

Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi), Year A

GOSPEL

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Jesus said to the crowd:

‘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.’

(John 6:51–58)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Gathering together to break bread and share the cup is the most ancient practice of the Church. Paul wrote a description of ‘The Lord’s Supper’ in I Corinthians 11:23 in about the year 56.
- This feast, which used to be known as ‘Corpus Christi’, originated in the Middle Ages as a celebration of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.
- In John’s Gospel, there is no narrative of the institution of the Eucharist. Rather, with the sharing of the loaves and fishes, combined with this Bread of Life discourse, John elaborates in a much deeper way the significance of the Eucharist.

EXPLORING THE WORD

This passage comes after Jesus has fed the multitudes with five barley loaves and two fish, but in his explanation of this sign, Jesus refers to himself as ‘living bread’, ‘bread from heaven’ that gives eternal life. The ancestors who followed Moses out of Egypt had been sent manna from heaven to nourish them in the desert, but they had still died. The food that Jesus offers—himself—will lead to eternal life!

As is typical in John’s Gospel, this text can be read on two levels. The words spoken by Jesus would have been shocking to those who heard them. For the Jewish people, to eat flesh and drink blood was unthinkable; it was abhorrent. Jewish dietary laws forbade the eating of flesh with its blood in it. Blood was the symbol of the life of the creature. At the end of the flood story in Genesis, God gives to humans all the plants and animals of the earth as food for them, ‘with this exception: you must not eat flesh with life, that is to say blood, in it’ (Genesis 9:4). Now here is Jesus saying that his followers must eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to have life. In the continuation of this gospel passage, many turn away from Jesus at hearing him say this. Jesus then asks the disciples if they too will leave him. Peter answers on their behalf with a wonderful acclamation of faith: ‘Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life and we believe; we know that you are the Holy One of God.’

The giving of Jesus’ flesh and blood for the life of the world is a reference to the salvific nature of his death and the inauguration of a new covenant through his sacrifice. In the Old Testament, a sacrifice was not complete unless it was also eaten; the Eucharist is our participation in Calvary, where we truly consume the once-for-all sacrifice under the species of bread and wine. Under that veil, Christ is present, Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What significance does eating and drinking have in your life? Is it a pleasure, a chore, an addiction?
- Tell others about a significant meal you have shared. What made it special?
- What do you draw life from?
- What is it that sustains you on your journey and nourishes your search for faith?
- If you are able to gather with friends or family for a meal this week, make a special blessing of the food that you will share. Sustain and nourish others this week.
- Read the story in Luke’s Gospel of how the disciples recognised Jesus in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:13–35). Spend time thinking about your journey

