



Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi)



Date: Sunday, June 23, 2019 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** C

First Reading: Genesis 14:18–20

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 110:1–4 | **Response:** Psalm 110:4b

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 11:23–26

Gospel Acclamation: John 6:51

Gospel Reading: Luke 9:11b–17

Preached at: the Jesuit Institute in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Last week we celebrated the solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity. A feast that reminded us that “Within God there is distinction but no difference. And that within God there is love without distance or diminishment.” [because, as Fr Terence Klein recently noted in his excellent essay on the subject] “Love pours out itself completely and receives itself fully.” And today we celebrate the feast of the most holy body and blood of Christ, a feast that reminds us too of just how completely and fully the Son gave himself to us. Let us today pray that we might receive Christ in the Eucharist fully, understanding more deeply the mystery of the Real Presence in our midst.

Our first reading today features the single appearance of Melchizedek, the King of Salem and someone who is called a “priest of God the most high”, in the Bible. It comes at a point in the book of Genesis where Abram has just waged a military campaign to rescue his nephew Lot from four kings who have captured him. Melchizedek suddenly appears and blesses Abram. And you might well wonder what the relationship of Melchizedek is to the feast of Corpus Christi which we celebrate today. I’m sure you’ve heard mention of Melchizedek before. But curiously he’s referred to only two more times in the whole Bible: in the Letter to the Hebrews, and in our Psalm for today. Some say that this Psalm was a coronation Psalm for the Hebrew Kings, who they believed, received the priesthood not by linear descent as the sons of Aaron and Levi did, but directly from God, because of the promise of the Lord that: ‘You are a priest for ever, a priest like Melchizedek of old.’ This same priesthood is the one that Jesus shared – according to the letter to the Hebrews – which is why it is mentioned. Perhaps, on the feast of Corpus Christi, that is the important point to notice here: that the bread and wine Melchizedek offered Abram before blessing him prefigures the

Eucharist of Jesus, and Melchizedek's non-Levitical priesthood prefigured both, the priesthood of Christ, and the ministerial priesthood of the Catholic Church, who faithfully feeds the Church in the celebration of the Sacrament of the Eucharist which we commemorate this day. We heard in our 2nd reading – which incidentally is the earliest written account of what transpired at the Last Supper – that St Paul believed that with each repetition of the bread-and-wine offering, we “proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.” In anticipating the Lord's coming we receive the Eucharist as ‘food for the journey’, to sustain, heal and help us as we live Christ's message of love and mercy in our lives.

But there is something else which I think, given the situation in our Church today – bears pointing out. Our first reading ends with Abram giving Melchizedek a “tithe of everything”. Why is that important to keep in? After all the readings today are shorter than usual because the Liturgy includes a sequence and, in many places, a procession. I think it is because this recognizes Melchizedek and in turn Jesus' priesthood and authority. I think it's a pity that this reading ends where it does because the next paragraph in Genesis mentions an important point concerning Abram's meeting with Melchizedek, a meeting which was also with the King of Sodom, who unlike Melchizedek offered Abram to keep all the possessions of Lot if only he turned over Lot's people, and Abram, having eaten the bread and wine and been blessed by Melchizedek, says:

“not one thread, not one sandal strap, nothing will I take of what is yours; you shall not say, ‘I enriched Abram’. For myself, nothing.” For myself, nothing. We have in recent weeks heard of scandalous financial abuses – essentially abuses of power – in the Church by clergy. I am thinking specifically of the case in the news recently of the Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston, in West Virginia in America, who as a pastor in a small, rural diocese, spent large amounts of money buying favours and distributing largesse to maintain his power and influence. This is an American example but I'm sure it is not an isolated case. It strikes me, as I'm sure it strikes you, as highly incongruent that a priest who is ordained to offer the people the Eucharist and charged, like Abram, not to keep anything for himself beyond the lawfully prescribed offering, would seek to profit personally from this sacred calling. In a land that features ‘Prophets of Doom’ and other ministers of profit in place of prophetic ministers, this contrast can only be deepened when we consider the Gospel which shows the generosity of Jesus to give to the poor. And his example in the Eucharist is truly self-giving.

In today's Gospel we are reminded of Jesus' miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. Our Gospel begins that Jesus welcomed the crowd, talked to them about the Kingdom of God and cured those in need of healing and fed the hungry by multiplying the five loaves and fishes until there were 12 baskets left over. Here what belongs to the people are gathered up and shared and Jesus works a miracle to multiply it so that all receive what they need – and his generosity is such, mirroring the Father's, that there is a surplus – 12 baskets we are told: a symbolic number of inclusion that reminds us of the whole nation, the 12 tribes of Israel, and the 12 apostles.

On this day as we celebrate the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, I am reminded of the words of St Thomas Aquinas who famously had a vision where Christ, noting his writings wanted to offer him a reward and asked him what he wanted – and Thomas said “*Nil nisi te, Domine*” “None other than you, Lord”. And this is what we receive in the Eucharist – none other than you Lord. Jesus Christ is really present in the Eucharist. The old formula spoke that we receive him in his fullness, his body and blood, soul and divinity, and that Christ is really present. I often get questions about how Christ can be present in all the Eucharists around the world through all time. I like to use the example of a mirror that the great priest and author of detective stories, Fr Ronald Knox, once explained.

He said that “What looked like a piece of bread was, you see, a kind of supernatural mirror — not reflecting, as other mirrors do, the appearance without the reality; it reflected the reality without the appearance. A person looking into multiple broken pieces of a mirror sees his or her reflection in each one, rather than seeing his or her once integral reflection now divided amongst the pieces. So too, with the Eucharist, when the Host is broken each part contains the whole Christ, not some part of him.”

And Jesus gave us the example while he was with us of his power to change and multiply, let us just remember the miracle at the wedding feast at Cana (Jn 2:1–11) and Christ's multiplication of loaves (Jn 6:1–14) which we read in today's Gospel. These miracles demonstrate, respectively, Christ's power to change one substance into another and to multiply something's quantity.”

But we should probably also mention what Pope Francis has often recalled: He said that we have come to

“learn that the Eucharist is not a prize for the good, but is strength for the weak, for sinners. It is forgiveness, it is the Viaticum that helps us to move forward, to walk.” He picks this point up again in his great text *Evangelii Gaudium* where he says at paragraph 47: “The Eucharist ... is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.” This is not new! He takes this from St Ambrose who wrote:

“If, whenever Christ’s blood is shed, it is shed for the forgiveness of sins, I who sin often, should receive it often: I need a frequent remedy.” I think the important thing to note about the Eucharist is that it does sustain, heal, forgive and conform us to be more like Jesus. But our lives, if we live them eucharistically, should not be selfish like the example of that wayward Bishop. Rather our eucharistic life must be a life “poured out in loving service” just like the life it comes from. Jesus emptied himself for us so that we might empty ourselves for each other and remind each other that we bear God’s image and likeness in us.

In our country in South Africa today, many of us are aware of the huge inequalities and growing poverty in our land. We cannot talk about the spiritual food of the Eucharist and remember the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, without also considering how we can help our neighbours who are hungry too. Hungry for physical nourishment, but also the nourishment that feeds our souls: relationship and respect. If we are eucharistic people, let us recognize God in them too. Let us smile and greet them as full persons and where we can, offer help. The Eucharist was Christ’s gift to us. None of us are worthy of his compassion and help, and yet he freely gave himself. Let us also pray for the grace to freely give, and let us start with those who hunger most in our world. Then the miracle that Jesus began all those years ago, might continue and sustained by his body and blood we might also take his love out into the world, proclaiming as St Paul says that Christ has died – but we await his coming and until it comes, let us build God’s Kingdom here on earth together, welcoming each other to the feast that is freely given and intended to sustain sinners on the way.

Amen.

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