

Corpus Christi

(Cycle B)

READING I: Exodus 24:3-8*

DATE: 06/13-14/2009

READING II: Hebrews 9:11-15*

PLACE: Corpus Christi; St. Francis of Assisi

GOSPEL: Mark 14:12-16,22-26*

TIME: 4:00 p.m.; 10:30 a.m. / 7:30 a.m.

EVENT: mass

THEME: By participating in the sacrifice of the Body and Blood of Christ, we participate in the covenant between God and us.

I. The Sacrifice of the Mass

- Most of us have probably heard the expression, “the sacrifice of the mass,” but I wonder how many of us fully appreciate the significance of that expression.
- For many Catholics, a sacrifice is giving up chocolate for Lent, and so trying to connect that to the sacrifice of the mass doesn't offer much meaning.

II. Ritual Sacrifice

- In reality, a sacrifice is a specific form of ritual worship that most people of the ancient world practiced, including the Jews and their pagan neighbors.
- Typically, a worshiper would offer a sacrifice by bringing an animal to a priest, who would then slaughter the animal on an altar, drain its blood, and roast it over a fire.
- The thought was that the fumes and fragrance would rise to heaven, and then God would decide whether to accept or reject the sacrifice.
- Once the animal was cooked, the priest would keep a portion of it for himself and return the rest to the worshiper, and the sacrifice was ultimately consumed.
- When the Hebrew scriptures refer to sacrifices, that, for the most part is what they are referring to.
- Within the Jewish tradition, sacrifices could be offered as a way of seeking forgiveness from God or giving thanks to God.
- In the Book of Exodus, today, we hear how Moses used a sacrifice to seal the covenant between God and the people.
- The people promise to obey all that God has taught them in the Ten Commandments and the Law, and God promises to bless the people in their following that Law.
- Young bulls were sacrificed, and their blood was sprinkled on both the people and the altar, signifying both the people's and God's participation in the covenant.

III. Sacrifice in Christianity

- The notion of sacrifice became part of the Christian experience, not so much as a form of worship, but as a way of understanding the brutal and bloody death of Jesus Christ.
- Early Christians would have found it very unsatisfying to leave the death of Jesus as simply the execution of a criminal by the Roman authorities.
- They needed to give meaning to that event, and so they searched their heritage and their culture to identify something familiar that would help them explain to themselves and to others the significance of Jesus' death on a cross.
- And so they landed on the idea of sacrifice as a way of explaining how Christ's bloody death became a means through which they experienced a renewed relationship with God, the forgiveness of their sins, and the outpouring of new life and grace upon them.
- Essentially, they came to understand that Jesus' love for us was so great that he was willing to sacrifice his own life in order that we might know God's love for us.
- In fact, once they interpreted Jesus' death as the greatest and ultimate sacrifice to be offered to God, the early Christians specifically gave up the practice of ritual sacrifice, believing, as we hear in the Letter to the Hebrews, that it was no longer necessary in order to please or praise God.
- Rather, they saw Jesus' death as the only true sacrifice acceptable to God, one that in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, exists for all eternity, once and for all.
- While there was no longer a need for us to offer animal sacrifices in our worship, we could still participate in the one and eternal sacrifice of Christ by our remembrance of him, as he asked us to do.

IV. Sacrifice and Covenant in the Eucharist

- And that's where our gospel reading brings it all together for us in today's celebration of the Body and Blood of Christ, the feast of Corpus Christi.
- Mark tells us that, when Jesus gathered his disciples together for the Last Supper, he offered them bread and wine as a remembrance of him.
- He tells them that the bread is his body, and he offers them the wine, saying, "This is my blood of the covenant."
- Upon hearing these words, our thoughts should immediately be taken to our first reading from Exodus, in which Moses sealed the covenant between God and the people with the blood of a sacrifice.
- Seen through the lens of later Christians, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection brings about a new relationship with God that is sealed through the blood of Jesus himself.

- We participate in that new relationship, that new covenant, by participating in the Eucharist itself – not by having blood sprinkled upon us, but by sharing in the one bread and the one cup that, for us, is the perfect, unbloody sacrifice.
- This way of understanding the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ helps us to see that today’s feast of Corpus Christi is not simply about the actual species of bread becoming Body and wine becoming Blood.
 - It’s about the relationship created between God and us by the *breaking* of the Body and the *pouring* of the Blood of Jesus Christ.
 - The Eucharist is not something that is static, which just sits there; it’s something that is dynamic, that catches us up in the loving life of God made known to us through Jesus Christ.
- The Body and Blood of Christ is ultimately about relationship: our relationship to one another as the Body of Christ and our relationship with God sealed in the Blood of Christ.

V. Conclusion

- So, the next time you hear the expression, “the sacrifice of the mass,” forget about giving up chocolate for Lent.
 - Instead, think about the new relationship with God created by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – how his faithfulness and devotion to us and to God allowed him to offer himself as a sacrifice for us all.
 - And how we have the opportunity to say “yes” to that new relationship, to that new covenant – how we can say that we will do everything that the Lord has told us – every time we step forward to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, Corpus Christi.