

Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi) 2020

Jesus' words in today's gospel shocked many of his disciples. So much so, that in the passage that follows the one we just heard, St. John writes, "Many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him."

It is not hard to understand why these disciples decided to abandon Jesus and to return home. The words of Jesus were shocking. Jesus had just declared himself to be living bread that had come down from heaven and that those who eat this bread will live forever. If that wasn't shocking enough, he told them, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day."

This must have sounded strange, bizarre, and outrageous to them. What is he talking about? What does he mean? How can he talk about eating his flesh and drinking his blood? For many, if not most, the idea of eating and drinking his flesh and blood was repugnant.

Not all his disciples left him, however. There were some who stuck with him even though they probably didn't fully understand what he was talking about. In another later passage, Jesus asked the twelve Apostles: "Do you also want to leave?" Simon Peter answered him, "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God."

Those who had come to believe that Jesus was the holy one of God, understood that Jesus was the Messiah and that he had been sent by God to feed and nourish them just as manna had been sent by God to feed and nourish their ancestors in the desert. He was the new bread come down from heaven.

The gospel of St. John was written somewhere between 90 or 100 AD (sixty to seventy years after the resurrection). By then, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the community of St. John came to understand the divine nature of Jesus the Christ. They understood that he was the Word of God made flesh and that his suffering, death and resurrection were salvific.

They gathered each week to pray and to recall the events of the Last Supper. They repeated the words and actions of Jesus as he shared bread and wine with the Apostles on the final evening before his death. "This is my Body" and "this is my Blood." "Eat and drink them in remembrance of me." They understand and believed that Jesus was present with them once again in the bread and the wine that was shared and consumed.

Today we celebrate the great feast of the Body and Blood of the Lord. Like the community of St. John, we believe we have been saved in and through Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection. Jesus sacrificed his body and blood so that we might be freed from the bondage of sin and death. He offered his flesh and blood for the life of the world.

Each time we gather to celebrate the Mass, we do what the early Christians did. We recall the saving actions and words of Jesus and we believe that he is once again present with us in his Body and Blood.

St. Paul says it so well in the second reading:

Brothers and sisters:

The cup of blessing that we bless,
is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?
The bread that we break,
is it not a participation in the body of Christ?
Because the loaf of bread is one,
we, though many, are one body,
for we all partake of the one loaf.

Every time we celebrate the Eucharist we participate in the suffering, death, and resurrection of the Lord. When we receive Holy Communion, we eat and drink the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

We are called to become what we eat and drink. We are called to become the Body and Blood of Christ and to be Christ for one another. The Eucharist nourishes us and transforms us. It is the sustenance we need to live the life of discipleship. It truly is the living bread come down from heaven to accompany us on our journey of life.

Pope Francis, in the Joy of the Gospel says: "The Eucharist is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak." In a daily homily he said, "The Eucharist is not a magic act but an encounter with the living God."

St. Paul reminds us that it is also the Eucharist that makes us one. It is the source and cause of our unity as members of the Body of Christ. Just as a loaf of bread is made up of many grains of wheat, so the Church, the Body of Christ, is made up of many individuals but in Jesus Christ we are one.

This Corpus Christi Sunday, many Catholics continue to shelter at home and are viewing the Mass on line. They have not been able to physically gather around the altar to celebrate the Eucharist and to receive Holy Communion. We remember them a special way today. They hunger and long for the Body and Blood of Christ. We continue to pray for an end to the pandemic and the discovery of a cure, treatment, and vaccine so that we will all be able to safely gather again as the Body of Christ and together receive this precious gift that feeds us, nourishes us and gives us new life!