



Feast of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ (A) – June 11, 2023

"He who eats this bread will live forever"

Question of the Week: *Why did Jesus give us bread as Himself to eat?*

- **Deuteronomy 8: 2-3, 14b-16a**
 - "Do not forget the LORD, your God"
- **Psalms 147: 12-15, 19-20**
 - *R. Praise the Lord, Jerusalem.*
- **1 Corinthians 10: 16-17**
 - Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body,
- **John 6: 51-58**
 - I am the living bread that came down from heaven

Reading 1: Manna From Heaven

Q How has God cared for you? How have you responded to his care?

In a long discourse/commentary on the Law, Moses used the language of parent and child to symbolize the Exodus experience. God cared for his people, as a father cared for his dependent children. In his wisdom, he provided everything the people needed for the long journey, including food. Yet, even this dependent relationship had a point: life required, not only food, but the Word of God. [8:2-3]

However, dependence was a two-edged sword. It could encourage trust. Or, it could spawn pride, resentment, and rebellion. Even in dependence, the people had a choice. So, Moses gave a brief history of God's initiative. "Remember," Moses said to the people, "remember how God cared for you!" In the end, the water from the rock and the manna from heaven were signs of God's

compassion. But, even they were a means to an end: a relationship with God. [8:14b-16]

Eucharist is a sign of God's compassion. It reminds us what God has done and will do for us. But, it, too, is a means to an end. As the full presence of the risen Lord, it can bring us into a deep relationship with God. We only need to depend upon God, trust him as his child, to make it so.

Q: When you receive Eucharist this Sunday, reflect on what God has done in your life.

Psalms: Praise the Lord for All Things

Q: When do you stop in your daily routine to give God praise? Why do you praise the Lord?

If we bother to look, we can always find a reason to praise God. Despite evil in the world, open eyes and open hearts will glorify God for the



smallest blessing. So, let us look and raise our voices in song to the Lord!

The psalms are full of praise. Psalm 147 was a combination of three different psalms that represented praise in different contexts. The first (147:1-6) praised God for comforting the poor and needy in Jerusalem after the Babylonian Exile. God was the one who rebuilt Jerusalem; those who returned were his instruments in the construction. God would also return those left in alien environs to the Promised Land. The God of the cosmos cared for the least significant, so great was his power.

The second song of praise (147:7-11) thanked God for his power, primarily shown in the rainy season. Through his gift, produce and livestock flourished. In the greater view, all (even the king) should remember that they rely on God for all good things (like the rain), not on national strength or the size of an army. The devout and humble pleased God, for they lived that reliance. (Notice the unspoken relationship between praise and an attitude of reliance on God for his many blessings.)

The third song (147:12-20) addressed Jerusalem which believed God's word originated with his presence in the Temple then spread to the corners of the world. The city should praise God for his protection and his blessing. Both came from the word of God which swiftly commands nature's rhythms and processes. This was the same word God gave to his people in the Law. Notice that the power that regulated nature also regulated the life of the people in the city. There was a sense God's creative power and his Law were one and the same.

Let's dwell on that last point for just a moment. God's Word controls the universe and guides our very lives. If there was any reason to praise God, this insight would be the reason. God's power is so overwhelming that it holds the galaxies in their orbits, the sub-atomic particles in their space, and the fate of nations in his hands. Yet,

the Lord has not forgotten me or you as individuals. When we are poor and needy, he sustains us. When we enjoy the produce of the land, he provides for us. When we see the good his will gives us, he blesses us. God takes care of us with all good things.

Praise God!

Q: Take a few moments and look for reasons to praise God. Nothing is too small or too large. Make a list, if needed, and praise the Lord!

Reading 2: Communion Defines Community

Q: Who shares your meals with you? Are these people important to you? Why or why not?

10:16 "is it not communion with the blood of Christ?" The word "communion" in Greek is "koinonia," a term that described community and fellowship. Koinonia meant an allegiance of two or more people with a common purpose; meal association defined the membership of the koinonia. In the context that surround these verses, Paul was concerned about Christians eating meat sacrificed to idols; pagan neighbors would invite Christians to banquets at temples where such meat was shared in a meal of communion. Paul argued against accepting such invitations, for participation in the meal meant a communion with the idol. How could someone claim to be a Christian when he was present at such a banquet? Did he worship Christ or the idol? Certainly scandal would follow.

Communion defines community. That statement might seem obvious, even trite, like Gertrude Stein's famous phrase: "A rose is a rose is a rose." But, because it is so obvious, its impact is overlooked. Humans define their social worlds with meals. Table mates are usually family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. These are people who share something in common: blood relations, geographic proximity, job environments, and shared values. Sometimes, the



strongest bonds for meal fellowship transcend these factors. Sometimes, these bonds are far greater than the people involved.

Eucharist is a case in point. Christ defined his community at a simple meal; he defined it with his self-giving. His Body was himself and his Blood was his life. When believers share the meal, they become one with Christ. The loaf of bread, the Body of Christ, is the focal point. Those who eat the bread become one with the Body. Communion with the bread defines the community as the Body of Christ. The Church, then, is the people who are made one in the Body of Christ and share the life of Christ in common.

When Christ shared himself with us, he molded us into himself. Christ's communion defines us as part of his community.

Q: How important is Communion to you? Who shares Communion with you? How important are these people to you? Why or why not?

Gospel: By Habit or Commitment?

Q: Does Communion reflect a habit or a commitment?

At one point or another, every Christian says a prayer or receives communion without thought. Christian practice becomes second nature. And the Christian takes elements of a faith life for granted.

However, our post-Christian society will make such a lax attitude more difficult to sustain. The media tempts the Christian with the easy life. The need for economic gain invites the believer to cut corners with personal relationships. Even voices on the fringe have become rabidly anti-Christian. The Christian can no longer depend upon culture to maintain faith. The cacophony of voices from media, the stress of daily living, and even those on the edge ask one question: How strong is our commitment to Christ?

In John's gospel, Jesus debated this question with a hostile crowd. In doing so, Jesus taught them and John's readers the true meaning of Communion.

6:51 "but the bread which I will give is my flesh, on behalf of the life of the world."

John is trying to draw a parallel between the given bread (broken and shared at the Last Supper) and Jesus' flesh (given upon the cross). The thread that holds the parallel together is the verb "given." Jesus freely gave himself up on the cross for the world. Jesus freely gave bread at the Last Supper with the words, "This is my body." Setting aside the nitpicking difference between "flesh" and "body," John clearly wanted to see salvation on the cross celebrated in the bread shared in the Eucharist. Jesus freely gave himself to us on the cross. He freely gives himself to us in Communion. The gift is these two different events is the same.

Like last week's study, Jesus debated with a Jewish audience. In John 3:16-18, he discussed spiritual rebirth with Nicodemus. Now, he found himself in a fiery dialogue with a Jewish crowd. They traveled across the Sea of Galilee to see Jesus after they witnessed a great miracle: the multiplication of the loaves and fish (see John 6:1-15). Jesus challenged their reason to seek him out. They wanted a prophet to follow. But Jesus offered them something more than food to feed their bellies. He offered them the feast of eternal life! And, so, the dialogue continued with the audience on the physical plane and with Jesus on the spiritual plane.

"I AM" has been emphasized, since John used the phrase to denote the divine presence within Jesus. As we have studied in the past, the phrase "I AM" hearkened back to the title God revealed to Moses at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 3:14-15). This title, YHWH in the Hebrew text, was connected with the verb "to be," not in the context of existence but activity ("to be doing something"). Jews believed their God lived because he actively



intervened time and time again their history. Unlike the dead idols of neighboring peoples, the Jews proudly called their God, the "living" God, the One that got the job done.

Jesus used the idea of the living God when he described himself as the "living" bread from heaven. He bridged the title "I AM" with bread. Unlike the manna God sent the Hebrews as they wandered the desert, Jesus came to feed people as the living bread (see John 6:30-32). Jesus, then, connected his identity (I AM, the living One, the divine presence) to his mission (bread from heaven to feed the world).

Jesus is the bread that "came down from heaven" in 6:51a, but he "will give" this bread (his flesh). Notice the shift in verb tense from the past to the future. The past refers to the Incarnation (see John 1:14); the future refers to his death on the cross. With this simple shift in time, Jesus again emphasized the thematic change from his identity to his mission.

John 6:51 created a controversy. The crowd began to grumble about Jesus' claim. How could Jesus give his flesh as food? Even though people complained to each other, the thrust of their argument went against Jesus.

Jesus responded emphatically. "Amen! Amen! I say to you!" Then, with an "if...then" statement, Jesus divided his audience into the spiritually dead and the spiritually living.

Those who do not eat and drink have no life, for they have no intimacy with the "Son of Man." Taken together as a Semitic phrase, the term "flesh and blood" referred to the entire person. The phrase, "Son of Man" flowed from a reference to everyone (like the phrase "G.I. Joe" referred to all American fighting men in World War II; see Psalm 8:4) to a reference to the Messiah (see Daniel 7:13). The phrase "Son of Man" made Jesus like everyone else. It also made him God's Chosen. With these two converging meanings, the phrase "Son of Man" amply

described Jesus as God's unique instrument for universal salvation. Those who had direct intimate union with the Son of Man had eternal life, for they possessed God's very Life. Those who did not exist as empty shells.

To drive the point home, John used an unusual verb in 6:54a: "The person gnawing on my flesh..." This graphic image connected the eater to the food, the believer to the Master. The believer must not nibble the flesh of the Master. No, to feast on the bread of life required a full commitment from the believer!

John continued to use the verb "gnaw on" in 6:54-58 to distinguish the believer from the non-believer.

What did Jesus mean by "true food" and "true drink?" In the context of ancient times and the context of the verse, the word "true" meant "only." The body and blood of Christ, then, were the only food and drink that really mattered.

Remember our discussion of John 14:6 (Fifth Sunday in Easter) when Jesus stated "I AM the way, the Truth, and the Life." In this short phrase, Jesus connected the phrase "I AM" with the "Truth." In other words, the divine presence within Jesus ("I AM") was the only thing that mattered ("the Truth"). Everything else paled in comparison. In the same way, intimacy with Jesus (flesh and blood) was the only thing that really matter for the believer (eat true food...drink true drink).

Those who make such a strong commitment ("gnaws on" his flesh) have the life of Christ within them, as they become part of Christ. The verb "stay" in 6:56 expresses intimate union between Christ and the believer. As a corollary, such intimacy unites believers with each other in Christ. St. Paul coined an analogy for the union of a believer with Christ and other Christians: the Body of Christ.

Verse 6:57 has two parts: Jesus' relationship with the Father and the believer's relationship with



Jesus. In both relationships, one party depends on the other for life. Jesus lives because of the Father. And the believer lives because of Jesus.

The first relationship caused the second one. The mission of Jesus from the Father bridged the two relationships. The Father willed the Son to sacrifice himself so he could feed believers. In this sense, Jesus became the conduit for the Father's very life to the believer. Jesus has life through the Father. The believer has life through Jesus.

The title "living" for God the Father echoes the implications of Jesus' phrase "I AM" and his self-identification with the bread from heaven (see 6:51a above).

6:58 summed up Jesus's discourse. Jesus used bread to compare believers and unbelievers. Believers gnawed on the bread (the flesh of Jesus) that gives life. They shared a table fellowship centered on the Lord. And they became part of the Body they consumed.

Unbelievers (symbolized by the Jewish antagonists of Jesus) held they lived close to God, for their ancestors ate the manna bread from heaven (i.e., their ancestors based their lives solely upon God's providence). But there was a difference between one truly living close to God and believing one lived close to God because that person enjoyed a good life. Living close to God involved risks (being misunderstood and even persecuted for faith); enjoying God's favor merely meant a relatively comfortable life. The one who chose intimacy with God was spiritually alive. The one who simply paid lip service to God for his blessings was spiritually dying.

Catechism Theme: Question and Answer Summary on the Eucharist (CCC 1407-1418)

- Why is Eucharist the high point of Christian life?

The Eucharist is the high point of Christian life because 1) Eucharist remembers and celebrates the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, and 2) in the Communion, Jesus unites his followers with himself. (1407)

- What are the two parts of Eucharist?

The two parts of Eucharist are 1) the Liturgy of the Word where the Bible is read and taught, and 2) the Liturgy of the Eucharist where God is thanked for all his gifts, the bread and wine are consecrated (changed into the Body and Blood of Jesus), and Jesus' followers share in his Body and Blood at Communion. (1408)

- How is the risen Jesus active in the Eucharist?

Since the Eucharist celebrates the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, the Jesus acts as high priest (by offering himself to God the Father) and victim (who died in our place). The ordained priest represents Christ as priest in the Mass; the consecrated bread and wine is Christ sharing himself with us. (1411)

- What are the sacramental signs of Eucharist?

The sacramental signs of Eucharist are 1) the bread and wine, 2) the prayer asking for the blessing of the Holy Spirit and 3) the word of Consecration ("This is my body...this is my blood of the new covenant..."). (1412)

- Is only part of Jesus present in Eucharist or all of Jesus?

All of Jesus is present in the consecrated bread and wine, not merely his Spirit. Jesus is present "Body, Blood, soul and divinity." (1413)

- What is necessary in order to receive Eucharist?

In order to receive Eucharist, one must be forgiven of serious (or "mortal") sins. Someone with a serious sin must receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before they receive Eucharist. (1415) Eucharist does forgive less serious (or



"venial" sins) and strengthens one against serious sin. (1416)

- How many times a year must a Catholic receive Eucharist?

A Catholic must receive Eucharist at least once a year, but all Catholics are encouraged to go every time they attend Mass. (1417)

- Why does one genuflect in front of the tabernacle?

Since the tabernacle contains the consecrated bread (which is really Jesus), one shows honor to the consecrated hosts (known as the "Blessed Sacrament") by genuflecting. (1418)

Q: Westerners, especially Americans, enjoy "the Good Life." Does this freedom from

want help or hinder your commitment to Christ? Explain.

So many sparks fly from these few passages: the divinity of Christ, the gift of his sacrifice on the cross, his life offered to the believer (made explicit at Communion), the commitment of the believer in response. To continue the meal metaphor, the rich thematic fare Christ offered in John 6:51-58 can overwhelm us. But it should not numb us. Christ invites us to consume him in Word and Sacrament. He entreats us to constantly renew our commitment to his Lordship. The question that lies before us is simple. Do we take his invitation at its full value?

Q: How can you help the Communion you receive on Sunday come alive this week