

The subject of Corpus Christi is daunting. Where does one begin? It is not just about bread and wine. First there is the Incarnation when Mary gave Jesus his human body. Second there is the Crucifixion where Jesus experienced the worst kind of suffering and death that can happen to a human body. Thirdly, there is the Eucharist in which the body and blood of Jesus is somehow present. Finally, there is the church, Jesus' flowerers, the body of which he is the head.

In addition, there are all the theories about exactly how the bread and wine become the body of Christ. Is it simply a memorial to remind us of Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross? This theory is sometimes called the real absence. Or do we follow the scholastics and try to explain by reason and logic how the Eucharistic elements become the literal body and blood of Christ despite looking like bread and wine. Or we might agree with the Lutherans that what we have is something called the Real Presence, that is the bread and blood but we cannot say how. The Eastern Orthodox are content with it being a mystery.

Our reading from Deuteronomy speaks of God's provision for our most basic needs. Moses reminds the Israelites of their forty years in the wilderness. God let them hunger and thirst and provided them with manna which they had never experienced and miraculous streams of water from a rock. It helps us to know that manna means "what is it." The lesson God wants them to learn is that "one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." God had met their needs.

Our reading from 1 Corinthians chapter 11 recounts Jesus' actions at the Last Supper. He redefines the bread and wine, the sacred meal as his body and blood. He tells them, and us, to partake of the bread and wine and to continue to do this in remembrance of him till he comes again. So as we partake in the Eucharist we are united with Christ.

In the 10th chapter 1 Corinthians, Paul spiritualizes the experience of the Israelites in the wilderness. Remember that the Corinthians were a very fragmented group. Paul speaks about the unity that the Israelites experienced – "all were baptized in Moses in the cloud and in the sea; all drank the same spiritual food and drink from the rock." Then he says that in the sharing of the cup and the bread, we are sharing in the body and blood of Christ. "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body for we all partake in the one Bread."

In the Gospel according to John, we find a distinctly non-21st century idea: Jesus as a sacrifice whose body and blood are offered for us that we may live eternally. To me it sounds a bit strange and off-putting.

People in Jesus' time would not have a problem with this idea. Part of the sacrifice offered to the gods was burned on the altar, part was given to the priest and part was given to the one who brought it. Since it had been offered to the gods, it was believed that the gods were

present in the sacrifice. At the sacrificial feast the worshipper would partake of the gods as he ate.

Sacrifices still happen today. One of our associates who was born in the Middle East said that at her birth her father wanted to sacrifice a lamb in celebration. Somehow the lamb broke loose and escaped and no one knew what happened to it.

In the Gospel, Jesus uses sacrificial language and also makes reference to the manna in the wilderness. He says "I am the bread of life...whoever eats of this bread will live forever. The bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh...those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them." This is how intimately Jesus desires to relate to us. He wants to become our very life.

I'd like to end with a passage from "The Magnificent Defeat" by Frederick Buechner. "He spoke of his death and as he spoke he performed a symbolic act, taking a loaf of bread, breaking it in his hands and saying "this is my body broken for you". In other words – "I die willingly for your sake as I break this bread now for your sake." And then the cup of wine which he spoke of as the blood he would shed for them. Afterward he invites the disciples to eat and drink this food, that is he invites them to share in his life both the suffering and the joy of it.

And for these centuries, the church has been re-enacting this last supper as a symbol of these things – as a symbol of his giving his life away for the sake of this world and a symbol of his followers participating in this life, this giving.

The mystery of the symbols is that a symbol contains some of the power of the thing that it symbolizes – power that can transform a human life into a new kind of life altogether. A life like his with some of his power in it.

So what has Christ given to us in the Eucharist?

1. Union with Christ
2. Union with all other members of the Body of Christ
3. Transformation into a new kind of life