

THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST (CORPUS CHRISTI)

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

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, "Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?" So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there." So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

REFLECTION 1:

A MEAL LIKE NO OTHER

Despite international pressure to end it, many countries still retain the death penalty for murder and other serious crimes. As 'consolation' the condemned prisoner in accordance with an ancient Greek tradition is invited to partake of a 'last supper'. Most of the condemned usually gorge themselves on their last meal. However, Joan of Arc before being burnt at the stake requested only Holy Communion. Jesus chose a final meal of bread and wine, a meal that changed the world forever where everyone was invited. His last supper is shared at every Mass, when the bread and wine becomes the true body and blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

In order to stimulate the table conversation, the hostess at a recent dinner party asked each of the guests to share their most memorable meal experience. Most of the guests reminisced on a whole range of gourmet experiences from birthday to anniversary celebrations. The feast we are celebrating today challenges us to consider our sharing in the body and blood of Christ as our number one, all time favourite repast. Sacrificial as it is, in its remembrance of the death of Jesus the feast also offers the gift of Jesus in the form of bread and wine as authentic necessary food. To fully appreciate our Eucharistic sharing, we have to acknowledge the significance of the meal in the Hebrew tradition. Food was God's life-saving gift, so sharing food with others was the same as sharing God's life together. The choice of one's table companions was no small matter, so eating together and sharing God's gift of life created a bond with people that one would uphold and protect at all costs.

Because it was so central, the sharing of food was readily incorporated into religious rituals and today's scripture readings make reference to these. For instance the Sinai covenant was sealed with the sacrifice of an animal whose blood or life force was sprinkled on the altar (symbolizing God) and the gathered believers. Then all shared a meal, so binding the partners together for life. Moses mediated such a covenant in the desert to mark his peoples' Passover from the slavery in Egypt to freedom in a land of their own (Exodus 24). This covenant was celebrated every year with a shared meal that affirmed their union with God and one another in a Passover meal.

Against this backdrop, Christians understood that the saving sacrificial death of Jesus forged a new covenant between God and humankind. By means of the blood Jesus poured forth on Calvary in love and forgiveness and by virtue of Jesus' passage from death to life, sinners have been empowered to pass from the slavery of sin into freedom. As the theme of the forthcoming Eucharistic Congress expresses it 'Communion with Christ and with one another'.

In the account of Jesus' last meal with his disciples Mark's Gospel (Mark 14) relied heavily on the significance of the sacred Passover meal in order to affirm that Jesus in his person and through his mission, was the perfect once-for-all sacrifice. By our sharing in the bread and wine that he identifies with his very body and blood, we remember his saving sacrifice. We are fed by the meal that makes us who we are, one with God, one with each other – 'communion with Christ and with one another'.

REFLECTION 2: OPEN HANDS AND OPEN HEARTS

Henry Nouwen (b.1932) a Dutch priest and prolific author with a profound insight into the scriptures, suggested in his book, 'With Open Hands' that many of us come before God with clenched fists. As a result Nouwen suggested we are unable to receive God's gifts, one of the most important of which is the sacramental and real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. He suggested that it is fear that causes us to clench and refuse and as a consequence we walk away empty. Don't be afraid of the one who wants to enter that space where you live, urged Nouwen. Don't be afraid to let God see your hate, your little to show or to share; don't be afraid to let it be seen. When you dare to let go and relinquish your fears, your hand relaxes and your palm spreads out in a gesture of receiving. Patience is needed, of course, before your hands are completely open and are ready to be filled.

This openness must be cultivated daily and requires our acknowledgement that, on our own, we are limited, dependant, weak and vulnerable. But when God fills our hands, we become inspired and empowered for service and for witnessing to the goodness and compassionate care of God. So it is with open hands that we gather this day to celebrate the most Holy Body and Blood of Christ – not with fear and doubt, but with much openness we allow our hands to be filled and ourselves to be fed with the Bread of Life.

In our first reading (Exodus 24) the author speaks of the covenant and its terms, while the Israelites promise active fidelity. Then the covenant is sealed with the blood of young bulls. In today's second reading from Hebrews the ancient author (not St. Paul) will compare the blood of the Hebrew sacrifices with that of Jesus, shed on Calvary for the redemption of all humankind. Jesus as the ultimate high priest and the most perfect sacrifice has mediated a new covenant, the sacrifice of Jesus for an eternal redemption.

Mark in today's Gospel (Mark 14) will illustrate how the two testaments come together and are fulfilled in Jesus. During the feast of Passover, at which time the Israelites remembered and celebrated their own passing over from slavery to freedom, Jesus celebrated his last meal with his own. Then he himself would pass over from suffering and death to eternal life forever with God. As a remembrance of this great gift of redemption and as a means of maintaining their communion with him, Jesus offered bread and wine, his sacramental body and blood, which they ate and drank. This would be the new covenant sealed by the blood he would soon shed 'for the many' – that is for all. Jesus is made known in the sacred meal that we share and that we who gather are members of the body of Christ. So that when we say 'Amen' when the priest or Eucharistic minister says 'Body of Christ' we must also be ready to declare our communion with the body of Christ who sits beside us in the pew, the body of Christ we encounter at work and across the dinner table. Our 'Amen' also announces our willingness to open our minds and hearts to the suffering, needy and defenceless body of Christ whose hungers we are to feed and whose needs are our responsibility. If our 'Amen' does not include our attention to all the members of the body of Christ, then it is a lie and our faith a sham. May this not be so? Body of Christ, Amen.