

Readings for Corpus Christi

FIRST READING: Exodus 24:3-8

A reading from the Book of Exodus:

When Moses came to the people and related all the words and ordinances of the LORD, they all answered with one voice, "We will do everything that the LORD has told us." 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. Then, having sent certain young men of the Israelites to offer holocausts and sacrifice young bulls as peace offerings to the LORD, Moses took half of the blood and put it in large bowls; the other half he splashed on the altar. Taking the book of the covenant, he read it aloud to the people, who answered, "All that the LORD has said, we will heed and do." Then he took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words of his."

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 116:12-13, 15-16, 17-18

I will take the cup of salvation, and call on the name of the Lord.

How shall I make a return to the LORD for all the good he has done for me? The cup of salvation I will take up, and I will call upon the name of the LORD.

I will take the cup of salvation, and call on the name of the Lord.

Precious in the eyes of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones. I am your servant, the son of your handmaid; you have loosed my bonds.

I will take the cup of salvation, and call on the name of the Lord.

To you will I offer sacrifice of thanksgiving, and I will call upon the name of the LORD. My vows to the LORD I will pay in the presence of all his people.

SECOND READING: Hebrews 9:11-15

A reading from the Letter to the Hebrews:

Brothers and sisters: 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, he entered once for all into the sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of a heifer's ashes can sanctify those who are defiled so that their flesh is cleansed, 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. 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.

The word of the Lord.

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark:

On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples said to him, "Where do you want us to go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?" 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. 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?'" Then he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready. Make the preparations for us there." The disciples then went off, entered the city, and found it just as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover. While they were eating, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, and they all drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many. 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." Then, after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for Corpus Christi

When I was in grammar school we didn't study scripture. We studied bible history. We used text books on the bible not using the bible itself. When it came to the notion of things offered to God as sacrifices, we learned about burnt offerings. We thought that the food-stuffs offered to God were completely consumed by fire. This always seemed to me to be wasteful. God is a spirit and has no need and, perhaps, no desire to eat. This is a mistaken notion of a biblical sacrifice. The offering was eaten by the ones who offered it.

In my catechism lessons I learned that the Eucharist was both a sacrifice and a meal and those were two different aspects of its sacramental nature. The sacrifice is offered to God and the meal is offered to us. This is only partly true. The Sacrifice is offered to God for us and has the context of a ritual, communal action where all in attendance participate. The delineation between sacrifice and meal is not as distinct. The two are deeply related. When we gather, Jesus is in our midst and we celebrate Jesus' presence by sharing a ritual meal. In gathering we become Jesus' church. Another name for the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ. We become Christ's body and blood as we gather. The outward sign of that inner, unseen identity is to receive the Eucharist, Jesus' body and blood. We gather in Jesus' name and know him in the breaking of bread. Our Eucharist is God's gift to us.

The people of Israel who wandered in the desert would not have wasted food. What the sacrifices actually were is more akin to what I just described. The people gathered together for the purpose of worshiping God. They knew that God really didn't eat. The offerings were cooked and then eaten by those gathered. Most of us find the smells of cooking to be a delight. What went to God was the lovely, comforting aromas of roasting meat and vegetables. The sacrifices solidified the people into a unified community. God was present with them, pleased with the cooking aromas and the subsequent feasting.

It's also easy to forget, since we no longer raise our own livestock to eat, that to prepare dinner was, at one time, a messy and literally bloody affair. A nomadic people would save all they could of the slaughtered animal, blood, bone, marrow, fat, skin and teeth for use. Today we get our food from the supermarket. We buy our meat dressed and prepared as steaks, chops and roasts packaged and ready for us to cook. In the time of Moses, preparation of a feast involved the messy slaughter of beast to get the meat.

Why all the blood? How much blood is in a young bull? Just over ten gallons. The scriptures do not relate how many bulls were slaughtered. If the number of those gathered were in the thousands, they must have killed a whole lot of the critters to feed them all. That was a lot of blood. Thank God what we offer at mass is much less messy and not as disgusting. Why would God want blood in the first place? The connection between the tribes was based on kinship. They were genetically related as blood relatives. Their kinship as a people were the ties of blood. How did they solidify their relationship with God? With the blood of the animal sacrifices and the subsequent feasting on steak, ribs and chops. To get to the feast, the bulls were first slaughtered. Blood sacrifices to God continued in Judaism until the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in 70-71AD by the Romans.

This was the Jewish notion of sacrifice. We are Christian in our Catholicism. There is a bloody sacrifice at the heart of our tradition too. Jesus was tortured to death on the cross. As a human, he shed about a gallon and a half of blood. Bloodshed is at the center of our relationship with God through Jesus. Jesus died to save us. Salvation is ours because of the blood Jesus shed as he died. When we receive communion we receive Jesus' body and blood in the form of bread and wine. The sacrifice of Jesus, we remember as we eat and drink together at the Eucharist, is a gift that God has given to us to share.

Jesus and the twelve apostles were Jewish. They were bound to the ancient traditions of Israel. Together they would have celebrated the Passover and Seder Meal. The gospel made a point that before anyone could share a Passover meal; someone had to prepare for it. The Last Supper took place in Jerusalem. Pilgrims journey to Jerusalem specifically to celebrate the Passover meal. Such guesthouses would have been available for out-of towners like Jesus and the twelve. The disciples secured the place for the feast and then prepared the meal. Preparation of the Passover Seder has specific instructions that are thousands of years old. The guest of honor at the meal is the lamb. But before it could become the main course, it had to be slaughtered and dressed. We depend upon refrigeration to preserve our food today. The best way to preserve meat in Jesus day was to keep it alive and walking until just before dinner time.

At the beginning of the Seder meal, the food for the feast is presented to the host who in turn blesses each course. When the host blessed the Matzo, unleavened crackers, he sets one aside for later, at the end of the meal. During the meal, there are four glasses of wine spaced out from the beginning of the evening's feast to the end. When the meal is finished, the host breaks off a piece of the matzo he set aside and eats the piece. The rest of the guests do the same. This matzo is called the afikomen. The fourth cup of wine is called the cup of blessing and the host and guests share a drink from it. It is this part of the Jewish Seder Meal that Jesus appropriated for the Eucharist. The matzo, the afikomen, became Jesus' body and the cup of blessing became Jesus' blood. Our mass has deep roots in Judaism.

In the book of Exodus God blessed the Israelite people with freedom from slavery and the promise to become God's people. The ritual and offerings were, in reality, part of God's gifts to

them. This ritual made them the People of God. In the Seder meal Jews remember the Exodus as it they themselves experienced liberation. At our celebration of the mass, we remember God's gifts to us. Our word Eucharist comes from two Greek words that mean thanksgiving. Our thankfulness for God's gifts is also one of God's gifts to us. We remember our liberation from sin and death as if we, ourselves witnessed Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. As the Exodus molded the twelve tribes into God's holy people, Jesus' cross and resurrection has done the same for us. The Church is God's holy people too. At mass we remember Jesus and his gift. As we gather in Jesus name, we become his mystical body, the Church. The culmination of the mass is communion when we receive Jesus in the forms of bread and wine. Today we celebrate Jesus, the community of believers and receive the outward sign of the sacrament that defines us.

May Jesus always accompany us on our journey to the Kingdom of God.

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