

Solemnity of Christ's Body and Blood, June 3rd, 2018

Today, we celebrate the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, Corpus Christi. The Church is asking us to set aside some time to reflect on the great gift we have been given by our Lord Jesus Christ, the gift of Himself in the Eucharist. This is the Doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ, that on the evening of the Last Supper, we are told Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to His disciples saying, "Take, this is my body." And He took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them saying, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many." Through these words and actions, on that most solemn night, the night He would be betrayed by one of His own, and handed over to His enemies to be crucified, Jesus instituted this great sacrament of His love for His people. The sacrament that gives us Himself, so that we can be strengthened and sustained in faith, in this life, and to also share in His divine and eternal life in the next.

The Doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ teaches us that during the celebration of the Eucharist, when an ordained priest, standing in the person of Christ, says the Eucharistic prayer and the words of consecration, the bread and wine brought forward from the congregation as gifts, become the Body and Blood of our Risen Lord. This is our belief, the belief of the Church. We believe this happens because this is what Jesus tells us happens. Jesus' real presence in the Eucharist is a hidden presence, one that is not visible or detectable to our physical senses, but one that is seen through the eyes of faith, faith in who Jesus is, the Son of the Living God, and faith in the words that He speaks to us.

The Doctrine of the Real Presence can be a challenging one to accept, but I think it can be helpful for our understanding, to study the biblical context surrounding the institution of the Eucharist, in order to help us gain insight into this great mystery of our faith. We need to

understand that Jesus spoke the words instituting this sacrament in the context of a Passover celebration.

Passover, as many are aware, is the inaugural event of Israel as a nation. The story is given to us in the Book of Exodus. It is the story of how God used Moses to deliver Israel from brutal slavery in Egypt. God sent Moses to Pharaoh, the Egyptian ruler, and asked him to let the Israelites leave Egypt, to go into the desert, in order to offer sacrifice and worship to their God, the God of Israel. Pharaoh, not wanting to lose his labor force, refused. Through Moses, God warns Pharaoh to relent or else Egypt will suffer devastating plagues. Nine terrible plagues fell on Egypt. Things like the Nile River turning into blood. Plagues of gnats, flies, and frogs swarmed over the land, and still Pharaoh would not relent.

The tenth plague was the worst. The Angel of Death was to be sent throughout Egypt to kill all the firstborn of every family from Pharaoh on the throne to the slave girl at the mill and even the firstborn of all the animals. However, God gave specific instructions to the Israelites about what to do, so that the Angel of Death would “Passover” their homes. They were told to procure a year-old, unblemished lamb, and on the prescribed day they were to sacrifice the lamb at evening twilight. They were to take the blood of the lamb and sprinkle it on the doorposts and the lintels of their houses. Lastly, the families were to roast and consume the sacrifice with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Three important things needed to happen; the lamb needed to be sacrificed, the blood needed to be sprinkled on the lintels and doorposts, and every member of the family needed to participate in the sacrificial meal by partaking of the lamb. By carrying out these tasks, the first-born of Israel was spared, but not the first-born of Egypt. Pharaoh’s heart of stone was broken, and he not only relented, but he sent Israel out of Egypt.

There is a lot that happens to Israel in the three months of travel after leaving Egypt, which is where our First Reading picks up the story. In it we read about how the covenant between God and Israel was ratified at Mount Sinai. The theme of covenant is strong in today's readings and it is a very important concept to understand, as it applies to the history of salvation, given to us in the Scriptures. Dr. Scott Hahn has an outstanding and very readable book entitled, "A Father Who Keeps His Promises", that goes into detail about how the Scriptures can be understood through the lens of covenant. According to Dr. Hahn a covenant is an agreement between two parties, where instead of goods and services being exchanged, an exchange of persons occurs. It is the idea of "you are mine, and I am yours". A covenant creates a shared bond of interpersonal communion. Marriage and adoption are forms of covenants. Covenants create bonds of sacred kinship; covenants make families.

In our reading we see all the elements of what a covenant looked like in the ancient world. The agreement is between God and Israel with Moses being the mediator. God promises Israel that He will be their God and they will be His people, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation from which all the world would be blessed. Israel's side of the bargain is that they must obey God's law, which we hear them promise, that they understand, and that they will do it, and of course we know that they won't. Moses builds an altar and a sacrifice is made. Half of the blood of the sacrifice is poured out on the Altar, representing God, and the other half is sprinkled on the people. The blood of the sacrifice had two important meanings. First, it was a seal on the covenant that the two parties were now "one blood" and they now live a shared life. The second meaning is that the blood indicated the kind of punishment deserved by either party that broke their end of the agreement. The idea being, that what happened to those animals, should then happen to those who were unfaithful to their end of the covenant.

A covenant came with a blessing and a curse. The blessing of this covenant is that Israel would be a people special in the eyes of God, living life to the fullest under God's law. The curse was that if they turned away from God, they would end up like those sacrificial animals, they would die. Israel's choice was between life and death. We don't have them as part of our reading, but the following verses describe how Moses and the elders of the people went up to the top of the mountain and shared in the sacrificial banquet in the presence of God. Again, we see the sacrifice, the sprinkling of blood, and the sharing in of the sacrificial meal.

Returning to our Gospel, we hear Jesus celebrating Passover with His disciples. They are doing this because part of the first Passover instructions was that Israel should keep Passover as a memorial feast in perpetuity. It is important to note that the Jews did not just think that this meant that they should have a celebration of an event of the past. They understood the memorial feast to mean that they were participating in that past event as if it were happening to them now.

Dr. Brandt Pitre, in his weekly video on this reading, says that a First Century Passover celebration was significantly different than the Seder Supper celebrated today. When Jesus tells his two disciples to go into the city and prepare the Passover for them, it meant they needed to go and find the place Jesus had arranged for, but also that they would have to go and procure a lamb, take it to the Temple, have it sacrificed, its blood caught by the Temple priest and poured out on the Altar of Sacrifice. They would then have had to prepare the lamb for the Passover meal that evening. We see again those three elements of covenant. The sacrifice, the blood poured out, and the shared sacrificial meal.

Jesus is presiding at the Last Supper, and as He is going through the rituals of the Passover celebration, He takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, gives it to His disciples and instead of speaking about it being the bread of affliction that their fathers experienced in Egypt, which

would normally be spoken of, He says, “This is my body.” Then He does the same thing with the cup. Instead of speaking about the blood of the lamb being sprinkled on doorposts or the Altar of Sacrifice, He says, “This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many.”

Through these actions Jesus reveals that He is the fulfillment of the Passover lamb. He is creating a “New Covenant” of which He is the sacrificial victim. He is the Lamb of God, who will take away the sins of the world. He is the one who kept God’s law without blemish. He is the one who will make atonement for all the curses brought down on the people because of their broken covenants, their sins. He is the First-born Son. It will be His body that is offered up in sacrifice, of which no bones will be broken. It is His blood that will be poured out, not on the wood of doorposts or altar, but on the wood of the Cross. It is His risen and glorified Body and Blood, that will be consumed at the great sacrificial banquet.

Today we celebrate in a special way, the great gift Jesus gives to the Church of His Body and Blood. In a few minutes, when Fr. Glenn, our priest, standing in the person of Christ, at that Altar of Sacrifice, begins the Eucharistic Prayer, containing those words of consecration, we all are entering into that great sacrificial banquet. Keep in mind, we are not just remembering some important past event, we are actually entering into that event, as if it were happening to us today. Just like the Jews do with Passover, we understand the Mass to be a re-presentation of those salvific and life-giving events of Jesus’ Passion, Death, and Resurrection. It is as if we are there at the Last Supper with Jesus and the Apostles, and Jesus is telling us to take and eat His Body, and to take and drink His Blood. Keep in mind the great honor and privilege you have, as a member of God’s covenantal family, to receive this great gift of Christ’s Body and Blood, and understand you are giving and renewing your own covenantal promise to Him, when you receive Him and you say, “Amen.”