

The Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi)  
(Exodus 24:3-8 / Mark 14:12-16. 22-26)  
06.06.2021

Dear brothers and sisters,

In the bible, the word “Covenant” means a friendly relationship offered by God to humankind. God’s covenant is the source of fullness of life and endless happiness for those who enter into it. Both readings heard this morning speak of God’s multifaceted covenant with humanity.

The covenant between God and humankind was first promised to Noah and to his descendants after the flood. It was then explicitly concluded with Abraham and his descendants. It was at the foot of Mount Sinai that the people of Israel, freed from slavery, solemnly accepted God’s covenant by promising to obey the Lord’s commandments transmitted to them by Moses. Israel is the people chosen by God to communicate His salvation to the whole of humanity! Today’s first reading from the book of Exodus narrates for us the celebration of God’s covenant with his people through Moses.

It is important to notice that God’s covenant with his people is not God’s work alone. In this covenant, there are two protagonists: God, who takes the initiative to love his people, and the people who freely choose to obey God’s law by putting into practice all the Lord’s commandments. In the covenant sealed at Sinai, both God and his people have their part to play. Fullness of life and endless happiness are not only God’s gifts to his people. The Lord’s people also have to freely consent to receive the gifts offered to them by putting into practice the commandments which are given to help them live more freely. The Lord has set us free from slavery, sin and death; but we have to obey his commandments if we are to remain free and not fall back into slavery.

This celebration of the covenant at the foot of Mount Sinai is sealed by the sprinkling of blood on the people by Moses: “This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you”. The blood used by Moses came from the sacrifice of animals that had been offered to God by the people. By the sprinkling of this blood, God gives back to the people the life sacrificed to Him in a transformed way. He makes new life out of the death of the animals offered in sacrifice to Him.

Today’s gospel speaks of the renewal of God’s covenant with humankind, the new and eternal covenant ratified in the blood of Christ: “Jesus took a cup, and when he had returned thanks he gave it to his disciples, and all drank from it, and he said to them: This is my blood, the blood of the covenant, which is to be poured out for many”.

We can understandably feel uncomfortable with all the blood poured out not only in the covenant God made with his people through Moses, but also in the Lord’s new covenant sealed in the blood of Jesus

It is important to place in its proper context the blood used in the covenants between God and his people. From the beginning of time, right up until the crucifixion of Jesus, all cultures used to sacrifice blood to their gods because blood was regarded as the seat of life within us. When

blood circulates within us, there is life; when blood stops circulating, death comes. In ancient cultures, everywhere, the idea was present that we owed blood to God, that God needed blood. For a long time, this included human blood. Humans were killed on altars everywhere. Eventually many cultures eliminated human sacrifice and used animals instead. We have an example of this with the covenant sealed through Moses' sacrifice. By the time of Jesus, the Temple in Jerusalem had become a huge slaughterhouse with priests unceasingly killing animals to be offered in sacrifice.

Richard Rohr, a well-known Franciscan spiritual writer, suggests that with the crucifixion of Jesus a change of perspective occurred. In the past humans were spilling blood to try to get to God. With the crucifixion of Jesus things get reversed: God spills his blood to reach out to us. In the past we were spilling blood in order to assure ourselves of God's protection, God's favour and God's love. With the death of Jesus on the Cross, it is God who spills his blood out of love for us, in order to reveal his love to us. God takes the initiative of assuring us of his love.

The institution of the Eucharist took place in the context of the Passover feast. It is for this reason that the first part of today's gospel passage recounts for us so many details regarding the preparation of the paschal meal during which Jesus gave us this sacrament. At Passover, it was remembered that the first born of the Jewish families had been saved from death because some of the blood of the sacrificed lamb had been put on both door-posts and the lintel of their houses as a sign. By the blood of Jesus poured out for us in his sacred passion, death and resurrection, we are set free from the slavery of sin and death.

The blood Jesus poured out for us in the new and eternal covenant is a sign of God's love for us, his love freely offered, love we only have to consent to receive, a love that we are called, in turn, to share with others, all others, without exception. This love is an all inclusive love, a love which excludes nobody whatsoever.

The Roman authorities and the Jewish leaders wanted to kill Jesus, to pour out his blood for the good of the people. They were still in the old perspective of spilling innocent blood to win God's favour. But in fact what happened? Jesus overtook his enemies, he neutralized them by giving his body and blood first, by offering his life to his disciples, and, through them, to the world, to each one of us. When Jesus instituted the Eucharist, he gave himself totally to his disciples and to us. When his enemies came to take his life, they had nothing to take because Jesus had already given his life.

In each Eucharist, we remember and celebrate the gift of Jesus' life to us. Jesus gives his body and blood in communion to all of us. In each Eucharist, the new covenant of Christ with his people is made present here and now. This is what we call a memorial.

Jesus consented to give his life for us without anger, bitterness or hate, but with a warm heart, filled with love and forgiveness towards those who were taking his life violently and unjustly. "This is my body, take it and eat it; this is my blood, the blood of the new covenant, take it and drink it". When we receive the body and blood of Jesus in communion, we are invited to become what we receive, to imitate Jesus and give our own life freely and lovingly, without anger,

bitterness, jealousy or hate, to give our life for our brothers and sisters in humanity. This is the sacrifice of our lives that we are invited to make.

The Eucharist invites us and teaches us to die day after day without anger, hatred or bitterness in our hearts, to offer ourselves with a loving and forgiving heart. This is not always an easy way to follow, but it is the way to fullness of life and to endless happiness; it is the way of fidelity to God's covenant of love which is sealed with each one of us.