

Sunday, June 2, 2013

Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ (C)

Conventual Mass

The Lord Emmanuel Walks With Us

After Mass today, you are all invited to take part in our Corpus Christi procession. Processions are a very ancient form of devotion. In Christian liturgical forms they represent our pilgrimage through life to the Lord God seated in majesty and to the altar of the Lamb. In some places the Corpus Christi procession has an especially festive air complete with bands playing hymns, carpets made of flower petals with tapestries and leafy branches lining the way of the procession. I remember especially a Corpus Christi procession in which I took part. The year was 1970, the place a little medieval city in Germany. At one point, one of the altars for benediction was set up against the ancient city walls where the river replete with swans was flowing by. You can't get more romantic than that! More important, I was conscious of the fact that all those people taking part, and there were many, were taking part because they held to the ancient faith that the Eucharist is truly the body and blood of Christ. The Eucharist carried in the monstrance is witness as well that we do not travel on our pilgrimage alone, but that Christ accompanies us on the way. The Word who became one with us, has bonded with us, and his love will never leave us go.

The first letter to the Corinthians from which our second reading is taken is dated to about the year 50 some fifteen to twenty years before the Gospels. The way Paul speaks of the Eucharist shows that this observance was familiar to the Christians of that time. It was enough for Paul to briefly call to mind their liturgical practice. There was no need for him to repeat each time a detailed account of the Last Supper. Paul recalled only the essentials of the rite.¹ Justin Martyr who was executed a century after this letter was written, attests in his writings to the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

In other portions of this letter, we find that Paul is upset because the Corinthians are not behaving at their celebration of the Body and Blood of Christ as they should. Some bring their own food and eat and drink immoderately while others go hungry. The selfishness and comfort of the Corinthians is in contrast to the self-giving of Jesus on the cross. The gift of himself on the cross and the celebration of the Eucharist ought to draw out from us a like response of generosity and self-giving.² The Word who became one of us although ascended to the Father, still walks with us to be with us and to serve us

The gospel of the multiplication of the loaves and fish is found in all four evangelists. At first glance its inclusion among all four of the

gospels seems to be simply the retelling of an extraordinary miracle. But today's gospel is written with definite Eucharistic overtones. In the third line of today's reading are the words "As the day was drawing to a close." We are put in mind of that fateful evening when Jesus celebrated the Paschal meal with his disciples, the beginning of his own Pasch and the institution of the Eucharist. We also remember those words filled with longing uttered by those Easter travelers: "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is drawing to a close." Then there are the same ritual gestures: Jesus took the bread, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them. These gestures are the same in today's gospel as well as at the Last Supper and Emmaus. These self same gestures come down through the early church to us today. This is not to imply that the multiplication, the Last Supper and Emmaus are the same, but it points out that St. Luke in his telling gave them a definite Eucharistic connotation.³

Jesus tells his disciples to tell the crowd to sit down in groups of fifty, a rather unexpected detail. Against all expectations this mob of hungry and tired people sits down obediently, even quickly, in neat, orderly groups. The image changes from an unorganized crowd to a well-structured assembly, one no longer in a deserted place but in the immense hall of a solemn banquet presided over by Jesus.⁴

“They all ate and were satisfied. And when the leftover fragments were picked up, they filled twelve wicker baskets.” Christian tradition has always seen a lesson in this account of the abundance and care with which the fragments were preserved. The Eucharist is the bread reserved by Christ to feed the peoples of all time.⁴

When we reread the beginning of this gospel, we can see in it a prefiguration of our own Eucharistic celebration. Jesus began by speaking to the crowds about the kingdom of God, and healing those who needed to be healed. This was, of course, the every day activity of Jesus. Within the framework of the Eucharistic connotation of the gospel and the liturgical celebration these words take on added meaning. It begins with the prayer to the Lord asking for salvation, for healing, especially from sin, the greatest of diseases. It continues with the proclamation of the Word that speaks to us about the Kingdom of God and exhorts us to become part of this mystery.⁵ After this we enter into the Eucharistic offering of Christ to the Father proper.

Jesus continues to walk with us feeding us with his body and blood for the journey. “On the night he was handed over, [the Lord Jesus] took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also the

cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.” When we “eat this bread and drink this cup” we make present and proclaim the death of Jesus until the end of time. It is a proclamation that goes beyond the memory of and our inclusion in a past event. It is not a question “as if” we were participating in Christ’s supper; we truly participate here and now in what he did on the night he was handed over. In the Eucharist the body and blood of Christ are once more offered to the Father as they were offered on Calvary. In the Eucharist Christ continues to make that same offering to the Father in heaven, and makes it present for us on earth. And when we participate in its celebration, we offer not only Christ, but in union with him we offer ourselves, our needs, our gifts, and our problems, so that it is our offering as well as his. The celebration of the Eucharist links our lives with the life of Jesus.⁶

The above are but a few thoughts as we contemplate the great mystery of the sacrament of Christ’s body and blood. When we ponder this great gift of God, we ask ourselves, “Why?” Why does an omnipotent God do such a thing? Why does he stoop so low as to seek our companionship, to want to walk with us? The ultimate answer is hidden in the mystery of God’s love.

All we can say is that “Love does such things.”

As we continue with our Eucharist today and as we go forth in procession, I would like to leave you with words written by St. John Chrysostom:

“If we leave this world after having participated in that sacrament, we shall enter with complete confidence into the heavenly sanctuary... And why speak of the life to come? The very earth, here below, becomes heaven through this mystery. Open; Open the doors of heaven, look: and you will see what I announced to you. I am going to show you what the treasures of highest heaven have that is most precious on earth. For, if it is true that in a royal palace what is most august is neither the walls nor the golden paneling but the king on his throne, likewise in heaven itself, it is the king. Now you can see him, today, on the earth. I am not showing you angels or archangels or heaven or the heaven of heavens: I am showing you the master and Lord of all this. Do you understand that what is most precious you see on earth? And not only do you see it but you touch it; but you do even more; you feed on it; you receive it, you take it into your very home.⁷

End Notes

¹ Days of the Lord, the Liturgical Year, v. 7 (Collegeville, Minn., Liturgical Press, 1994) 59

² Daniel E. Pilarczyk, Live Letters: Reflections on the Second Readings of the Sunday Lectionary (Cincinnati, Oh., St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2002) 475

³ Days of the Lord, 61

⁴ Days of the Lord, 62

⁵ Days of the Lord, 60

⁶ Pilarczyk, 476

⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilie 24 sur la Premiere letter aux Corinthiens, in Days of the Lord, 60