

**This Sunday's Readings – The Body and Blood of Christ** – Today we celebrate the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ. This used to be known as the Feast of Corpus Christi (the Body of Christ), prior to Vatican II. The following excerpt from the Bible Study Class of St. Charles Borromeo Church, Picayune, MS, describes the history of this feast – “The purpose of the feast of Corpus Christi is to instruct the people in the mystery, faith, and devotion surrounding the Eucharist. The celebration of the feast evolved during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, having been preceded by the Berengarian heresy. Berengar of Tours was an archdeacon who taught that the presence of Christ in the Eucharist was more symbolic than real. By the thirteenth century reception of the Eucharist was less emphasized and was to some extent superseded by merely seeing the Host. At this time (1209) Juliana of Liege, an Augustinian nun, had a vision which demanded a feast for the Eucharist. After much persuasion the feast was celebrated for the first time in 1247, and extended to the whole Church in 1264. Resistance to the feast was found in Rome and Liege, but by 1317 its celebration had spread throughout the world”. But do we really understand the true meaning of this Feast? Fr. Roger Karban in his 2008 syndicated column offers this comment – “The first step in correctly understanding any Scripture passage is to hear it within the context in which the sacred author originally placed it. Just as the individual actions of our lives make sense only against the background of our entire lives, so we can't take a verse or two of Scripture out of the writer's work and think we're getting from those lines what the author originally put in them. Nowhere have we “sinned” more against this biblical principle than in our understanding of the Eucharist. We zero in on Jesus' words of institution - This is my body/blood” - and completely ignore the context in which our sacred writers have Jesus proclaim them. Through the centuries we've spent most of our theological time reflecting on how the bread is transformed into Jesus' body; the wine into his blood. Little time has been given to understanding the implications of the Eucharistic community's transformation into the body and blood of Christ. Yet that's almost always the context in which our Christian sacred authors place Jesus' words over the bread and wine”.

The first reading is from the Book of Deuteronomy, which means “second law”. It also recounts the story of the Exodus but more in the format of a homily. At this point in Hebrew history, the Israelites are finally in sight of the Promised Land and are preparing to cross the Jordan River. At this point Moses instructs the people not to forget the 40 years of trials and tribulations in the desert. He reminds the people that God provided for the people by giving them manna from Heaven, which provided daily nourishment. This manna is a prototype for the Eucharist. He also provided water from the rocks. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this comment on the manna and water – “Paul himself treated the water from the rock and the manna as types of the two great Christian sacraments of baptism and holy communion ([1 Corinthians 10:1-4](#)); and in the discourse of the bread from heaven in John 6, part of which will be read as the gospel of this day, the manna is likewise treated as a type of the Eucharistic Bread”. However, this manna did not provide eternal life. What is even more important than food and water is the word of the Lord as Moses states – “not by bread alone does one live, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord”. That is the source of eternal life. Moses emphasizes “**remember**” and “**do not forget**”. Remember the words of our Lord in the Eucharistic Prayer “Do this in memory of me”.

The reading from the Gospel of John is the conclusion of the “Bread of Life Discourse” that Jesus gave after feeding the multitudes. Some scripture scholars believe that this section might have been added at a later date. Here we read of a different “manna”. Just as manna (today’s first reading) came from God, so did Jesus (today’s Gospel) come from God. In this case, this manna (the Body and Blood of Christ) provides eternal life. In his book *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today*, Reginald H. Fuller looks at this discourse from another perspective. He states “the whole discourse outlines the events of salvation history, the coming of the Christ as the bread from heaven into the world in the incarnation (vv. 26-51b), the surrender of himself in his atoning death (v. 51c), the availability of his surrendered life as the nourishment of the faithful in holy communion (vv. 53-58). John does not regard the sacrament as a thing in itself, detached from the total saving event of Christ, but as the means by which this saving event is constantly made available for present participation in the life of the Church. We note, too, how in Johannine idiom the double aspect of the Eucharist expressed in the earlier institution narratives (Paul and the Synoptists) is preserved. The Eucharist makes the past present for participation (“flesh” and “blood” referring back to Christ’s death on Calvary), and it makes the future (“I will raise him up at the last day”; “will live because of me”; and “will live for ever”) equally present (“has eternal life”). Note also that the Eucharistic part of the discourse does not lose sight of the manna typology: “not such as the fathers ate and died.””

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* helps us understand today’s scripture readings by explaining the culture of that time – “Christians living in the twentieth century are heirs of a richly complex and refined tradition. Contemporary understanding of the Eucharist frequently clouds our vision of the challenges faced by our first-century ancestors in the faith and the strategies they employed to meet these challenges.

#### JESUS’ HOMILY

Today’s passage reports that Jesus’ comments led his contemporaries to a violent dispute among themselves: “How can he give us his flesh to eat?” (v. 52). No one interpreted this statement literally. The violent dispute erupts because Jesus once again resorts to “anti-language” (see the commentary for Trinity Sunday). He uses familiar words like “manna” “bread come down from heaven” and “I am . . .” and creates new and jarring meanings. What was he really saying? One clue is found in the verse that immediately follows today’s reading: “Jesus said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum” (v. 59). It may be best to interpret today’s passage as part of a “midrashic homily” Jesus preached in the synagogue. (The Hebrew word *midrash* means interpretation or explanation.) Homilies by definition always explain biblical texts and apply them to life. A homily never was and should not now be a sermon or a speech or a lecture. What biblical text was Jesus explaining? This is not an easy question to answer. We know that first-century Judeans read the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) in the synagogue. It was divided into 150 sections which were read sequentially over a three-year period. A second reading, called the Haphtarah, was drawn from the Prophets. Some scholars hypothesize that a third reading came from the 150 canonical psalms.

## THE TARGUMIM

(A) search (for the “lectionary” envisioned above) would be a purely creative-imaginative exercise were it not for yet another ancient body of Jewish literature known as the Targumim (singular: Targum), which are paraphrases of the Hebrew Scriptures in the Aramaic language. During the Babylonian Exile Israel gradually forgot its Hebrew language and adopted the language the Babylonians spoke: Aramaic or Chaldean. They could no longer understand the Hebrew Scriptures when these were read to them. In the synagogues, therefore, one person would read from the Hebrew text while another person would translate, on the spot, into Aramaic. Gradually the translations became paraphrases, and in some instances the paraphrases became much longer than the text. By the sixth and seventh centuries C.E., two collections of such Targumim existed: the Babylonian and the Palestinian. The former in general is more literal, the latter more paraphrastic. In either case, scholars use great care in relying on these documents. Even though they were collected in the sixth and seventh centuries, they do contain concepts that reach back to the time of Jesus. While many modern believers might insist that Scripture should not be so challenging to understand and interpret this small excursion into our biblical tradition shows how much more there is to learn. What does the Eucharist and its relationship to manna mean to you?”

Joe Juellich, Liturgy Team