

**Genesis 14:18 - 20**

**Psalm 110**

**1 Corinthians 11:23 - 26**

**Luke 9:10 - 17**

### **The Body of Christ**

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Today we have replaced the set readings to focus on the theme of Corpus Christi, the Body of Christ a feast that dates from the thirteenth century, and would have traditionally involved a colourful procession in which the bread from the Eucharist was carried in honour about the town. In taking up this theme today we are not turning back to the Middle Ages. Nor are we setting out to rekindle old arguments about transubstantiation. We normally focus on the institution of the Eucharist on Maundy Thursday, but in taking up this theme on the Sunday after Trinity, as other parts of the church do, it allows us to think again about the central part the Eucharist plays in the ongoing life of the church, and of our congregation.

You may be worried that this sounds a bit Catholic and may not sit well the four stern Reformers in our rose window. Be at rest. Neither in taking this theme, nor in having the Eucharist weekly are we out of step with what the majority of the Reformers thought. Calvin, for example said:

*[the Lord's Supper] was ordained to be frequently used among all Christians in order that they might frequently return in memory to Christ's Passion, by such remembrance sustain and strengthen their faith, and urge themselves to sing thanksgiving to God and to proclaim his goodness; finally by it to nourish mutual love, and among themselves to give witness to this love and discern its bond in the unity of Christ's body.*

There is a sermon in every one of Calvin's clauses, and many ideas overlay one another in the Eucharist, which is a core symbol in the belief system of the Christian Church. There is no escaping the link between the Eucharist and Israel's celebration of the Passover Sacrifice and the saga of the Exodus. But the Passover was not a commemoration of a person. It commemorated an act of divine redemption from which Israel gained their identity as people of God. The continuing celebration of the Passover was, and is, to recall the night of freedom in Egypt, and to pray for its meaning and power to become a present reality. And it is also true this feast of life was also associated with the killing of a Paschal Lamb, and with the death of the Egyptians.

Although Paul does not say so in Corinthians, it was probably at a Passover meal that Jesus gave the Eucharist to the disciples in the words that are so familiar to us. Paul was not present at the Last Supper, but he is the first to pass on these words, in which Jesus transposes the Paschal narrative into a different key, and upon which the whole of Eucharistic theology has been built.

Everything Paul says here is in support his last line: "for as often as you eat the bread

and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes". Reference to the death recalls the night of Jesus' betrayal, and it is in the connection between the action and the event that the meaning comes. When he gave the bread, Jesus made a deep and symbolic link between his self-giving, and the sharing of the loaf. Where the Paschal Lamb once stood **Jesus now offers us his life**, symbolised by a broken loaf. Jesus' willingness to live only for God has become the means by which we are joined to God again. In John's Gospel, Jesus says "unless you eat my flesh... you have no life in you". The Jews complain: "this is more than we can stomach". They are unable to move past the material sense to the spiritual meaning. In Paul it is in stretching out our hands to receive the bread that we seek to enter into the life Jesus gave for us, and have that life permeate our own.

This is not easy language and it is no less difficult when it comes to the cup. If eating flesh posed a problem, no Jew would have been able to contemplate the idea of a cup of blood. Paul actually avoids a direct identification between the wine in the cup and the blood. The cup Paul refers to still pre-supposes the shedding of Christ's blood, but the blood as such is not the agent. The blood is a symbol of Jesus' profound self-giving. Once again, through strange imagery, we are offered an open door to a new relationship, which is why his cup is a cup of blessing. To "drink the cup" is to enter into the new relationship established in Jesus' life, willingly spent for God in the world.

"For as often as you eat the bread and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord's **death** until he comes." The philosopher Paul Ricouer has put forward the idea that a change of obedience comes about by a change in imagination. In particular he emphasises that it is in the willingness to be informed by ambiguity, hurt and discontinuity that we are renewed. This is directly relevant to Christians who use Paul's words. For us the Cross is central, and the Baptism Font and the Communion Table are vehicles for a story that is grounded in hurt and discontinuity, while at the same time speaking of a great, enfolding, merciful love. By its very nature the Christian symbol system takes us to another side of life. It opens us to another imagination based on an alternative narrative, which the prevailing culture seeks to cover, by putting us on the side of those who always come out on top. If we could rewrite what we see and hear, and show what it meant to be on the other end of the massacre of Indigenous people. If we really knew what it cost to be in Gallipoli, Vietnam and Baghdad, we would never support the use of Smart Bombs, or the plan to join with America in massive military exercises, secretly organized in our own country. The death at the heart of the Christian story is a profound challenge to the prevailing imagination. In holding before us the suffering born of Jesus' self-giving it, reveals the depth of God's covenant with us, and it changes the way we see the rest of life. Because of this death, we see that it is no calling of the Christian to be a death dealer. That is why those who feed at this table make their peace with one another, and will be most reluctant to go out and support death-dealing initiatives.

For Jews the celebration of the Passover was the moment when they made sense of themselves and rediscovered the deeper lines of their identity. For Christian it is in Baptism and the Eucharist that we discover who God is for us, and what a human life shaped by complete trust in God looks like.

That is why a table, around which we gather to eat and drink, is central to our

worship. It is said you become what you eat. The point of the meal is to show where our life comes from, and to enable us to become even more deeply formed or moulded by Jesus' life. This meal makes it possible for us to enter more deeply into solidarity with Christ, and with each other.

While there is talk of death here, there is also talk of abundance of life. We see this in Luke where the disciples receive a double lesson in life. The power does not come from their material resources, and neither does it bypass them. The power comes from the Lord in whose hands their puny resources prove to be more than enough. In our moments of anxiety about the future of the church, or our carefully planned projects, there is a lesson here. The disciples who believed they had nothing, but were bold enough to enter into Jesus' way of self-giving, receive back an extravagant return.

The twelve baskets of broken pieces left over are a sign that here a new people is formed, who surpass the twelve tribes of the old Israel. They go forth from that deserted, hungry place into the future as friends of God who have received food for their pilgrimage. Jesus' "table service" at the meal proclaims the source of his authority to teach and heal. It is a living demonstration of the gracious, merciful love of God, which seeks to feed, nurture and sustain. At every Eucharist we do indeed proclaim the death of the Lord. But what it says is that God is for us, and for our good.