

June 14, 2009

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

Reading 1

[Ex 24:3-8](#)

When Moses came to the people
and related all the words and ordinances of the LORD,
they all answered with one voice,
"We will do everything that the LORD has told us."
Moses then wrote down all the words of the LORD and,
rising early the next day,
he erected at the foot of the mountain an altar
and twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel.
Then, having sent certain young men of the Israelites
to offer holocausts and sacrifice young bulls
as peace offerings to the LORD,
Moses took half of the blood and put it in large bowls;
the other half he splashed on the altar.
Taking the book of the covenant, he read it aloud to the people,
who answered, "All that the LORD has said, we will heed and do."
Then he took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, saying,
"This is the blood of the covenant
that the LORD has made with you
in accordance with all these words of his."

Responsorial Psalm

[Ps 116:12-13, 15-16, 17-18](#)

R. (13) **I will take the cup of salvation, and call on the name of the Lord.**
or:

R. **Alleluia.**

How shall I make a return to the LORD
for all the good he has done for me?
The cup of salvation I will take up,
and I will call upon the name of the LORD.

R. **I will take the cup of salvation, and call on the name of the Lord.**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

Precious in the eyes of the LORD
is the death of his faithful ones.
I am your servant, the son of your handmaid;
you have loosed my bonds.

R. **I will take the cup of salvation, and call on the name of the Lord.**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

To you will I offer sacrifice of thanksgiving,
and I will call upon the name of the LORD.
My vows to the LORD I will pay
in the presence of all his people.

R. **I will take the cup of salvation, and call on the name of the Lord.**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

Reading II

[Heb 9:11-15](#)

Brothers and sisters:

When Christ came as high priest
of the good things that have come to be,
passing through the greater and more perfect tabernacle
not made by hands, that is, not belonging to this creation,
he entered once for all into the sanctuary,
not with the blood of goats and calves
but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.
For if the blood of goats and bulls
and the sprinkling of a heifer's ashes
can sanctify those who are defiled
so that their flesh is cleansed,
how much more will the blood of Christ,
who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God,

cleanse our consciences from dead works
to worship the living God.

For this reason he is mediator of a new covenant:
since a death has taken place for deliverance
from transgressions under the first covenant,
those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.

Gospel

[Mk 14:12-16, 22-26](#)

On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread,
when they sacrificed the Passover lamb,
Jesus' disciples said to him,
"Where do you want us to go
and prepare for you to eat the Passover?"
He sent two of his disciples and said to them,
"Go into the city and a man will meet you,
carrying a jar of water.
Follow him.
Wherever he enters, say to the master of the house,
"The Teacher says, "Where is my guest room
where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?""
Then he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready.
Make the preparations for us there."
The disciples then went off, entered the city,
and found it just as he had told them;
and they prepared the Passover.
While they were eating,
he took bread, said the blessing,
broke it, gave it to them, and said,
"Take it; this is my body."
Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them,
and they all drank from it.
He said to them,
"This is my blood of the covenant,
which will be shed for many.
Amen, I say to you,
I shall not drink again the fruit of the vine
until the day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."
Then, after singing a hymn,
they went out to the Mount of Olives.

HOMILY

This celebration of the solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ talks about blood sacrifice. We often hear more talk about the Body of Christ, *Corpus Christi* in Latin, than blood of Christ; it may even be indecent to talk about blood in certain circles outside of surgery departments and laboratories in hospitals. The word blood is so much associated with injury and violence that the simple evocation of the term may sound discomfoting. But there is no way we can talk about the salvation brought to us through Christ without mentioning his bloody sacrifice on the cross for us.

The word sacrifice also and its use in the social and religious studies have been reductive and often have a negative connotation, associated with primitive practices in pagan religions, so that mentioning it in the church may seem awkward to some. But the reality is that there is no way we can celebrate rituals in our Christian liturgy in bypassing the reality of sacrifice of which the sacrifice of Christ is the perfect example. It is the single most important event that occurred in the history of our faith that gives meaning to our daily and weekly worship and bring us together.

The first reading that we heard today comes from the book of exodus chapter 24: versus 3-8. This passage talks about the ratification of the covenant between God and his people on mount Sinai Moses being the mediator and notary of this agreement between God and his people.

To better understand what is going on here we need to remember what the meaning of blood sacrifices is among the Israelites. The Israelites had basically 3 kinds of sacrifices: *the holocaust* or *burnt offering*, *the sacrifice of communion* or *fellowship sacrifice* and *the sacrifice for atonement of sin* or *expiatory sacrifice*, or simply *sin offering*.

First the holocaust: the root of the word that designates the holocaust in Hebrew is *Olah* which means « *to go up* » it is a sacrifice in which the slain animal *goes up* as it were, on to the altar and is completely burnt and its smoke “*rises up*” toward God. The priest who presides the sacrifice takes the blood of the animal and pour it all around the altar. This sacrifice was accompanied by an offering of kneaded dough and a pouring out of wine or libation. Early in the history of the people of Israel this sacrifice meant *thanksgiving sacrifice* or *petition*, later on this sacrifice will extend to the meaning of a *sacrifice of expiation*. The fact that the sacrificed animal *is burnt up* means the irrevocable gift to God.

The sacrifice of communion was any bloody sacrifice accompanied by *a religious meal*. Here also the blood of the animal was shed on the altar but the main characteristic of this sacrifice is that *the animal was not burnt up but it was divided in 3 shares; one share* for God, this shares went on the altar together with the blood and what was considered the best part of the animal the fat, and was burnt up on the altar; *one share* for the priest, and *one* for the person offering the sacrifice. This sacrifice in which the *petitioner* shared with God, [represented by the altar, and his mediator the priest], **means to eat with God**; so partaking in God’s table as member of his family. It was also offered bread, oil, wine and salt. Of course God does not eat, but the meal eaten in his presence expressed the sharing with him on the table of the altar. This sacrifice was a joyous and festive sacrifice which signified peace with God reconciliation with God; it was a sacrifice of covenant.

The third kind of sacrifice is the sacrifice for the atonement of sin or expiatory sacrifice (a sin offering).

The most important characteristic here is the role of blood. In the sacrifice offered for the assembly of the children of God, In the book of Leviticus chap 4, 13-21, the high priest takes some of the bull's blood, bring it into the Tent (the Holy), dip his finger in it, and sprinkle it in front of the curtain seven times "in front of Yahweh". The blood is considered as the soul of the victim, its life; it atones for the sins as the book of Leviticus says: "*the life of every living thing is in the blood, and that is why the Lord has commanded that all blood be poured out on the altar to take away the people's sins. Blood which is life takes away sins.*" (lev.17, 11)

In the sacrifice being offered by Moses to God to seal the covenant between God and his people, Moses after reading anew the words of the covenant to God's people and having received their consent and agreement sprinkled on the people with the blood of the sacrifice, saying "***This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words of his***". It means that, from now on, not only they have their sins forgiven, because to stand before God one needed purification, but also they have become God's relatives, they are of the same blood, they become the people of God. So the holocaust offered, is a ***thanksgiving to God*** for freeing them from the bondage of Egypt and at the same for making peace with them and recognizing them as his people.

The letter to the Hebrews that we heard in the second reading uses ***the ritual of the sacrifice for sin*** that the people of Israel celebrated once, every year on the Feast of the *Yom Kippur*, that is the Feast of the Expiation, to explain Jesus' sacrifice. As the second reading showed Jesus is the New High Priest, *not belonging to this creation, he entered once for all into the sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own, thus obtaining eternal redemption.*

The sacrifice of the cross was for the new messianic community the day of forgiveness once for all. But here let us not think that the slaying of Jesus happen to soothe God's wrath on account of our sins, God has no revenge to take on us, the shedding of Jesus' blood on the cross like the sprinkling of the blood on the tabernacle in the holy Tent which represented God's throne, means the reconciliation between God and his people. It means that a new covenant was restored as on Mount Sinai. Jesus is the Mediator of a new covenant with his own blood. It is the very words that Moses uses on Mount Sinai to seal the first covenant with God, that Jesus uses before his disciples, that we read in today's gospel, to seal the New Covenant : "***This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many.***"

The sacrifice of Christ is first and foremost a spiritual sacrifice. All of Jesus life was offering and obedience to his father. The letter to the Hebrews reminds us that since the incarnation Jesus brought all the sacrifices to an end:

So God does away with all the old sacrifices and puts the sacrifice of Christ in their place. Because Jesus Christ did what God wanted him to do, we are all purified from sin by the offering that he made of his own body once and for all."

What we celebrate in the Eucharist is Jesus' sacrifice but we do not repeat Jesus' sacrifice it is done once and for all and this sacrifice endures for ever for our salvation, we make it present and real because Jesus said: "*Do this in memory of me.*" It is why we talk about Jesus' real presence

in the bread and wine offered in his memory. The bread and wine become through the power of the Spirit the visible signs of his Body and Blood offered on the cross for our salvation. In taking part in and in receiving the Body and blood of Christ we are forgiven our sins and we are reconciled with God, we are at peace with God. We are the people of the New Covenant, God's people, God's relatives. And if we partake in God's life, if we belong to him, there is nothing we have to fear, because God is our share. He is our protector and redeemer. These are the benefits that we receive in this New Covenant.

We also know that the Covenant entails responsibility. When the people of God heard the words and ordinances of the Lord they said: ***“All that the Lord has said, we will heed and do”***. What are our responsibilities? These responsibilities should not be understood in strictly legal terms because as you know there is no match between God and us. They are not to be understood as works we should do to compensate for the salvation given us. God's gift of salvation is free and does not require anything in return. The only duty that we have is to make his salvation known to our brothers and sisters. This we can do in showing selfless love to them, in being agents of reconciliation, justice and peace. And this requires that we be active witnesses of Jesus. We cannot just satisfy ourselves with a personal faith to God, viewing our being Christians as simply a personal relationship to God through the observance of his commandments. God does not save us just as individuals, Jesus gathered a community of disciples and wants them to be the agents of the building of God's reign in world and sent them into the world be witnesses, and share the good news. This community St Paul calls the Body of Christ. We are members of the Body of Christ. What responsibility do we personally take to make this community a better witness of Christ's self offering to the world?

The Eucharist we receive is called the Body and Blood of Christ, that is the concrete sign of our love, commitment, and agreement with Jesus, how mindful are we when we receive Jesus into our hands, our life, our home and how does this awareness play itself out in our relationship with one another?

May the occasion of this feast of the Body and Blood of Christ bring new awareness to our identity as disciples of whom who gave his life for the salvation of us all.

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