

## **The Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi) – 2021B**

We might wonder: What did folks think on the day when Moses slaughtered some bulls and splashed half of the blood on a stone table and sprinkled the rest on them? Neighboring cultures used blood sacrifice to make their point to the gods or to themselves, so the ritual didn't come from left field. Blood was serious—blood meant life or death. The altar represented God's realm, and so the people were bound to God in their mutual reception of the blood. Moses called this action a covenant. Somewhere between the words of God and the blood of animals, a promise was solemnly contracted.

Blood covenant was a messy business. It is hard to imagine the hours of janitorial duty that early priests must have put in mopping up the shrines and temples. Yet the human participants got off easy compared with the sacrificial animals that gave their lives in the stead of the nation. We can almost hear the weariness in the words of the Letter to the Hebrews—the writer surely a priest convert to the Christian perspective—as he describes the cycle of ritual killings. Finally, he says, one sacrifice has been made to end all sacrifice. Christ the high priest has inaugurated a new covenant. Somewhere between the words of the Last Supper and the passion of the cross, God has fulfilled the promise that humanity could not keep.

“Take ,” Jesus says simply in Mark's rendering of the event. What is being offered is his own body, his life, no small thing. Jesus doesn't waste a lot of words explaining what he means or persuading us of the merits of his offer. For three years, the argument has been made in teaching, preaching, healing, casting out demons, and forgiving sins. All of this saving activity by any other name is now literally placed into our hands—if we want it. Take, Jesus says, and hands over his life symbolically as food. Did the disciples understand that they were in the presence of a ritual being born, like those folks in the time of Moses? Did they perceive that tearing off a piece of the

bread and drinking a little wine was their assent to a great and fateful participation in divine life?

They might have if they had our advantage: a keen awareness of the sacramental life. We also have the advantage of hearing, in quick succession, Moses' words about the blood of the covenant echoed by Jesus. The disciples may not have been awake enough to make the connections that night, but we cannot afford to make the same mistake. What they received fresh is by now an ancient ritual of words and gestures and shared life. Take it, or don't take it, but let us not close our eyes to what it is.

The Eucharist is a nourishing meal of bread and wine to which we are invited by virtue of our Baptism. It is a reminder of the ancient Passover from slavery to freedom, from sin and death to victory over both. It is a sign of the communion of the whole church, each one of us to the other in Christ. It is the memory of a sacrifice made in flesh and blood. It is the life of Christ made present and tangible right now in our midst. It is the love of God for the human race poured out.

But our Eucharist is also a ritual of decision, to participate or not in the life of God handed to us in the Body and Blood of Christ. Take, Jesus said. But do not take it lightly or thoughtlessly or as an antique ritual that requires no further obligation.

"We do the same thing over and over." This is the common lament of churchgoers routinely bored in the pews. Not all of these are children and teenagers. Some folks who've attended Mass for decades are still confounded by the need for ritual. It doesn't change, may not edify, rarely entertains, and isn't always artfully performed. So why do we do it—over and over?

All ritual is fundamentally a mnemonic device. Take the evening ablutions before bedtime. Most of us do them in the same order with the same tools in the same way, night after night. That way we're sure to do it all and not to forget some aspect of hygiene. Once you've found the best toothbrush, toothpaste, face soap, and comb, you don't mess with success.

The end result is good news: You get to keep your teeth, gums, and skin in good working condition.

That's a prosaic example, but it's a model for how most ritual works. Ritual requires preparation: If you don't buy a new toothbrush or launder your towels occasionally, the ritual breaks down. Also, you have to supply a certain amount of intentionality to the effort. The same careful preparation is called for in the celebration of the Eucharist.

Take it as solemnly as the people did who stood before Moses and allowed themselves to be marked by blood and incorporated into a covenant that held the power of life and death over their heads. Maybe one advantage the ancients have over us is that they stood close enough to the altar to be splashed by blood they wore home, reminding them of the seriousness of their commitment. Our decision to take the life of Christ into ourselves is more sobering still.

There is a divine directory called "the book of life" in the Book of Revelation 20:12. Admission to the eternal city of God will be limited to "only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life" (21:27). In Luke, Jesus invites his disciples to "rejoice that their names are written in heaven" (10:20). Hebrews speaks of "the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" (12:23). And in his letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul speaks of colleagues who have struggled beside him in the work of the gospel, people "whose names are in the book of life" (4:3).

What a list this is, and what a price Jesus has paid to put it together! Jesus was a man on a mission, a mission that would cost him significant bodily pain and emotional hardship. Jesus played the role of a high priest, a person who had the job of performing temple sacrifices to bring people forgiveness of their sins. But unlike an earthly high priest, Jesus offered his own blood — not the blood of calves and goats. Killed on the cross, he was slaughtered in an unbelievably humiliating, excruciating and bloody sacrifice designed to bring us back into a right relationship with God for all time. He "offered himself without blemish to God," says today's passage from the

letter to the Hebrews, in a sacrifice designed to “purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!” (9:14).

Jesus’ death on the cross gives us a place on the list. It offers us an opportunity to join the roll call of the redeemed, the sanctuary of the saints — all the saints, those who are forgiven, purified, renewed and restored. When you’re on this list, you can never be lost.

We all know that the thing about elite lists is that they are just about impossible to get onto. This list isn’t like those lists. This list is for everyone. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,” says Jesus to Nicodemus, “so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). This gift is for everyone who believes — not just the elite.

The list is for life. “I am the resurrection and the life,” says Jesus to Martha. “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live” (John 11:25). This gift brings life to those who die — not just peace to those who have lost loved ones. The list lasts forever. Christ “entered once for all into the Holy Place,” says the letter to the Hebrews, “not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption” (9:12). Jesus gave his life, and the result is eternal redemption — his list is never going to change or diminish or disappear. Jesus has suffered once, for all, so that we might make his “list of life.” And we can respond, as so many have before us, with faith and with gratitude, with wonder and with worship. With our names on this list, we’ll never be lost.

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