

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST (B)
Exodus 24:3-8 Psalm 116 Hebrews 9: 11-15 Mark 14: 12-16, 22-26

Dear Preachers:

Today’s first reading describes in some detail the ritual that Moses ordered to ratify the covenant God was making with the people. This covenant ritual would be renewed often, especially whenever Israel wandered from God. Eventually they would build a temple where the altar sacrifices would become a regular part of their religious and community lives. The sacrifices would be a continual sign of the covenant and remind the people that the bond between them and God had been “sealed in blood” and so they could trust in the fidelity of the One who had entered into contract with them.

Like all rituals we celebrate over years and years, this ritual had the possibility of becoming staid, merely something religious law or custom required. Rituals get passed on to the next generations and these new recipients of their parents’ religious observances can grow bored with what looks like mere formality. How many teenagers have told us about going to church on Sunday? “It’s so boring!” It may not always be their fault, we who carry on the tradition can make our rituals look empty and meaningless—perhaps the traditional practices have become merely ritual for us, devoid of what they express about our relationship with God. We can forget what we are ritualizing, we can forget we are not doing it because we are “supposed to” or “we have always done it”. Rather, with this Exodus reading in mind, we perform our rituals to celebrate what God has done for us and the new life we have been given.

Like us, the Israelites, on their own, were no prizes. They were picked, not because they were irresistible to God, but because God is a big-hearted gift-giver. The ritual of word and blood the people are celebrating acknowledges their awareness of how gracious God had been to them. The ritual would be a reminder of their God and their desire to serve this most appealing God. It’s as if they are saying, “What a wonderful God we have! What can we do to serve this God? Let’s stay as close to this God as we can; it will be to our benefit.” The repeating of the ritual would help them to stay close----but God would stay even closer.

The people are committing themselves to God and God is making covenant with them. There is no hint of boredom here, no hint of having to follow meaningless rules and regulations. They say with enthusiasm, “We will do everything that the Lord has told us.” Scan the previous chapters in Exodus. The Israelites have just been delivered from slavery, taken through the desert, nourished with manna and

quail, and given water from the rock. Despite their grumblings and stumblings on their God-directed journey, God still wants to make covenant with them. Why wouldn't they accept the terms of this covenant? They have everything to gain by staying close to God. But they, like us, will pull away from what they are celebrating in today's event.

Our own short comings and sin on the journey of our lives give us reason to pause; why would God want to get involved with me with all my blemishes? We can say the same thing about ourselves as a church. The pope and our bishops have asked forgiveness for the sins of our church. There is much for which to ask forgiveness. But this is true not just for our Roman church, other religious groups are doing the same. Recently the Methodists made an apology to Catholics for their sins against us. Why would God continue to have anything to do with the Israelite people after their desert journey? Why would God continue to want anything to do with us as well? Who knows why? It has something to do with the foolish lover we have for our God!

Blood was sprinkled on the altar; peace was made between God and the people. For us too, at this eucharistic celebration, we are reminded of the blood of Christ offered for us; not a sacrifice of appeasement to an angry God, but a reminder of how far God was and is willing to go to show that, even if we were to give up on ourselves, God will never give up on us. Thus, this eucharistic celebration is not rote or formal liturgy for us. At least it shouldn't be. Not if we have heard the Word speaking to us assembled today at this altar.

Every time we gather at Eucharist we bring much to the altar. And we are reminded that since the last time we were here, we have much for which to ask forgiveness. But the eucharistic ritual is a visible reminder and assurance to us: God has not given up on us. God, through Jesus, draws close to us to confirm a fact: God and we are in covenant to one another. And God is always ready to renew that covenant after our wanderings and goings astray in the desert.

The holocaust ordered by Moses was the people's prayer of praise and thanksgiving to their wonderful God. So too for us, our offering today at Eucharist expresses our praise of God as we realize and celebrate what God has done for us. The ties renewed at this altar are so powerful that, through this sacrifice, we are enabled to offer a similar sacrifice in our personal and communal lives. We sacrifice our body and blood when we:

-give our energies and time to our children. (A father told me recently that he and his wife were sleep-deprived during the first two years of their new born's life. And someone chimed in, "Just wait till he's a teenager!")

-dedicate ourselves and give up free time to minister to others in our church communities

-sacrifice a job because our principles will not allow us to compromise or take dishonest shortcuts

-tend to an ailing parent by bringing them groceries, renewing prescriptions, taking time to take them to doctors' appointments, cooking meals and just spending time listening to them

-advocate for the poor, homeless, disabled, mental patients, prisoners, abused women, uninsured children, etc. at community meetings and before governmental bodies.

-work in the community to reduce violence in schools and on our streets

How do ordinary people like us get such dedication to do so much service for others, to pour out our life blood on so many altars of service? Those of us at this Eucharist have no doubt about the source of our commitment and energy. The living reminder is at this altar for us today: God has given everything for us. As we hear the Word and respond by partaking in this meal we do so with eyes open. We see those people with us who are professing what we do---that our God is worth celebrating, not because we are ordered to do so, but because we know better.

QUOTABLE:

This Sunday's texts remind us that if we do not do "what the Lord has spoken" (Ex 24: 3), we are turning our backs on the Lord's surrender of his body and blood. If we do not practice his will of life and justice, our participation in Christian worship, in the Sunday Eucharist, is devoid of content. Beyond sincerity and personal itineraries, the situation of injustice and marginalization of the poor appears as a clamorous departure from the demands of the new covenant sealed in Christ's blood. Every Eucharistic celebration ought to remind us of "the structures of sin" (cited by Medellin and John Paul II) existing in today's world. Our repenting for having contributed to these structures not only involves saying so in solemn moments, but above all it involves beginning to build this society on the basis of the needs of the oppressed and of those who are excluded from it.

—Gustavo Gutierrez, in *SHARING THE WORD THROUGH THE LITURGICAL YEAR*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995 (translated in 1997), page 123.

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“Blessings on your preaching”

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