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The author of this Sunday's selection from Deuteronomy (we'll assume he was a man, because women didn't have the leisure time to learn to read and write) was writing history in the form of a homily he attributed to Moses. Narrating what happened when God provided bread "back then," he was really addressing an audience living hundreds of years after the desert trek. This author wrote because he knew that the Exodus adventure was not a one-time event and people of other ages would need to appropriate it for themselves.

Moses gave his people one command in two forms: "Remember" and "Do not forget." What Moses wanted the people to remember was that in their wandering when they were fed up with God and afraid they would die, God remained with them, putting up with their complaints and seeing to it that both their basic and their deepest needs were met.

In those days our ancestors in the desert gradually became fearful that they had let their hopes and dreams carry them too far. Freedom had sounded great when they were in Egypt under the thumbs of their taskmasters, but when the road ahead appeared interminable the vision in the rear-view mirror looked better than it ever had before. They had left slavery, but for what? Hope was not solid enough to calm their hunger nor wet enough to slake their thirst.

Moses reminded them that in spite of their fears, they didn't die. The water from the rock was not as good as Perrier and the mysterious manna might have been as insipid as it was nourishing, but they didn't perish just because they didn't have everything they wanted. In fact, they learned that God could be counted on to take care of them, never leaving them to face their perils alone. They came to recognize God's loving presence through their times of trouble.

Moses did more than hint that the Israelites had needed every one of the 40 years of that trial in order to learn faith. Their want slowly led them to understand what was truly important. Eventually, the vision in the rear-view mirror lost its luster, and they understood that they could survive with very little as long as God was with them. If they hadn't learned that important lesson, they might have remained forever unable to distinguish between what gives life and what simply satisfies an appetite.

From the days of Exodus we fast-forward a few centuries to see a crowd pressing Jesus to keep them miraculously supplied with free bread. The problem Jesus faced was that the people who sought him remembered the story of Moses in the desert, but they didn't remember what their ancestors had learned there. Jesus was offering them bread, but it was the bread of life, the bread of commitment, the bread of following him through suffering into the real life of union with God. Instead of allowing themselves to comprehend that he was offering his life for them they refused to go beyond the level of the literal. They mocked him. Perhaps afraid to take him seriously, they jeered as others would at the crucifixion: "How can this man give us his flesh (his mortal self) to eat?" Like a new Moses, Jesus was inviting them into his own Exodus through death to life. He was inviting them to receive him as the Father's gift and become one with him, but they only had an appetite for a miraculous supply of bread.

What St. Paul tells the Corinthians in today's second reading offers a commentary on Jesus' offer to be living bread for us. Speaking of the community's eucharistic meal, Paul reminds his people that eating and drinking in the name of Christ implies being united with him in his self-giving, in his dying and his rising. It is communion, not a free lunch.

Between the 13th and the mid-20th centuries, Catholics often celebrated this feast with elaborate public processions that focused on Christ's miraculous presence in the consecrated host carried aloft. The readings the church has chosen for this feast change our focus from the symbolic procession to a contemporary Exodus. Today's

Scriptures lead us to realize that celebrating the Eucharist calls us to go out of ourselves, to move beyond our preferences and appetites and to take up Jesus' offer of communion with him. This is a journey that will be every bit as frightening and grace-filled as the one on which Moses led his people. Our advantage over our Israelite ancestors is that we can learn from their experience and go beyond it. Christ promises us not just his presence, but the communion that gave him life.

DEUTERONOMY 8:2-3, 14b-16a

This reading, like last week's from Exodus, invites us back to the desert with our Israelite ancestors. Moses is reminding his people that after spending 40 years learning to depend on God they should well remember what they had learned. He then went on to describe their testing. Although we may take lightly their longing for the pots of stew they left in Egypt, they truly feared for their lives, thinking they would starve in the desert. It was the worst sort of dread of the morrow, leading them to suspect that Moses and God had duped them into a suicidal venture far worse than the slavery they had survived for generations.

Every child who knows the most fundamental Biblical stories can tell us that God sent them manna. There are lots of explanations of what it really was and how it appeared each day, but what is quite telling is the fact that the name the people gave this food, manna, literally meant "what's this?" Obviously, hunger was the only sauce they needed to accept whatever literally fell into their path. God used their hunger to bring them to a deeper level. The experience of depending on God was meant to teach them that life is more than food and that its meaning depends on "every word that comes forth from the mouth of God."

Deuteronomy was written for people who lived long after the desert days. But, in typical Hebrew fashion it speaks to the reader as "you" who were afflicted and fed, enslaved and made free. The trials of the desert are emblematic of human life, and particularly the life of the people of God. Anyone who identifies with God's people is invited into the memory of the desert so as to incorporate its lessons.

When Moses says "Do not forget the Lord," he's not talking about a catechism lesson but of a way of life. In the section the Lectionary skips over Moses warns the people of the dangers of abundance, he tells them that plenty of wheat and vines and pomegranates have the potential to make them feel self-sufficient and that satisfaction will be far more dangerous to them than the scarcity of the desert.

This reading touches on the particular privilege of the poor, the special awareness of God's providence that comes only from the experience of great need. People of faith who have very little seem to be blessed with a unique consciousness of God's goodness even, or perhaps especially, in times of great need. People who battle addiction often discover the same thing. It seems as though our awareness of God's care can go no deeper than our desire for God or our awareness of need. This selection from Deuteronomy calls us to remember our poverty, to accept our neediness and our hungers as guides that can lead us to being filled beyond our wildest dreams, not just with mystery bread, but with the word who comes from God.

1 CORINTHIANS 10:16-17

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he was addressing a people whose cultural practices included festive meals where the gods were celebrated. Although not religious in any way we would recognize, these dinners included the honoring of pagan deities; and Paul disapproved of Christian participation in such celebrations for that reason. Paul's original intent in this selection from 1 Corinthians was to differentiate the Lord's Supper from that sort of festivity, but this short selection also teaches a great deal about Paul's understanding of the Eucharist.

The cup of blessing of which Paul spoke was a regular part of ordinary meals. In Paul's culture, blessing was not an action intended to make something holy, but an acknowledgement that what was prayed over was a gift from God, a blessing in itself. People didn't bless *things*, they blessed God, giving thanks for signs of God's goodness. Blessing didn't change an object, but recognized it as a gift.

Paul wrote to communities who met regularly for the Lord's Supper. For Paul that particular meal was intended to be a celebration of profound communion with God and one another, an expression of love and solidarity among equal members of the body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul says that unless the participants share the communion of giving themselves for one another, their eucharistic meal becomes a sacrilege rather than worship. When he says "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes," he means that eating and drinking in Christ's name requires communion with Christ in his self-offering. Eating that bread and drinking that cup imply offering one's own body and blood for the world just as Christ did.

That is Paul's theme in the selection we hear today as we celebrate the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ. Just as baptism means dying and rising with Christ, the cup of blessing is a participation in Christ's shedding his blood, the sharing of the bread is an act of incorporation into his body. The action is twofold: we receive what Christ offered, and we join him in that self-giving for the life of the world.

This thoroughly inverts the common notion of holy sacrifice. Traditional sacrifices are offerings humans make to the gods seeking favor or offering worship. The Christian sacrifice begins with Christ offering himself to humanity in the name of God. It is God who seeks communion with us, not the other way around. Partaking of the cup and bread is, therefore, very truly a participation in Christ's greatest expression of love, accepting and joining in his act of total self-giving to bring all into one as he and the Father are one.

JOHN 6:51-58

Today's Gospel comes from the last part of John's eucharistic discourse in which Jesus explains that as the bread of life, he offers life to the world. Perhaps the most important thing we can do as we begin to study John 6 is to remember that it was written by the evangelist who is famous for leading disciples through faulty interpretations into the depths of Jesus' message.

The first statement Jesus makes in this selection is rather straight forward: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven." Within this passage, Jesus draws on his audience's memory of the Exodus. Jesus tells them that just as God sent the mysterious manna, he himself is God's ultimate and living gift, sent for the life of the world. In the next phrase, Jesus moves from the symbolism of the manna to saying that he is giving his flesh — his mortal, human self, all that he is — for the life of the world.

With the startling vocabulary about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, John is trying to move us from the physical to the spiritual plane. The crowds who quarreled among themselves asking "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" echoed Nicodemus who focused on the impossibility of re-entering his mother's womb to be born again. They mirrored the Samaritan woman-apostle whose questions to Jesus were fixated on the physical-geographical plane while he tried to introduce her into the realm of the Spirit.

The people who heard Jesus speaking the words of today's Gospel knew well that eating and praying together implied communion. They knew that the God of Abraham and Moses was God-with-them, the God who had been involved in the events of their past. The blessing they traditionally said as they broke the bread during a meal recalled and rejoiced in God's presence in their ongoing history. The truly shocking thing Jesus did by calling himself the living bread had nothing to do with cannibalism. The scandal was the declaration that in his very humanity he embodied divine life being offered to them. Jesus claimed that communion with him was the way to the communion with God that he already enjoyed. What tripped them up was that he brought God too close.

By comparing the gift of himself to the desert manna, Jesus reiterated the most basic fact of his life: he had been sent by the Father for the life of the world. He also claimed that there was no comparison between the first manna and what he offered. Those who ate the desert manna survived for a time and then died. Those who find their sustenance in Christ the living bread will share his victory over death and the life he has from the Father.

Ultimately, the real scandal of Jesus' claim to be the bread of life was his claim that God was revealed in his mortal flesh. A God who is majestic and unreachable is far easier to deal with than one who invites us to communion in the here and now. It doesn't cost much to worship a god to whom we can offer placating sacrifices and then go on with our lives as normal. But God who initiates communion with us is going to claim everything we are as we come to abide in Christ and allow him to abide in us.

Planning: Body and Blood of Christ

By: Lawrence Mick

Our first reading for this solemnity includes lines that will be familiar to people: "not by bread alone does one live, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the Lord". Jesus quotes those lines in response to the temptation in the desert right after his baptism by John the Baptist. Neither Moses nor Jesus were referring directly to the Eucharist, but we might ask ourselves how well we live by "every word" that comes forth from the mouth of Jesus.

At the Last Supper, he spoke words that we recall in the midst of the Eucharistic Prayer at every Mass: “Take and eat ... this is my body. Take and drink ... this is the cup of my blood.” We do rather well at heeding his first command but many Catholics still reject his second one, taking only the bread at Communion and passing by the cup.

There are probably many reasons for this behavior. One of the biggest is that we are still trying to recover from centuries when church leaders denied the cup to the faithful. Old habits die hard, and nowhere is this truer than in ritual behavior. Many Catholics grew up taking only the bread, and they simply continue that practice.

Some people are concerned about health issues. Some may be alcoholic and need to avoid all alcohol. Some may have a cold and are simply being considerate of others. Some just don’t see any good reason to share the blood of Christ, whether through lack of catechesis or refusal to accept such education.

It might be helpful for planners to query a number of parishioners who skip the cup as to why they make this decision—not in a judgmental way but just seeking to understand. That might give a more solid basis for efforts to lead parishioners to fully participate in this sacrament as Jesus intended. If the issue is understanding why the church restored Communion from the cup, you can offer explanations in the bulletin or in homilies. If the concern is medical, you can provide statements from the Center for Disease Control that assure people that this is not a problem, etc.

Actions, of course, speak louder than words. Planners should also consider whether parish practices contribute to the problem. If Communion is offered under only one species at some Sunday Masses, this surely reinforces the sense that it doesn’t really matter. The same is true for daily Masses, funerals, weddings and all other Masses. If presiders and parish leaders don’t clearly value Communion under both species, why would we be surprised if parishioners get that message?

Another indicator that Communion from the cup is not valued is having too few ministers of the cup at Masses. If this results in “traffic jams” during the Communion procession, many will simply skip the cup rather than wait behind a line of people. And if there is regularly too little wine to last throughout the Communion procession that also communicates a belief that it really is not important. (This may happen occasionally if you misjudge, but if it is happening often, increase the amount of wine in the cups to avoid running out.) Err on the side of plenty rather than scarcity.

Prayers: Body and Blood of Christ

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Unity is easier to talk about than to achieve. There have always been divisions among people, including God's people. But we have access to a unique source of unity: the Eucharistic. In our act of breaking bread and drinking from the one cup, our relationship to one another is strengthened. Jesus gave himself for us and continues to do so even now. Though we know this, we need to be reminded that we are truly members of one body—his body. What is our attitude toward those standing next to us each Sunday, sharing this same life-giving gift?

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you give yourself to us in the living bread: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you give us life when we feed on you: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to be one body united in you: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray now for each other and for all people who are called to live in unity.

Minister For the whole church: That our participation in the Eucharist may strengthen our unity and our desire to build the human community...we pray,

- For the world's refugees, who yearn to belong to a welcoming community; and for all people separated from their loved ones...we pray,
- For those who feel unworthy of receiving the body and blood of Christ...we pray,
- For parents, catechists, pastors, and all who are responsible for teaching our children the meaning of the Eucharist...we pray,
- For all fathers and stepfathers; grandfathers and godfathers; for all men who serve and nurture young people...for their strength and tenderness, courage and wisdom, generosity and faithfulness...we pray,
- For families struggling with child care and time to be together during these summer months...we pray,

- For all in our midst who are suffering, fearful, or discouraged—especially the sick and the dying; and for those who have died...(*names*)...we pray,

Presider God of life, you fed your people in the desert; and you continue to feed us with the body and blood of your son, Jesus. Make us worthy participants of the Eucharistic feast and help us to remember that we are one body in him. May this gift empower us to help strengthen the whole human community. We pray in Jesus' holy name. Amen

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