

CORPUS CHRISTI 7th June 2015 7.00am Eucharist 8.00am Eucharist 9.30am Solemn Eucharist

Readings: Exodus 24:3-8; Psalm 116; 1 Corinthians 10:14-21; Mark 14:12-16 (17-21) 22-26

The feast of Corpus Christi began as a local festival in Liège, Belgium. In 1264, Pope Urban IV extended the feast to the universal Church. The feast was celebrated on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday. It was revived in the C of E in the 19th century following the Oxford Movement. In our lectionary, the Thursday after Trinity Sunday is called *Thanksgiving for the Holy Communion*. It may be celebrated then or “at other times.” We’re observing that option today.

Our readings today mention blood a lot. Moses reads the words of the Lord to the people, who verbally agree to what the Lord has spoken; animals are sacrificed, then half their blood is sprinkled on the altar and the other half on the people with words reminding them of the Lord’s covenant with his people.

Then St Paul tells the Corinthians that the bread is a sharing or participation in the body of Christ, and the cup is a sharing or participation in the blood of Christ. And in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus shares the cup with his disciples, calling it his “blood of the covenant which is poured out for many” (Mark 14:24).

Why so much blood? Is the God we worship bloodthirsty, delighting in the sacrificing of animals and even of his sinless Son? Does God require a victim to be slaughtered and its blood shed to placate God’s wrath?

The idea of the people of Israel having blood splashed over them sounds repulsive, as does the thought of Jesus being nailed to the cross and having his blood shed. But we’re struck by the idea of something happening to the people involved. When we drink from the cup and consume the blood of Christ, something is happening to us. The liturgy doesn’t aim to teach us something theoretical that we mull over in our heads. *The liturgy is designed to involve us*. Something happens to us; we undergo something.

The Jewish high priest went into the most holy place of the Temple – the “Holy of Holies” – once a year on the Day of Atonement. He sacrificed a bull or a calf to atone for his own sins before going in. Then he entered, having first chosen by lot one of two lambs or goats – one for a sin offering for the Lord, the other for ‘Azazel’ or a scapegoat. The first one was sacrificed and its blood was taken into the Holy of Holies and sprinkled on the mercy seat, or lid of the Ark of the Covenant.

The High Priest on the Day of Atonement, wore a plain white robe, like an angel of God. One of the names of the angel was ‘Son of God.’ Later, he put on the beautiful vestments of his priesthood. It was as if he were an angelic manifestation of God. The phrase, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’ is a NT reference to the Jewish rite of atonement.

The sprinkling of the furnishings in the Temple with blood was designed to remove all the impurities of creation which started from the Temple veil outwards. God the Creator dwelt inside the Holy of Holies which was regarded as beyond and outside creation. So, the ritual atonement was a liturgy in which God emerged from the most holy place in order to set the people free from their sins and impurities. *God* was doing the work of reconciling his people and restoring creation out of love for the people.

We have a tendency to spoil and make a proper mess of creation with our wars, our oil spills, our greed, our lust and all the other things that ruin life on this planet. God emerges from the Holy of Holies that symbolises the time and place before creation (outside creation). As the priest emerged from the veil,

which was made of rich fabric representing the created order, he put on the priestly vestments that were made of similar material to the veil, representing God entering the world to make atonement and to restore that which we'd messed up.

The high priest was acting in the name of the Lord, in the person of Yahweh. This was God providing the means of setting people free from their sins. It was *not* the priest or the people trying to appease God by offering blood. As RC theologian James Alison puts it: "the Jewish understanding [of atonement] was way ahead of the 'Aztec' version we attribute to it. (By 'Aztec' he means the concept of sacrificing something to satisfy or placate a god or deity). Even at that time it was understood that it was not about humans trying desperately to satisfy God, but God taking the initiative of breaking through towards us. In other words, atonement was something of which we were the *beneficiaries*" (James Alison, *Undergoing God*, p.54).

The NT letter to the Hebrews likens Jesus to the high priest Melchizedek. Jesus' final prayer before his disciples in John 17 is modelled on the atonement prayer of the Jewish high priest. In John's Gospel Jesus was killed at the same time as the Passover lambs were being slaughtered – he who was the 'Lamb of God.' Strangely, he was wearing a seamless robe like a *priest's* robe, and they cast lots for it instead of tearing it. When Jesus cried out 'It is finished' it meant atonement was complete; creation is restored.

In John's Gospel on Easter morning we're in a garden. It's like the first day of creation, the first day of the week. Mary Magdalene sees in the tomb two angels! One is sitting at the head and one at the foot, like the two cherubim on the mercy seat on the Ark of the Covenant. The Holy of Holies has been opened up. The way the synoptic Gospels picture it is having the veil of the Temple ripped from top to bottom. Jesus has come forth from the place of creation into the world.

Every time we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, we are participating in God's act of creation. We do that in other ways too, but here we share in the fullness of creation through the self-offering of Christ. Every time we gather here we do so with the wonderful realisation that the Holy of Holies has been opened up for us. There's no need for any other sacrifices. Jesus has ascended into heaven to sit at God's right hand to intercede on our behalf. When he ascended there were two angels, the cherubim from the Ark, the two at the empty tomb. They told the disciples to stop gawking and go and wait for the power of the Holy Spirit so they can tell others what's happened. Now the Holy of Holies is everywhere. The Eucharist is Jesus our high priest emerging from the Holy of Holies, giving us his body and blood, and forming *us* into a living priesthood and a living temple in the world. We share in the very life of God.

The Jewish background of our liturgy reminds us that what we do here didn't just happen; it wasn't just thought up by a liturgical working group pooling ideas. We enact here the drama of Jesus' own fulfilment of the ancient Jewish sacrifices. Liturgy by itself and for its own sake is a waste of time. At best it becomes simply an aesthetic exercise or a kind of entertainment.

The reason many people find liturgy puzzling, boring or incomprehensible, is that they fail to connect it with life. Jesus brought together the liturgical and the ethical. Worship must relate to life, indeed inform our whole life. It's not a matter of grasping something intellectually, but of allowing something to happen to you, of undergoing something. If it were simply a matter of grasping or understanding something, of 'getting it right,' then your religion becomes a matter of "We're right; we're the good guys; we're forgiven; we're the ones who *get it*." Of course it's assumed then that others *don't* get it.

No, the Christian faith is a journey. We're continually being brought to an awareness of what God has done and is doing in us through the Holy Spirit as we are continually being forgiven, transformed and changed into the likeness of God in Jesus Christ. That will include times when we *don't* get it right.

The Eucharist is how we participate in that one true sacrifice which, as James Alison puts it "has been done but not "over and done with." It means that the victorious Lamb is there; his blood flowing out; the victim, the *forgiving* victim, is present. And we have access to participate in that atonement, which has been achieved through it being made available to us in our Eucharist" (Alison, p. 63).

The community formed by the regular participation in the Eucharist will spread out into the world nourished by the body and blood of the Lamb, continuing the process of bringing the creation to fulfillment, especially by extending forgiveness where we would rather mete out punishment. We're all at different stages of the journey, something not dependent on age, because some travel more slowly than others. So in our eucharistic celebrations, we can never know where on the journey our fellow worshippers are. We differ in so many ways.

But the one who stands forgiving and drawing us to himself, starts where we are. As we allow ourselves to undergo the liturgy, a new imagination, a new vision, a new energy is given us. Then the forgiving victim gives himself in such a way that we become him, his body in the world. Thus, over time, the renewal of the whole creation takes place. In case you weren't aware of it, that's why you're here today.

Fr Mark Watson
Canon Pastor