

JUNE 10, 2012: BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

Exodus 24:3-8 Hebrews 9:11-15 Mark 14:12-16, 22-26

We see a sign of the changes wrought by Vatican II in the title of today's feast. We old-timers remember when it was just called "Corpus Christi:" the Body of Christ. The Blood of Christ got short shrift. For good reason; before the Vatican II reforms the laity were forbidden to receive from the cup. Even today the cup minister often has little to do during celebrations of the Lord's Supper. Many priests look for any excuse to avoid offering the cup to the entire community. Rarely do we hear a homily encouraging people to receive both species. After all, we learned in those pre-council days that if you receive Jesus' body, the blood's automatically there. For many, it's simply a matter of extra credit - something they don't really need to get into heaven. Besides, there're all those germs!

It's clear from our Christian Scriptures that our ancestors in the faith would have been appalled at the excuses we use for refusing the cup. In the earliest mention of the Lord's Supper - I Corinthians 11 - Jesus tells his followers, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Drink it and remember me."

These words take us back to our first reading. Note what Moses says about the blood sprinkled on the people at the foot of Mt. Sinai. "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words of his."

Covenants normally include signs that the participants have entered into those agreements. Many workers and employers have copies of signed contracts outlining each party's responsibilities and benefits. Most married couples wear wedding rings to show they're committed to one another.

The outward sign the Israelites had entered the Sinai covenant with Yahweh was the blood on their clothes and skin. In a parallel way, the outward sign Christians have joined Jesus in living up to the covenant he made with his Father is their reception of his blood from the Eucharistic cup.

Marcan scholars frequently point out an overlooked part of his Last Supper pericope. "He (Jesus) took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them and they all drank from it." In Mark's narrative, the last meal Jesus eats with his followers is a Passover Supper. In such ritual meals, each participant has her or his own cup of wine sitting on the table in front of them. Yet, at a very important point in Mark's account, Jesus tells his disciples not to drink from those cups. He passes his own cup around the table. By drinking from Jesus' personal cup, they're demonstrating their determination to carry on his ministry after his death. I can't imagine what would have happened had any of that night's supper guests refused to drink from his cup because of germs or because they bought into a theological opinion that the body under the form of the bread they'd just received already contained Jesus' blood. I suspect the about-to-die Jesus would have confronted their refusal with some form of "It's my way or the highway!"

Nothing wrong with surfacing the deep Jewish sacrificial significance of Jesus' shedding his blood for us. The author of Hebrews does so in today's second reading. But long before Christian authors began reflecting on that deeper, esoteric significance they had to deal with the evident implications of actually drinking his blood. Some scholars contend that one reason we receive Jesus' body first is to give us the strength to then step up and receive from his cup.

We Catholics obviously have a long way to go before we understand and practice signs which our ancestors in the faith took for granted.

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JUNE 17, 2012: ELEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ezekiel 17:22-24 II Corinthians 5:6-10 Mark 4:26-34

Those familiar with biblical prophets know about their concept of the "remnant." Though many begin their prophetic ministry with high hopes for success, all eventually are forced to admit that very few of the "faithful" are even interested in hearing the word of God, much less in carrying it out. After a while they're convinced only a minute number will actually change their lives because of the message they're commissioned to deliver. They have no other choice but to develop low expectations.

In today's first reading Ezekiel speaks about that remnant in poetic terms. "I (Yahweh) will take from the crest of the cedar, from its topmost branches tear off a tender shoot, and plant it on a high and lofty mountain It shall put forth branches and bear fruit, and become a majestic cedar." In the midst of general rejection, the prophet consoles himself with the conviction that this small branch - those who actually listen to him and carry out Yahweh's word - will one day grow into a huge tree.

We presume all sixth century BCE Jews basically held the same doctrines and dogmas. Like all prophets, Ezekiel's ministry didn't revolve around familiarizing his people with a catechism list of beliefs. His task was to demand they live the kind of lives which flow from those beliefs.

My old biblical archeology prof Robert North bought into our prophet's idea of the remnant. He once shared his conviction that we have far too many Christians - a position the great theologian Karl Rahner had also defended years before in his classic book *The Christian Commitment*. "The historical Jesus," North stated, "never intended his followers to be more than a small minority in the overall population. Very few people would actually have the courage to imitate his lifestyle. Yet he was convinced those committed few could change the world." Both Rahner and North believed once it becomes socially acceptable to be Christian, Christians will change nothing. Worse yet, they'll start labeling as "radical Christians" the remnant actually imitating Jesus.

As we hear in today's second reading, Paul knows it takes courage to "walk by faith, not by sight." Yet he also knows we're eventually going to be judged only on what we do "in the body." A million good thoughts about faith don't equal one good action done out of faith. Christians are to imitate Jesus, not just think or talk about Jesus. We're gradually to become other Christs.

What part of Jesus' life are we expected to imitate? In today's gospel pericope it's the part which springs from his conviction that God's working effectively right here and now in our daily lives. He refers to that insight whenever he talks about the "kingdom of God" or the "kingdom of heaven."

Real Christians need lots of patience. Both of today's "kingdom parables" stress that dimension of faith: the patience of farmers planting fields or sowing mustard seeds. Eventually the things we sow in faith will grow. But it'll take a long time before we notice any tangible results. Few people are willing to work a lifetime focused on a distant, better future. Most demand immediate results. I once mentioned in one of my commentaries that it takes a least four or five generations of Monarch butterflies to complete one migratory cycle from Mexico to Canada and back. No one butterfly ever experiences the whole process.

It's been two and a half generations since Vatican II began. Today only a faithful few still seem intent to carry out its reforms. Those who expected the council to bring instant results bailed out years ago. Our present prophets are simply encouraging us not to pull the rip cord.

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