together they total seven, the number of the covenant and perfection.

are all we have, unless we ourselves go and buy food for all these people."

In Mark 6:37 the reply is much sharper: "Are we to buy 200 days' wages worth of food?"

14 Now the men there numbered about five thousand. Then he said to his disciples, "Have them sit down in groups of (about) fifty."

The number which in Hebrew is *nun* and also means "fish." Hebrew does not have special words for numbers but uses existing words to express them (sort of like roman numerals which are really letters).

15 They did so and made them all sit down. 16 Then taking the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing over them, broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd.

Luke very purposefully uses the same language as that which describes the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper (Luke 22:19) and in the Emmaus story (Luke 24:30) "took ... looked up ... blessed ... broke ... gave."

17 They all ate and were satisfied. And when the leftover fragments were picked up,

The Greek word used here *klasmata* for "fragments" is the same as is used in the Didache as the technical term for the broken particles of the Eucharist.

they filled twelve wicker baskets.

Symbolic that there is enough to feed all the tribes of Israel. At the feeding of the four thousand, there are seven baskets left; symbolic that there is enough to feed all the Gentile tribes that had occupied Canaan prior to the Israelites arrival at the end of their exodus.

Luke, of all the evangelists, immediately links this feeding account with Jesus' prediction of His passion and His instructions about bearing one's cross daily (Luke 9:18-27). To celebrate the Eucharist is to join in His life and share not only His mission of preaching, teaching, and curing, but also His dedication and destiny symbolized by the cross (Luke 9:18-27).

St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church, Picayune, MS
<http://www.scborromeo.org>