

THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

Jesus' teaching on the bread of life in John 6 falls into two closely related parts. In the first, Jesus presents the bread of life as the word and wisdom of God. In the second (starting from the beginning of today's reading), he speaks more in eucharistic terms. It's a smooth transition from word to sacrament, reflecting what Vatican II said about the Mass: "The two parts which in a sense go to make up the Mass, viz. the liturgy of the word and the eucharistic liturgy, are so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship" (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* #56).

Two parts, one single act of worship. This synthesis is echoed in the post-conciliar documents. The *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* declares "... in the Mass is spread the table both of God's word and of the body of Christ" (#28). The *Introduction to the Lectionary* puts it this way: "The Church is nourished spiritually at the twofold table of God's Word and of the Eucharist – from the one it grows in wisdom and from the other in holiness" (#10).

It's fair to say that ensuring the community is truly nourished from each table is a work in progress.

A reading from the book of Deuteronomy 8:2–3, 14–16

Moses said to the people: 'Remember how the Lord your God led you for forty years in the wilderness, to humble you, to test you and know your inmost heart – whether you would keep his commandments or not. He humbled you, he made you feel hunger, he fed you with manna which neither you nor your fathers had known, to make you understand that man does not live on bread alone but that man lives on everything that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

'Do not then forget the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery: who guided you through this vast and dreadful wilderness, a land of fiery serpents, scorpions, thirst; who in this waterless place brought you water from the hardest rock; who in this wilderness fed you with manna that your fathers had not known.'

Responsorial Psalm Ps 147:12–15, 19–20

R. Praise the Lord, Jerusalem.

or

R. Alleluia.

O praise the Lord, Jerusalem!
Zion, praise your God!

He has strengthened the bars of your gates,
he has blessed the children within you. R.

He established peace on your borders,
he feeds you with finest wheat.

He sends out his word to the earth
and swiftly runs his command. R.

He makes his word known to Jacob,
to Israel his laws and decrees.

He has not dealt thus with other nations;
he has not taught them his decrees. R.

First Reading

In spite of leading the Israelites through the desert and being hailed as an incomparable prophet, Moses never entered the Promised Land. He died as he looked over it (Dt 34). Today's reading projects him into this land of plenty where its blessings threatened to seduce the Israelites into complacency.

Moses issues a solemn warning. The people must remember, and never forget, their exodus experience. The hardships were intense – hunger, thirst and mortal danger – but amid them all God protected Israel and provided for their needs. Stripped of their own resources, they saw the power of God with greater clarity and learnt the primacy of faith. This is what Moses wants them to hold fast to.

On this festive day, remembrance of the manna takes centre stage. It nourished the wanderers, but being unappetising and transitory, it pointed beyond itself to the one who gave it, the one whose words were to be heard and heeded. At the heart of the reading lies the saying that Jesus used in response to Satan's temptation to turn the stones into bread.

Overall the reading is in the mode of admonition. It is serious and dramatic rather than severe. Readers have the opportunity to paint a vivid word picture of desert life. All its demands are meant to focus attention on God's providential care of the chosen people.

Responsorial Psalm

The Book of Psalms concludes with five songs of praise all headed with "Alleluia," known therefore as the Hallel Psalms. Psalm 147 is one of these, as well as being the place in the book where the Greek and Hebrew numbering of the psalms reunite. Three verses have been selected to serve as the responsorial psalm.

Each verse has a distinct focus. The first (and the response which is sourced from it) centres on the hill-top city of Jerusalem. God is praised for making it safe and secure, not least for children. The second broadens in scope to encompass the land and the peace and productivity it enjoys. This leads to reflection on God's word. The third verse highlights Israel's unique status as the people who alone among the nations have been entrusted with God's teaching and wisdom.

Remembrance of God's word forges a clear link with the first reading and its declaration that we "do not live on bread alone, but . . . on everything that comes from the mouth of God". The response is a short imperative, "Praise the Lord, Jerusalem". Readers need to communicate this as an invitation rather than a decree. A warm tone and moderate pace will serve the purpose.

A reading from the first letter of St Paul to the Corinthians

10:16–17

The blessing-cup that we bless is a communion with the blood of Christ, and the bread that we break is a communion with the body of Christ. The fact that there is only one loaf means that, though there are many of us, we form a single body because we all have a share in this one loaf.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John 6:51–58

Jesus said to the Jews:

'I am the living bread which has come down from heaven.
Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever;
and the bread that I shall give
is my flesh, for the life of the world.'

Then the Jews started arguing with one another: 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' they said. Jesus replied:

'I tell you most solemnly,
if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man
and drink his blood,
you will not have life in you.
Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood
has eternal life,
and I shall raise him up on the last day.
For my flesh is real food
and my blood is real drink.
He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood
lives in me
and I live in him.

As I, who am sent by the living Father,
myself draw life from the Father,
so whoever eats me will draw life from me.
This is the bread come down from heaven;
not like the bread our ancestors ate:
they are dead,
but anyone who eats this bread will live for ever.'

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Second Reading

This reading must be one of the shortest in the entire lectionary. What it lacks in length, it makes up for in depth. It's a profound affirmation of the meaning of sacramental communion. Paul teaches the Corinthians that to share in the eucharistic bread and wine – the one loaf and one cup – is to be joined in communion with Christ and one another.

What prompts Paul to make this statement isn't clear from the reading itself. One of the issues that was troubling the Corinthian community was whether it was permissible or not to eat meat that had come to the market after it had been offered in pagan sacrifice. Paul addresses this question first in chapter 8 and then returns to it in chapter 10.

On the one hand, he says that Christians should feel free because pagan gods aren't real, but he recognises the risk of scandalising those with a weak conscience. When he goes on to say, "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons" (10:21), he is acknowledging the fact that eating and drinking together establishes real bonds of fellowship.

This is the positive teaching of today's text: the bond forged between Christ and community at the eucharistic table. The fact that celebrating the eucharist with one loaf and one cup is the exception rather than the rule is to be lamented. All the more reason for readers to proclaim this text with clarity and deliberation.

Gospel

This excerpt from the latter part of the sixth chapter of John's gospel has been chosen for its eucharistic content. The chapter began with the story of Jesus feeding the crowd with a few barley loaves and a couple of fish. That was followed by Jesus' appearance on the stormy waters of the lake, then the first part of the bread of life discourse in the synagogue at Capernaum.

That was backward-looking in the sense that Jesus' teaching on the bread of life drew on the wisdom traditions of the Old Testament, especially Proverbs and Sirach. In the remainder of the discourse the perspective changes to anticipation of Jesus' passion and death. The talk is now of the flesh and blood of the Son of Man. As it did in the earlier part of the discourse, the horizon stretches as far as "the last day". Even after all this time, Jesus' words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood still bring us up short. That would be even more the case if "eating" was more literally translated as "chewing".

We are spared the aftermath of his teaching which resulted in "many of his disciples" leaving him. Instead, we are invited to concentrate on the good news. Our sacramental participation effects a mutual in-dwelling between Jesus and the believer that is akin to that shared by Jesus and the Father. Jesus has much to say about this to his disciples after he has washed their feet. Today's reading is well-known. The challenge for ministers of the word is to make it sound entirely new.