

CORPUS CHRISTI (Year C): Body broken / Blood spilt ...for all.
First Reading: Genesis 14:18-20: Melchizedek, the priest of bread & wine;
Second Reading: 1 Cor 11:23-26: The early Eucharist's basic essentials;
Gospel: Luke 9:11b-17: the Feeding of the 5,000 foreshadows the Mass.

This weekend, the Catholic Church has a solemn feast all about the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist itself. By now, you'll have guessed that I have a personal liking for short readings and sermons – plus simple liturgy. Well, this Sunday's readings fit the bill perfectly – on all counts! While not denigrating the beautiful and complex liturgies that are well done in many parishes, cathedrals and colleges (in my early days at the 'old' Ushaw, they were truly magnificent), I sometimes wonder what St Paul would have made of them. The problem arises when the form (how it's done) becomes more important than the substance (why it's done, and what it means to those there). My point is not that the 'form' does not matter; rather it is a case of keeping a sense of balance.

Although simplicity in liturgy may appeal to some of us, there must be dignity, to offer any sense of mystery - an awareness that in a service like the Mass, we enter the presence of the Divine. This was foreshadowed in the strange event in the first reading: Abraham, on his travels, came across the person called Melchizedek, who was both a King of Salem ('Jeru-salem') and a priest of the same God whom Abraham worshipped. What was odd was that this priest did not use animal sacrifices, but bread and wine instead. Abraham recognised his authority, paid him tribute and was blessed by him in return. That done, Melchizedek went on his way, and disappeared into history. To early Christians, he prefigured Jesus at the Last Supper, both by using bread and wine, and by his sense of mystery. The modern Ordination service has, as one of the psalm responses: "You are a priest for ever – a priest like Melchizedek of old." This first reading, though short, packs a spiritual punch!

The gospel this Sunday sees our return (after weeks away) to St Luke, whom we usually follow in Year C. We have Luke's account of the Feeding of the 5,000. Again, this is a nature miracle with no 'logical' explanation; it is also one of the few events (apart from the Passion stories) mentioned equally in all four gospels. Perhaps the oddest part of it is Jesus' comment to the apostles (when told of the hunger of the crowd who had followed him into the countryside): "Give them something to eat yourselves". When they protested that all they could find were five loaves and two fish, Jesus decided to act. Having told the apostles to organize the people to sit in groups of fifty, "he took the loaves & fish; raised

his eyes to heaven, said the blessing over them, broke them, then handed them to the disciples to distribute among the crowd.” To anyone who hears the words of Consecration at Mass, this run of words will be familiar. I’m sure this is deliberate: St Luke is drawing a parallel between the feeding of the 5,000 on that Galilean hill and the feeding of each of us with the “sacred bread” of Jesus’ Body & Blood in Holy Communion. There is a sense of the miraculous: on that hill, all were fed; in the Eucharist we are all “fed” too.

However, I suggest that the most informative of the three readings is the second one – from St Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, 11:23-26. If you read this in a Bible, please note the previous paragraph. For the Eucharist / Mass, people had to use a large house, as there were no churches. Unlike our idea of fasting for an hour before Communion, they did the opposite: they had a shared meal just before the Eucharist. However, Corinthians could be a rum lot, sometimes lacking any ideal of fair-shares-for-all. Paul refers to times when the householder & guests finished their meal before the poorer people arrived. In 11, verse 21, he comments: “When the time comes to eat, everyone is in such a hurry to start his own supper that one person goes hungry while another is getting drunk.....making poor people embarrassed.” Hardly Christian charity!

After this waspish comment, Paul describes the early form of Eucharist. It is familiar to us from the gospels; but we must remember that Paul wrote this about AD 57 - long before the gospels appeared in their present form. Having given us the familiar format (which we use in the Consecration part of the Mass), he adds: “Anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup unworthily will be behaving unworthily towards the Body & Blood of the Lord.” To me, this speaks volumes. Far from seeing the Eucharist as a mere symbol, Paul believes Jesus to be genuinely present in the elements of the bread & wine. There is no space here for a detailed analysis of how this works, but let me just say that this is a “miracle “ of the same magnitude as the feeding of the 5,000, and is part of Jesus’ divine relationship with his Father. At Mass, the Holy Spirit is called-upon, to empower an action that is truly divine, but also personal to you and me.

I end with two spiritual ideas. The first is those gospel words, “Give them something to eat yourselves.” I find this troubling, as we cannot separate the idea of Holy Communion from the need to help the poor. The second: as we approach the altar for Communion, do we prepare ourselves? Sorrow for sin, along with belief in (& thanks for) Jesus’ divine presence would certainly help. *Fr Jim Dunne.*