

The Body and Blood of Christ – Year A

Today's feast is essentially about relationship and spiritual nourishment. For us Christians the focus is on intensifying and nourishing our relationship with Christ. While this festival focuses on Christ in the Eucharist, it is important not to overlook the reality of Jesus as the Word that gives life.

Deuteronomy 8:2-1, 14-16 The setting for this extract is Moses addressing the people of Israel just before they move into the land they are about to occupy. The poverty and hardship of the years in the wilderness should convince the people of their dependence on God and the need to adhere to the divine expectations and laws. God's care for the people should prove that there is more to a fulfilling life than food for the body. There is the integrated lifestyle of a people who give themselves to the values of Torah.

The words coming from God will shape and nourish their spirit

Moses is making it clear that everything coming from the mouth of God is life for body and spirit. Access to the word of God, passed on by Moses in this scenario, is the people's guide for living and their way to fulfilling lives. The manna and the water from the rock keep their bodies alive, but the words coming from God will shape and nourish their spirit.

Throughout their history the Israelites will regard themselves as a chosen people, a nation dedicated to God and will be reminded in every age, by a succession of prophets, that they have moral obligations to live up to this relationship with their God.

Psalms 148 This psalm continues the metaphor of food that sustains the spirit. The 'finest wheat' that feeds the nation and nourishes its relationship with the Creator is God's word. They do well to see this as a privilege, not granted to other nations in the same degree. The effect of this, of course, is that privilege brings with it obligations.

1 Corinthians 10:16-17 In this section of his letter to the Christians in Corinth Paul is reminding the community that even though the Israelite escapees from Egypt ate and drank the spiritual nourishment mediated by Moses, many of them disobeyed God's laws and never made it to the Promised Land. Paul was making the point that there are no magic formulas involved in a life that is pleasing to God. It takes dedication, resolve and work.

The corollary of Paul's introduction to this chapter is that the Corinthians need to sustain their relationship with Christ by strengthening their unity with each other. This prompts us to realise that our relationship with Christ is deepened when we consciously work at our interaction with our community and those who form part of our life. We read in Matthew 25:40:

...just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

John 6:51-58 The setting for this gospel passage is the synagogue at Capernaum, a town on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. The people who gathered to listen to Jesus asked if he could give them a sign so that they could believe in him as a person from God. After all, they argued, Moses gave his people 'bread from heaven' when they were in the desert and this gave them a reason to put their faith in Moses. Those listening to Jesus asked for the true bread from heaven and Jesus assured them that *he* was the bread that gives life, his flesh for the life of the world.

We can easily imagine how that went over. Naturally, it brought on murmuring and many rhabarbs. But by now we are familiar with startling remarks coming from Jesus that had the potential to put people off, such as: 'Let the dead bury their dead,' 'love your enemies,' 'before Abraham was, I am,' 'sell all that you own,' 'the first shall be last,' and so on. Clearly these were designed to strike a blow and make people think. Only those who had the curiosity and insight to stick around and find out what he was driving at would come to understand the full meaning of his words.

Peter doesn't answer Jesus in the words of flesh and blood

Naturally, we might say, the crowd found Jesus' words too much, and they began to drift away. Few, if any, figured, he can't mean what we think he means so, there must be something hidden in what he is saying. And a few verses after today's extract when the majority had wandered off, Jesus turned to his closest followers to ask if they felt like going too. The response from Peter is revealing. He doesn't

answer Jesus in the words of flesh and blood. Why doesn't he say something like, 'Lord, whatever you say, 'We'll eat your flesh and drink your blood'? No, Peter's answer takes us back to the very beginning of John's gospel where Jesus is introduced as the human form of the Word of God, 'In the beginning was the Word...'. That is to say, Jesus is the living and breathing form of communication from God. Everything about Jesus – his words, his actions, his relationships, are God speaking to us and giving us the key to a fulfilling life.

Peter gets it, and responds to Jesus as the Word of God.

Peter's answer was, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.' The 'bread from heaven' Jesus was talking about is, 'every word that comes from the mouth of God'. Peter gets it, and responds to Jesus as the Word of God.

However, in this section the John writer is balancing two key ideas. One, Jesus is 'the word that comes from the mouth of God', and two, Jesus is the food and drink that gives life. It's important to remember that the John writer has organised the pivotal events in the mission of Jesus around Jewish festivals and the feeding of the crowd followed by this bread of life discourse occur at Passover. This festival with the family Passover seder as its focus recalls the Israelites escaping from Egypt and being nourished in the desert by God. Eating and drinking to keep alive are central issues in this remembrance.

It follows, then, that Jesus' focus on eating and drinking has a Eucharistic application. In Jewish tradition 'flesh and blood' is an expression that refers to the whole person and here Jesus is referring to his whole self and saying that the fullness of life comes to those who encounter the whole Christ. A unique and significant encounter takes place in the Eucharistic celebration. Our participation in the Eucharistic meal connects us intimately with the whole Christ – the Word, or revelation of God, and the food of life.



The Eucharist is not a thing; it is a person.

Pope Benedict XVI



After Mass, a woman asked her husband what he thought of the mink stole on the lady who had been sitting in front of him.

'I didn't notice. I must have dozed off.'

'I must say! A lot of good coming to Mass does you.'

Laurie Woods