

The Body and Blood of Christ - B Cycle

June 7, 2015

INTRODUCTION: Our first reading brings us into the desert of Sinai, about 1300 years before Christ. There we meet Moses in charge of a motley bunch of Hebrews, leading them from their slave master in Egypt (who was probably Ramses II) to a new land they could call their own. We hear how God made a covenant with this bunch of people, a solemn pact by which he promised they would be his special people and they promised they would follow the law he gave them. I can't stress enough how important this passage is. Every detail deserves attention, but today's liturgy is especially interested in focusing on the theme of blood. It was often the custom in those days to use blood to ratify or to make a covenant binding. So Moses took the blood of sacrificed animals and sprinkled half of it on an altar which was used to represent God and he sprinkled half of it on the people. God and the people were thus bound together in a most solemn and serious bond. This covenant defined the Jews for centuries and much of the rest of the Bible pretty much describes the history of how God's people either observed or failed to observe this covenant and the consequences that resulted from their fidelity or infidelity. From their daily prayers to their most solemn feasts, the Jewish people always reflected on their covenant with the God who made them his special people.

One such solemn feast was the feast of Yom Kippur. It was the only day of the year that the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies where the Arc of the Covenant was kept. He approached the Arc of the Covenant with the blood of sacrificial animals, and he sprinkled it on the top of the Arc (called the mercy seat) asking God to forgive the sins of God's people. The blood symbolized the lives of God's people offering themselves to God asking for his mercy. Our second reading refers to this event. Assuming the reader knew all about this ritual, the Letter to the Hebrews tells us how Jesus, our high priest of the new covenant, entered into the eternal sanctuary, the highest heaven, the abode of God. Jesus entered with his own blood which he shed for us for the forgiveness of sins to make an eternal and perfect sacrifice to the Father.

HOMILY: For how many centuries did human beings think the earth was flat and that the sun and moon and stars revolved around this flat earth? People thought that's the way it was because that's the way it looked. There are people who use this same logic when it comes to the Eucharist. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" people asked when Jesus told them he was the bread of life. (*Jn. 6,52*) Jesus said many things that showed he spoke with authority and power: he healed the sick, raised the dead and calmed the storm, but he also said many things that had to be taken on faith, such as: "your sins are forgiven," or that he was sent by God, or when he said at the Last Supper: "this is my body," and "this is my blood." When we hear those words from Jesus we have to think: "Do I believe that?" It's a question that gives rise to another question: "do I believe Jesus, or do I need to see proof?" There were those during Jesus' time who believed Jesus even though they didn't understand, and there were those who could not be convinced no matter how many miracles they saw.

Our feast of the Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi) is meant to strengthen our faith in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. In Matthew, Mark, Luke, I Corinthians and especially in John's gospel, Jesus is most clear in telling us that the Eucharist is truly his body and blood. Yet, many people try to explain away these very direct words of Jesus "this is my body" and "this is my blood" because they cannot see it. They forget the words of Jesus to Thomas: "blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." (*Jn.20,29*) I know you believe or you wouldn't be here. I am sure you desire to strengthen that belief and I hope that our prayers today will deepen that belief.

I would like to reflect on some of the other things Jesus told us in today's gospel. In receiving Jesus in Communion, we are not only being united with him, we are renewing his covenant with us. "This is the blood of the covenant" he tells us. In this covenant, promises are made. He promises us his eternal love and everlasting life and we promise to live as he has taught us. Do we always live up to that promise? We know we don't, and Jesus knows it also. That's why Jesus gave the apostles the power to forgive sins. That's why we begin Mass asking forgiveness for our sins. In most expressions of the words over the cup, Jesus refers to his blood which is poured out for many. Jesus' death was poured out for us. "Many" in Hebrew or Aramaic can be understood here in the sense of "all." In Matthew's gospel, Jesus said his blood is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. His Eucharist, like his death, is a sacrifice. Sometimes we forget why we are here. We sometimes think the Mass is all about us, it should make us feel good or feel holy or something (and that's great when it does move us deeply and spiritually), but the Mass is also something we are offering to God as an act of worship. It is a perfect sacrifice that we now participate in: Jesus giving himself to the Father for us, We participate in that by giving ourselves to the Father in love. Our covenant with God is solemnly made in the blood of Jesus. Jesus ends today's gospel by saying he would not drink of the fruit of the vine until he drinks it new in the kingdom of God. At Mass we look forward to joining him. Amen.

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time - B Cycle

June 14, 2015

INTRODUCTION: The prophet Ezekiel, who is famous for his vision of the dry bones, speaks to us today about trees. He gives us two images. The first image is that God would take a cutting from a tree and plant it in Israel where it would grow into a majestic tree. The prophecy comes from that time in history when Jerusalem's king and the leading citizens of Israel were captured by the Babylonians and were taken off to Babylon as slaves. To finish the job, the Babylonians executed all the king's sons. This was 400 years after King David and it seemed to be the end of the Davidic monarchy which had lasted for that many years. **But** Ezekiel's image of the tiny cutting from a tree which grew into a majestic tree in Israel told God's people that God would raise up a future king from the house of David. In other words, God was not giving up on Israel or the House of David. Ezekiel's prophecy continues with a second image of big trees

becoming little trees and vice versa. God would bring low the high tree and lift high the lowly tree which says God would humble the proud and the mighty (Babylon and Egypt) and would raise up the lowly (i.e. Israel). These are messages of hope to a people in despair and their purpose was to give God's people courage as they patiently waited for God to act on their behalf.

HOMILY: Almost every year I get a Christmas card or two that goes something like this: "he was born and grew up in an obscure village, the child of ordinary people. As a young man he worked with his hands as a laborer and in his early 30's, he became an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book, never held an office, never married or had a family, nor owned a house. When he was only 33, his enemies accused him of insurrection and had him nailed to a cross. His executioners gambled for his clothing. He was laid in a borrowed grave. After 20 centuries he is the central figure of the human race. All the kings that ever reigned, all the armies that ever marched have not affected the lives of people on earth as much as that one solitary life.

And in **three years** Jesus was able to accomplish all he needed to accomplish to make his impact on the world. Compare this with the Buddha who worked for 45 years, or Moses who was the leader of God's people for 40 years, or Mohammed who published his revelations over a period of 22 years. And to do what Jesus did, he didn't have to travel to or study in any of the great cities of the Roman empire of that time.

Jesus' two parables today about the growth of the seed and the tiny mustard seed indicate Jesus had great confidence in where his ministry was going. Today, the number of those who believe in Christ outnumber every other religion. The largest group of believing Christians are Catholics – there are about 1.2 billion in the world. Second are those who follow Mohammed, including both Sunnis and Shiites. The third largest group are non-believers and close to them are the Hindus. Those who follow the Chinese traditional folk beliefs are next in line followed by the Buddhists. By comparison, the Jews make up hardly one fourth of one percent of the world's population. You didn't need to know all of that, but once I got started looking it up, I found it quite interesting.

I don't want to turn this into an opportunity to pat ourselves on the back as Catholics and say we're the biggest group. We have to be humble enough to know that could quickly change as the culture of today's world seems intent on destroying the traditional values of our faith. Mere numbers are not necessarily impressive, for in the spiritual realm, it is not quantity that counts so much as quality. When we talk about quality, the message of the gospel is brought directly to each one of us personally. Are we growing spiritually? If the parables today are not telling each of us we need to be growing in our faith, then they are not telling us anything.

As I was reflecting on this parable, it struck me that Jesus' use of a plant as a symbol of growth was brilliant. Think about this: plants either keep growing or they die. This is not the way it works with animals. When animals reach maturity, whether domesticated or wild, they may grow a little by learning a trick or two if they are taught or if they are very

bright, but by and large, when they mature, other than putting on a little weight or losing it, they do not grow in any way, except they grow older and they die. Humans are an exception. We may not grow much physically, but there seems to be no end to the skills and the knowledge we can acquire if we put out mind to it. In all the ways we can learn and grow, there is one way that is more important than any other. We have another life ahead of us and we must prepare for it. That's what Jesus came to teach us. Jesus called it the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God. He said in today's gospel, "this is how it is with the kingdom of God." As long as we are receptive to God's Spirit, we won't stop growing. As we grow we are to produce good works (often symbolized as good fruit) and then will come the time for the harvest. Then God will ask us what have you done with the life, the time, the talents and the opportunities I have given to you? Will we continue growing and producing good works until that time or will we just sit back and tell ourselves we know enough about our faith, we went to Catholic schools, we listen to the homily mostly without falling asleep, we even pray sometimes when it's not Sunday, so what more do we need to do? We have to keep developing a deeper relationship with God through prayer; we need to keep doing good works; we need to grow in our faith through reading and reflection; we may have some faults we need to work on. The Kingdom of God is our future when God calls us to leave this world. Will the love of God fill our hearts so that we are ready to fully embrace the Kingdom God has prepared for us?

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time - B Cycle

June 21, 2015

INTRODUCTION: {*Job, 38, 1-8; II Cor. 3, 14-17; Mk. 4, 35-41*} Our first reading gives us just a few verses from the lengthy book of Job. Job, as most of us know, struggles to understand the problem of why good people suffer...why life sometimes seems to be so unfair. The central figure in the book of Job is an extraordinarily good and virtuous man whose life is marked by many tragedies. In the final part of the book, he demands that God tell him why he is subject to such suffering when he has done nothing to deserve it. Finally, God speaks to assure Job that he has everything under control and he is in charge. The verses we will hear speak of how God controls the forces of nature, especially the storms and the sea. This brief passage prepares us to hear about Jesus calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee.

HOMILY: Happy Fathers' Day. I know you probably heard some of these stories before – but they are fitting for Fathers' Day. A little girl asked her dad, "why do you brag about wearing the pants in the family when it is mom who always tells you which pair to put on." One day a grandfather was visiting his family and his little grandchild asked him, "Can you croak like a frog?" Grandfather said, "I think I can do that. Why?" The little grandchild answered, "well dad said when you croak we're all going to Disneyland." A father was talking with his buddy about his kids. He said, "ever since my son was little I've been trying to teach him the value of a dollar. Now that he has begun to understand, he wants his allowance in gold." It's been just a little over 100 years since

Father's Day was first celebrated, but it took until 1972 for Congress to make it official. I guess a topic of such great importance deserves very careful consideration before taking action on it!

Did you notice that Mark told us there were other boats with Jesus and the Apostles. What's so important about that? Nothing. But it tells us this story is part of an earlier tradition about things Jesus did. Somehow there was more to the story, but Mark didn't include everything. He wanted to focus on the main point. Which is: Jesus can command the powers of nature because of who he is. Most of his miracles were healings or exorcisms, but here we see what is behind everything he does; he is the ruler of all nature. We see that here and we heard it as part of God's answer to Job in the first reading.

Let's look at the gospel story once again. In its simplest form, it has three important moments all tied together by the word "great." The Greek word for great, as many might be able to figure out, is "*mega*." We have many English words that begin with mega. In our gospel there was a great storm (it's translated as a violent squall, but the Greek has mega.) Jesus spoke two words and there was a great calm. The Apostles felt a great fear – a fear that one fears when they know they are in the presence of Almighty God. There was a mega storm, a mega calm and mega fear. If you took one element out of the story, there would be no story.

After the Apostles awaken Jesus, they ask him a question that we can all relate to. When we feel as if the storms of life are going to destroy us and Jesus seems to be asleep, we wonder if God cares that we are perishing?

How many times have you or I so desperately wondered: does God really care? After calming the storm, Jesus had a question for the Apostles: "Why don't you have more faith?" Here they have the lord of all creation with them in a boat. How could anything bad happen to them? Mark gives us this story of Jesus' power in order to help us nurture trust in Jesus in the midst of stress and persecution.

The apostles ask at the end of the gospel: "Who then is this whom even the wind and sea obey?" Our gospel leaves us with two questions, questions we may find ourselves asking from time to time: "Who is Jesus?" "Will you trust him?" I have always found that the place to look to find the faith I needed during difficult times is at the foot of the cross.

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time - B Cycle
June 28, 2015

INTRODUCTION: The first reading (*Wisdom 1, 13-15.2.23-24*) tells us God did not make death. Rather, it came about through the envy of the devil. This is obviously a commentary on the story of Adam and Eve in the garden – how they tried to find their happiness and fulfillment by making their own rules rather than doing what God told them to do or not do. They thought God wanted to prevent them from being happy instead of trusting that God had their best interests at heart. The two miracles in today's gospel (*Mark 5, 21-43*) show us what can happen when people really put their trust in Jesus. The second reading is an appeal to the Corinthians (*II Cor. 8,7.9.13-15*) for financial help for the poor in Jerusalem.

HOMILY: This week our Supreme Court was busy making laws that would change many people's lives. I do not want to comment right now on either Supreme Court decision, except to state that even though our government decrees something is legal or illegal, there are laws that speak with higher authority. One such example is that our government considers it perfectly legal and ethical to destroy for any reason the life of an unborn child, while we hold to a higher law that says "Thou shalt not kill." I'm just a simple parish priest with some knowledge of theology and psychology, but I am not prepared, like some TV news anchors, to come out with a profound statement until I get more information. It's going to take some time for me to digest the ramifications and implications of this week's Supreme Court decisions. I've seen a lot of changes in my 51 years as a priest, changes that have happened very rapidly, and sadly many of these changes conflicted with the morals and values Jesus taught us. Jesus came that we "might have life and might have it to the full." (*John 10,10*) He does not tell us there is any other way than his way. Our gospel today tells us we have a God who is interested in our happiness and our well-being and who through revelation calls us to change our lives so we can find the way to truth and life.

Last Sunday we heard the gospel about Jesus calming a storm on the Sea of Galilee. When he landed in Capernaum, he was immediately approached by the leader of the local synagogue whose 12 year-old daughter was dying. As Jesus was on his way to the house of the synagogue leader to heal her, he was delayed on the way by a woman who had suffered for 12 years with a bleeding problem. We are grateful to Mark for all the detail he gives us about these two miracles, details we don't usually have. He even tells us what was going through the mind of the lady who was constantly losing blood.

One thing we see that these two miracles have in common is the power and importance of faith. He tells the woman her faith has saved her and he tells the father of the 12 year-old girl: "do not be afraid, just have faith." You might wonder, wouldn't it help people's faith if they knew Jesus had raised this little girl back to life, yet he tells the apostles not to tell anyone what he had done. I think this was because the people of that time were not capable of understanding the resurrection yet. They wouldn't understand until after Jesus' own resurrection.

I want to call your attention to several items I think are important in today's gospel. You might notice that one of our stained glass windows depicts this miracle. Jesus healed at least four children that I can immediately think of and it was always the parents who came asking for healing. It is a good reminder to parents of the power and efficacy of intercessory prayer. I want you to notice the sensitivity and tenderness of Jesus. When the woman with the bleeding problem was healed, he knew who did it: the gospel tells us he turned around to see (the Greek says: *the woman*) who had touched him. He didn't scold her or embarrass her – which he could have done since by Jewish law, she had just made him ritually unclean. Instead he called her “daughter” and he made sure she was perfectly healed as he dismissed her saying: “go in peace and be cured of your affliction.” We should notice he took time to talk with her even though he was on an urgent mission. Even if everyone else was nervous about whether he would get to the little girl in time to help her, he knew what he would do. Notice also, after raising the little 12 year old girl, he told her parents to feed her. She would have been weak from her ordeal. One other thing to notice, Jesus never had to appeal to God to work these miracles like we have to do. For example we would have to pray to God asking **God** to make this little girl better.” The power of divine life was already in Jesus for he was God Incarnate. All he had to do was say “arise, little girl” and she sat up full of life.

I've not offered the sacrament of the healing of the sick lately for those dealing with sickness or infirmity, even infirmity from old age, so I'll do so after Mass today. If someone you know would like to receive it but who is not here, just catch me next week. Remember, as a sacrament, it is Christ who is touching you, the same Christ who touches you with his love in Holy Communion. Amen.