

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

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



The Feast of Corpus Christi (the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ) celebrates the gift that Jesus gives us in the Eucharist – his very self as our food and drink. In the Roman Catholic church in Britain and Ireland, the feast is celebrated on the Sunday after Trinity Sunday. Some other churches also keep it as the Day of Thanksgiving for the Institution of Holy Communion.

Second Reading 1 Corinthians 10: 16–17

(Something of the background to 1 Corinthians is given in the Prego Plus for Pentecost.)

Today's reading comes from that part of the Letter (from Chapter 7 onwards) where Paul answers questions put to him by the Corinthians. In Chapter 8 their query concerns eating food which came from animals sacrificed to idols – a real everyday problem for Christians. As only a small part of an animal was burnt as an offering to the idol, the rest belonged to the Temple priests, who often sold it to local butchers. Festive family meals would often take place in the Temple, so Christians had to decide whether or not to eat that meat.

Paul's answer follows two general principles: the faithful should be free from following the Law slavishly, and above all, should behave in a charitable manner.

In Chapter 10, which includes today's reading for Corpus Christi, Paul gives practical advice on this topic. Taking part in meals in the Temple is too much like worshipping demons and idols (10: 18–22). For Christians, it is breaking bread and drinking from the blessing cup that enables us to enter into communion with the Lord. The blessing cup mentioned here is the third ritual cup of the Passover meal, over which thanksgiving prayers were pronounced.

This breaking of bread and drinking from the cup, which we now call the Eucharist ('Thanksgiving'), strengthens and cements the union between Christians and the Lord. We who believe in his words and partake of the Eucharist become one with him and with each other.



Gospel John 6: 51–58

Today's Gospel is from the final section of the Eucharistic discourse in John 6, where the vocabulary changes radically from previous verses. The significant words are no longer 'bread from heaven' or 'bread of life'. The Judeans were familiar with these ideas since their ancestors were sustained by the manna as they crossed the desert. Now they are 'flesh', and the words 'blood', 'eat' and 'feed' are repeated often. There is a constant reference to food and drink.

'I am the living bread'

This is the only time this expression is used in the New Testament. We also find 'living water' and 'living Father', so the word 'living' is very close to 'divine' in meaning.

'How can *this man* give us his flesh to eat?'

This clearly indicates that the audience has not understood who Jesus is. There is a strong sense of contempt in the expression 'this man'.

'Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood'

John uses the term 'flesh' where the other evangelists talk of 'body' ('This is my body which is given for you': Luke 22: 19). It may be that John is attempting to combat a current heresy, Gnosticism, which held that Jesus was not a real human being, but a philosophical idea of love under the appearance of a man. It may also suggest the Incarnation revealed at the beginning of John's Gospel 'And the Word became flesh ...' (John 1: 14).

'Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me'

For Jewish people such language would be abhorrent and offensive.

The Old Testament clearly forbids drinking blood: 'you shall not eat its blood' (Deuteronomy 15: 23). To this day, observant Jews will only eat meat from which the blood has been drained (Kosher food). People who had been in contact with blood were considered ritually unclean.

John nowhere gives a detailed account of the institution of the Eucharist, and these verses may have been intended to make up for it. All along, John has



encouraged his audience to grow into an ever greater intimacy with Jesus, culminating here with the words 'Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me'. That is to say, that person is totally united with Jesus in an ongoing relationship of love and trust.