

“You give them something to eat”

Corpus Christi: The Body and Blood of Christ – Cycle C – 23 June 2019

Readings: Gen 14:18-20; 1 Cor 11:23-26; Lk 9:11-17

Jesus said to them, “You give them something to eat.” (Lk 9:13)

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The short first reading from the Book of Genesis chapter 14 narrates an event in the life of ‘Abram’, still to be renamed ‘Abraham’. It has been chosen on the feast of *Corpus Christi* because of the mention of ‘bread and wine’, which will later be Eucharistic elements. On his return, victorious, from battle with four invading kings from the East who had raided Eastern Canaan and decamped with a lot of treasure, Abram is greeted by the king and chief priest of Salem: Melchizedek. Salem was a pagan city at that time; it was later called ‘Jerusalem’ and became the capital of Israel. The ‘bread and wine’ referred to here has a sacrificial aspect and not only refers to a meal since it’s mentioned that Melchizedek is “a priest of God Most High”. It’s likely that Abram had entered into some kind of alliance with him. The first mention of “God Most High” in the passage does not necessarily imply Yahweh, the true God, since the Canaanites used the title “most high” (*Elyon*) for other gods, too. However, in the second instance, when “maker of heaven and earth” is used, it implies the God who Abram worships, who not only is Lord of the universe but also has the power “to deliver your enemies into your hands”. Abram uses this same appellation later for God (v.22).
2. The second reading from Paul’s 1st letter to the Corinthians, chapter 11, is the earliest account of what was called the ‘Lord’s Supper’ written around 55-56 A.D. Paul faithfully records what Jesus said at his Last Supper: “This is my body that is for you. Do this in *remembrance* of me ... and cup of the *new covenant* in my blood Drink it, in *remembrance* of me.” Who/What were they to remember? What is the ‘new covenant’? The ‘remembrance’ that Jesus was asking them to forever re-create was not merely to recollect that he had a farewell meal with them, but to remember him—his whole lifetime squandered in generous and joyful self-giving, which would culminate the next day in the breaking of his body and the shedding of his blood. Thus, in actual fact Jesus was inviting his disciples to do everything that he had done by way of a “new covenant”. Unlike the old covenant which was ratified with the blood of animals (see Ex 24:3-8, exterior sacrifice), Jesus indicates that he is initiating a new one (interior sacrifice), which demands total self-giving, even unto death. Note that this passage comes soon after Paul’s critique of the Corinth-community for their abuses (vv.17-22), since there was disunity, inequality and strife on the basis of class-structuring. Paul severely condemns this as being contrary to Jesus’ life and teachings.
3. The gospel narrative describes Jesus’ feeding of the multitude. The disciples – like many of us, today – respond to the situation of hunger by saying, “Send the people away! Let them fend for themselves!” However, to be fair to the disciples, they know very well that they do not have enough food even for themselves. But they had Jesus; and they should have known by then that He was enough! However, what follows has Eucharistic overtones

since Jesus makes the people sit down ... takes loaves of bread ... says a blessing ... breaks them ... distributes ... and people eat as much as they want. Besides the 'meal aspect' of the Eucharist, this passage also hints at the 'sacrificial aspect' of the Eucharist since, like in all the other Synoptic gospels, the 'feeding of the multitude' comes before Jesus announces his passion and death (Lk 9:22; Mk 8:31; Mt 16:21); the meal is linked to his self-giving sacrifice: his death.

Three Insights from Tradition:

1. Pope Urban IV instituted the feast of *Corpus Christi* in 1264 with the issue of the papal bull '*Transiturus*'. This was the very first papally-sanctioned universal feast of the Latin rite. The pope requested the 'angelic doctor' Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) to compose the liturgical prayers for the feast, which resulted in the composition of some of the finest hymns to the Blessed Sacrament including *Tantum ergo*, *Panis angelicus* and *Pange lingua*, which are sung worldwide till today.
2. Pope John Paul II [in his *Corpus Christi* homily on June 14, 2001]: "On this journey, Jesus goes before us, with the gift of Himself to the point of sacrifice and offers himself to us as nourishment and support. Indeed, He does not cease to repeat to the pastors of the People of God in all the ages: 'You give them something to eat' (Lk 9:17); break this bread of eternal life for everyone. A demanding and exalting task. A mission that lasts until the end of time."
3. Pope Francis [in his *Corpus Christi* homily on May 30, 2013]: "Where does the multiplication of the loaves come from? The answer lies in Jesus' request to the disciples: 'You give them...', 'to give', to share. What do the disciples share? The little they have: five loaves and two fish. However, it is those very loaves and fish in the Lord's hands that feed the entire crowd. And this tells us that in the Church, but also in society, a key word of which we must not be frightened is 'solidarity', that is, the ability to make what we have, our humble capacities, available to God, for only in sharing, in giving, will our life be fruitful. Solidarity is a word seen badly by the spirit of the world!"

The Core of Corpus Christi: Today's feast drives home two important points:

- a. Jesus offers Himself fully to us in the Eucharist with the words: "Take and eat this is my body ... and, take and drink, this is the *new covenant in my blood*..." We become partners in a new covenant, personal, which calls for gratitude to God for the self-gift of Jesus.
- b. Each of us who communes with Christ in 'Holy Communion' must offer ourselves to *be bread* to satisfy the hungers of the world: both, spiritual and physical. In our offering of bread and wine, we bring to the altar the earth and its bounty, but also its peoples and their deprivation. The Eucharist becomes a protest and a critique of the dehumanization and degradation that goes on around us. It must always urge us to take our stand to support and nourish those who live a diminished humanity and a broken corporality.

Reflection: We will truly be celebrating the Eucharist only when we can say with Jesus, "Take, this is my body, my blood, given for all!" This is, ultimately, the greatest mystery of love.
