

The Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

First reading:

*God's Covenant with his People
(Exodus 24.3-8)*

The first reading gives the story of the clinching of the Covenant on Mount Sinai, the moment when Israel became God's people, took on themselves the joyful obligations of the Law. The Law was God's gift to Israel, explaining what they must do to be his people. It was not a set of constricting obligations but a liberating set of instructions. Obedience to the Law was a response in love to a gift in love, to behave towards God with the generosity which God showed to his people. They must now behave towards others as God had behaved towards them, respecting the widow, caring for the orphan, welcoming the stranger. 'Be holy as I am holy', said the Lord. This reading is particularly apt at the Mass for Corpus Christi because, just like the Mass, it includes both instructions and sacrifice. In the first part of the Mass, we listen to God's revealing Word, which tells us in various ways how to behave if we are to be God's people. Only after committing ourselves to God's Word can we go on to join in the new alliance. That alliance, too, was celebrated by sharing a meal, for the communion sacrifices were a shared meal, and by sharing the blood, which is the life of Christ.

Question:

How does Christ nourish us in the Eucharist?

Second reading:

*The Blood of Christ
(Hebrews 9.11-15)*

Blood plays an important part in all three readings of this Mass, and it is essential to understand its function in both Israel's and our own sacra-mental system. Blood is an obvious symbol of life. Total loss of blood means total loss of life. As blood flows out, so life ebbs away. Therefore, just as life belongs to God, so blood belongs to God. In Israel, it is therefore sacred. In recognition that life is the gift of God, blood may not be consumed. Sacrifice in Israel was not appeasing an angry God, by offering the death of an animal instead of my own death. Rather, it was a joyful a sharing with God, the sharing of a meal, and the granting of new life. Death releases the blood, which can then be sprinkled over the offerers to symbolize fresh life from God. The Letter to the Hebrews contrasts the old sacrifices and old sharing of blood, 'the blood of goats and bull calves', with the gift of Christ's blood. How much more is the new life, given by the blood of the divine Son of God! This is the rich purpose of receiving the blood of Christ from the chalice.

Question:

What is the difference between the Christian and the pagan idea of sacrifice?

Gospel:

Baptism into the Trinity

(Matthew 28.16-20)

A New Partnership (Mark 14.12-16, 22-26)

The original, Old Testament covenant was sealed by a death and by the sharing of the blood between God (signified by the altar) and his people as a sign of new life. Israel broke that covenant by persistently refusing to keep true to the way of life which the covenant enshrined. Now Jesus' new covenant engages us in a new alliance and gives us new life. The story told in this reading is the warranty and guarantee that, each time we receive the Body and Blood of Christ, we are bound anew into his covenant. The story is told in almost exactly similar terms in each of

the first three gospels and in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. It must have been learnt and repeated by heart. There is just enough difference to show that Mark and Matthew reflect the tradition of the Hebrew communities, while Paul and Luke reflect the tradition of the Greek-speaking communities. It must have been repeated again and again from the very first years of Christianity. Each time we repeat these words, we are re-entering Jesus' covenant. There should be a health warning. The Mass is dangerous: are you ready to commit yourself to the Kingdom, to engage in a new and personal alliance with Christ and to live with his life?

Question:

What obligations do we take on by receiving the Eucharist?