

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

The Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

Year B

2 June 2024



Collect

O God, who in this wonderful Sacrament
have left us a memorial of your Passion,
grant us, we pray,
so to revere the sacred mysteries of your Body and Blood
that we may always experience in ourselves
the fruits of your redemption.
Who live and reign with God the Father
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

Every official eucharistic prayer in current Catholic use concludes with the imperative, “Do this in memory of me,” but strangely enough the sole time this injunction appears in the gospels is in Luke’s account of the Last Supper after Jesus has shared the bread. The only time the command refers to the cup, therefore, is in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (11:23-26). Remembering Jesus in both bread and wine was Church practice for centuries until communion from the cup fell into disuse. The post-Vatican II restoration of the cup has had very limited take-up, handicapped by old habits, resistance to change, and fears of disease. Today’s combination of readings invites a rediscovery of the powerful symbolism of the shared cup: life-blood, self-sacrifice, covenant, communion. They remind us that “doing this” is not just about a ritual action; it’s about flesh-and-blood hands-on living for others.

A reading from the book of Exodus

24:3–8

Moses went and told the people all the commands of the Lord and all the ordinances. In answer, all the people said with one voice, 'We will observe all the commands that the Lord has decreed.' Moses put all the commands of the Lord into writing, and early next morning he built an altar at the foot of the mountain, with twelve standing-stones for the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he directed certain young Israelites to offer holocausts and to immolate bullocks to the Lord as communion sacrifices. Half of the blood Moses took up and put into basins, the other half he cast on the altar. And taking the Book of the Covenant he read it to the listening people, and they said, 'We will observe all that the Lord has decreed; we will obey.' then Moses took the blood and cast it towards the people. 'This' he said 'is the blood of the Covenant that the Lord has made with you, containing all these rules.'

First Reading

The covenant ritual described in today's reading from the book of Exodus marks a significant moment in God's relationship with the people of ancient Israel. It is also an indispensable key to help Christians interpret Jesus' actions at his farewell meal.

The scene is vividly described. The people are gathered at the foot of Mt Sinai. Moses spells out God's terms for them to be divinely chosen, protected and blessed. The unanimous consent they declare is confirmed in a powerful ritual. An altar is built to represent the twelve tribes of Israel. Bullocks are sacrificed in God's honour, and their blood is cast on both the altar and the people to signify the sacred bond between them and their Lord. What gives this action its force is Israel's profound reverence for blood as the essence of life.

This unique Old Testament episode is alluded to in the gospel accounts of the Last Supper and elaborated on by the author of the letter to the Hebrews, as we are about to see. It calls for a degree of solemnity from readers in their proclamation. It's a dramatic story that lends itself to strong and authoritative delivery.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 115:12–13, 15–18

R. I will take the cup of salvation,
and call on the name of the Lord.

or

R. Alleluia.

How can I repay the Lord
for his goodness to me?
The cup of salvation I will raise;
I will call on the Lord's name. **R.**

O precious in the eyes of the Lord
is the death of his faithful.
Your servant, Lord, your servant am
I; you have loosened my bonds. **R.**

A thanksgiving sacrifice I make:
I will call on the Lord's name.
My vows to the Lord I will fulfil
before all his people. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 115/116 is a song of thanksgiving from one who has been saved from death. References to "the cup of salvation," "a thanksgiving sacrifice" and "vows" suggest that the psalmist is moved to thank God for his rescue in a formal ritual. Christian believers will readily identify this as the celebration of the eucharist.

The verses chosen to form the responsorial psalm are identical to those prayed at the solemn eucharist on Holy Thursday evening, but with a different response. This time the refrain is a slight variation of what the psalmist declares in the first stanza. This may make the assembly's response at that point a little hesitant, something for the reader to anticipate.

The sentence – "O precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his faithful" – may puzzle the reader with its ambiguity. It is not meant to imply that the Lord takes delight in our death, but that the Lord seeks to save his faithful from death.

This psalm-prayer interweaves thanksgiving, dedication and confident trust. Taking care not to run the short lines together, thoughtful readers will draw the assembly into its positive spirit.

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews

9:11–15

Now Christ has come, as the high priest of all the blessings which were to come. He has passed through the greater, the more perfect tent, which is better than one made by men's hands because it is not of this created order; and he has entered the sanctuary once and for all, taking with him not the blood of goats and bull calves, but his own blood, having won an eternal redemption for us. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer are sprinkled on those who have incurred defilement and they restore the holiness of their outward lives; how much more effectively the blood of Christ, who offered himself as the perfect sacrifice to God through the eternal Spirit, can purify our inner self from dead actions so that we do our service to the living God. He brings a new covenant, as the mediator, only so that the people who were called to an eternal inheritance may actually receive what was promised: his death took place to cancel the sins that infringed the earlier covenant.

Second Reading

The letter to the Hebrews is a rich but challenging text for contemporary Christians. It presents a sustained theological argument in high rhetorical style while assuming familiarity with Old Testament ritual traditions. All this makes an isolated extract like today's very difficult to digest without careful study. This puts the onus on readers to maximise the chances of the assembly grasping the drift of the argument in one hearing.

The author clearly has the blood ritual described in the first reading in mind, even if the lectionary passage doesn't extend as far as the explicit reference a few verses later. The key point the writer makes is that by the shedding of his blood in self-sacrifice Christ has definitively restored us to covenant relationship with the living God once and for all. This contrasts sharply with the ineffectiveness of Old Testament atonement and purification rituals. Even a thorough knowledge of these rituals doesn't clarify all the questions raised by this dense text, such as how Christ's self-offering actually accomplishes our redemption. But, as has been remarked more than once, readers are not called upon to elucidate the readings they proclaim. Their responsibility is to announce them as intelligibly as possible.

This is made more challenging because of the length and complexity of the sentences. Readers will need to invest time and effort into identifying the sense units within each sentence (the layout in the NRSV lectionary should help on this front) and being clear about their inter-relationship. Rehearsing the proclamation out loud several times, preferably with a test audience, will be invaluable.

Gospel

None of the institution narratives in the gospels or Paul are identical, nor is any one of them reproduced verbatim in the Church's eucharistic prayers. They all share much in common, but Mark and Matthew are distinguished by the greater emphasis they put on blood, writing of "the blood of the covenant" rather than "covenant in my blood." The readings from Exodus and Hebrews have prepared the way for this.

The reading falls into two parts, the preparation for the supper and the institution of the eucharist, omitting the intervening disclosure of Judas' impending betrayal. Countless treatises have been written examining the various institution narratives in forensic detail. One point to note here is that, in contrast to John's reckoning, the synoptic gospels identify the supper as a Passover meal. Another is that Mark and Matthew bring the word-actions over the bread and the cup together, while Luke and Paul divide them with the supper. On the other hand, all four accounts look ahead to the ultimate coming of the kingdom.

The story of the Last Supper is familiar both from its commemoration on Holy Thursday night and from its recital at every celebration of the eucharist. Today's festival invites the minister of the word to retell the story with loving appreciation.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

14:12–16, 22–26

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb was sacrificed, his disciples said to Jesus, 'Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the passover?' So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the city and you will meet a man carrying a pitcher of water. Follow him, and say to the owner of the house which he enters, "The Master says: Where is my dining room in which I can eat the passover with my disciples?" He will show you a large upper room furnished with couches, all prepared. Make the preparations for us there.' The disciples set out and went to the city and found everything as he had told them, and prepared the Passover.

And as they were eating he took some bread, and when he said the blessing he broke it and gave it to them. 'Take it,' he said 'this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and when he had returned thanks he gave it to them, and all drank from it, and he said to them, 'This is my blood, the blood of the covenant, which is to be poured out for many. I tell you solemnly, I shall not drink any more wine until the day I drink the new wine in the kingdom of God.'

After psalms had been sung they left for the Mount of Olives.

An alternative translation of the scripture readings is given here from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). This may be particularly useful for those in parishes which use the NRSV Lectionary.

BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the book of Exodus

24:3–8

Moses came and told the people
all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances;
and all the people answered with one voice, and said,
"All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do."
And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord.
He rose early in the morning,
and built an altar at the foot of the mountain,
and set up twelve pillars,
corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel.
He sent young men of the people of Israel,
who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen
as offerings of well-being to the Lord.
Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins,
and half of the blood he dashed against the altar.
Then he took the book of the covenant,
and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said,
"All that the Lord has spoken we will do,
and we will be obedient."
Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people,
and said, "See the blood of the covenant
that the Lord has made with you
in accordance with all these words."

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews

9:11–15

Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come.
He passed through the greater and perfect tent
not made with hands,
that is, not of this creation.
He entered once for all into the Holy Place,
not with the blood of goats and calves,
but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.
For if the blood of goats and bulls,
with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer,
sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified,
how much more will the blood of Christ,
who through the eternal Spirit offered himself
without blemish to God,
purify our conscience from dead works
to worship the living God!
For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant,
so that those who are called
may receive the promised eternal inheritance,
because a death has occurred that redeems them
from the transgressions under the first covenant.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to Mark 14:12–16, 22–26

On the first day of Unleavened Bread,
when the Passover lamb is sacrificed,
the disciples said to Jesus,
"Where do you want us to go and make the preparations
for you to eat the Passover?"
So Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying to them,
"Go into the city,
and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you;
follow him, and wherever he enters,
say to the owner of the house,
'The Teacher asks, "Where is my guest room
where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?"'
He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready.
Make preparations for us there."
So the disciples set out and went to the city,
and found everything as he had told them;
and they prepared the Passover meal.
While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread,
and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said,
"Take; this is my body."
Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them,
and all of them drank from it.
He said to them,
"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.
Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine
until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."
When they had sung the hymn,
they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Solemn Blessing

May almighty God bless us in his kindness
and pour out saving wisdom upon us.
Amen.

May he nourish us always with the teachings of the faith
and make us persevere in holy deeds.
Amen.

May he turn our steps towards himself
and show us the path of charity and peace.
Amen.

And may the blessing of almighty God,
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
come down on us and remain with us for ever.
Amen.

(Adapted from the Solemn Blessing for Ordinary Time III, Roman Missal p 715.)