

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

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

Warning: There is a lot of blood in this Sunday's readings. In Exodus, at the foot of Mt. Sinai, Moses took half the blood of young bulls that had been sacrificed and splashed it on an altar that represented God; he sprinkled the other half on the people. Imagine the sight, the smell, the feel of it! In Hebrews, we hear how Christ offered his own blood to "cleanse our consciences from dead works to worship the living God." In the gospel, Jesus gives a cup to his disciples at the Last Supper and says, "This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many." These passages graphically portray a ponderous truth about our relationship with God, a truth we celebrate this Sunday with great joy.

"Sacrificial blood is a powerful and pervasive theme in ancient Semitic worship."¹ Without a scientific knowledge of blood, ancient people nevertheless recognized it is essential to life. It pulses under our skin all the time, without our willing it, and when it pours out, we die. Ritual sprinkling with the lifeblood of an animal connected two parties in the same way as being born in the same family does. It says, "Our lives are entwined; we depend on each other." Thus, Moses uses blood in Exodus 24 to seal the covenant, the intimate connection God is making with Israel. This arrangement is not just a contract, a mere exchange of services; it is a permanent commitment to live for the other. As the superior party, God commits to stand with the Israelites in pain and suffering, to be their champion, provider and protector, their friend, support and companion. The people, on their part, agree to "do everything the Lord has told us" in the Ten Commandments and the Code of the Covenant that had just been read to them. Sealing the covenant with blood ritually proclaims the parties are "all in" on this relationship.

We know how difficult it is to be "all in" for another. Marriages are covenantal and half end in divorce. While we get along marvelously with certain family members, we fail repeatedly to interact lovingly with others. We have co-workers with whom we are at odds, neighbors who grate on our nerves, fellow citizens and parishioners we avoid. Sometimes we work hard and the relationships still fail. If we can finally steer out of troubled waters to a place of mutual respect, it has required great effort.

Our relationship with God is this same kind of difficult. We regularly turn our backs on God, dedicating ourselves to something else instead. God offers us opportunity and community and we focus on what is broken and who is to blame. Yet God keeps extending a hand to us. Heb 9 indicates to what extremes God goes to do just that. It connects the ritual use of blood to giving one's life for others: God's commitment to the covenant is so great that God's own blood (as the human Jesus) seals the covenant. God expresses a depth of commitment using the very thing we all know we cannot live without. With a commitment this great, the covenant cannot be broken, no matter what we do. God's "all in" locks in eternal redemption for us and Jesus is dubbed "high priest of the good things that have come to be."

If we mistake Hebrews as dismissing the value of the Jewish faith, the gospel reminds us that Christ's action is a continuation of what God has been doing since the Exodus. Mark carefully shows Jesus preparing for a Passover meal and leading it properly; it is within a Passover meal that he explains his death. This Passover context conveys to us the constancy of God's love. Jesus also models how to respond to our troubled relationships: prior to our passage, Judas and the religious leaders prepare for Jesus' death with resentment and plotting, but Jesus prepares for this showdown with devout Passover preparations so he can give comfort to his disciples. At the meal, he explains that the Passover wine is "my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many." (N.B. "many" here means a "great number without restriction."²) This ritual, the Eucharistic meal, is something we can do every day around the world to bind us to God and bolster our ability to love in the same self-sacrificing way. It reminds us daily that God is consistently "all in" for us. What a blessing to ponder!

- ❖ How is God faithful to you, even when you have struggled to be faithful to God?
- ❖ What concern of yours is relieved by knowing that God is "all in" for you?

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¹ George W. MacRae, S.J. "Hebrews." *Collegeville Bible Commentary*. Liturgical Press. 1992. p. 1257.

² Edward J. Mally, S.J. "The Gospel according to Mark." *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, vol. 2. Prentice Hall, 1968. p. 54.