

# SUNDAY READINGS

## READ AT HOME

### The Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

Year B

6 June 2021



#### Collect

O God, who in this wonderful Sacrament  
have left us a memorial of your Passion,  
grant us, we pray,  
so to revere the sacred mysteries of your Body and Blood  
that we may always experience in ourselves  
the fruits of your redemption.  
Who live and reign with God the Father  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever.  
**Amen.**

#### Readings and Commentaries

As if the Church were not satisfied with fifty days of paschal feasting, the festivals continue beyond the season. First the Holy Trinity is honoured, and now the Body and Blood of Christ. Many still know today's feast by its shorter Latin name, Corpus Christi.

This observance originated in the Belgian city of Liège in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Very soon after, in 1264, Pope Urban IV decreed that the feast be celebrated by the whole Western Church. From then until the reforms of the Second Vatican Council the popular focus of the feast was on the presence of Christ in the consecrated bread, the Blessed Sacrament.

Nowadays the feast invites us to enter into the whole mystery of Jesus' self-gift to us in the eucharistic meal. We are reminded that the eucharist is first and foremost an action that engages us heart and soul. Our communion in the Body and Blood of Christ makes the Church the Body of Christ. Like Jesus we break the bread and pour out the wine of our lives for the sake of the world.

**A reading from the book of Exodus 24:3–8**

Moses went and told the people all the commands of the Lord and all the ordinances. In answer, all the people said with one voice, 'We will observe all the commands that the Lord has decreed.' Moses put all the commands of the Lord into writing, and early next morning he built an altar at the foot of the mountain, with twelve standing-stones for the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he directed certain young Israelites to offer holocausts and to immolate bullocks to the Lord as communion sacrifices. Half of the blood Moses took up and put into basins, the other half he cast on the altar. And taking the Book of the Covenant he read it to the listening people, and they said, 'We will observe all that the Lord has decreed; we will obey.' then Moses took the blood and cast it towards the people. 'This' he said 'is the blood of the Covenant that the Lord has made with you, containing all these rules.'

**First Reading**

As the story is told in the book of Exodus, the Israelites are encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai. Moses goes up the mountain to commune with the Lord. He is given the Law which will define Israel as God's own people and govern their way of life. Today's reading describes how Moses presents the Law to the people and seals the covenant relationship between God and Israel in a ritual of blood.

First Moses reads the Law, the people give their assent, and he commits it to writing. Then he prepares for the ritual by setting up an altar and twelve pillars. Animals are offered in sacrifice and the blood (their life-force) is kept. Again the Law is read and consented to. The bond between God and Israel is symbolised and ratified by the blood sprinkled on altar and people.

This is an important episode in the history of Israel, but readers ought not presume that their listeners are familiar with either the context or the content of this story. It needs to be proclaimed clearly, with a certain degree of solemnity. The story moves forward step by step until the climax is reached in Moses' declaration, "This is the blood of the Covenant". This often-heard phrase – delivered distinctly – will serve as a bridge to the gospel of the day and to the supper narrative of the Eucharistic Prayer.

**Responsorial Psalm Ps 115:12–13, 15–18**

R. I will take the cup of salvation,  
and call on the name of the Lord.

or

R. Alleluia.

How can I repay the Lord  
for his goodness to me?

The cup of salvation I will raise;  
I will call on the Lord's name. R.

O precious in the eyes of the Lord  
is the death of his faithful.

Your servant, Lord, your servant am I;  
you have loosened my bonds. R.

A thanksgiving sacrifice I make:

I will call on the Lord's name.

My vows to the Lord I will fulfil  
before all his people. R.

**Responsorial Psalm**

The verses of the psalm are the same as those for the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday evening, but with a different response, this time taken directly from the psalm.

Psalm 115/116 is a song of thanksgiving from one who has been saved from death. It implies that the psalmist is moved to thank God in a formal ritual. This is suggested by the language used, referring to "the cup of salvation . . . a thanksgiving sacrifice . . . my vows". The psalm response encourages us to unite ourselves in the first place with the psalmist in his action of thanksgiving, and ultimately with Christ. It invites us to renew our commitment to the Lord.

The lines are short, but should be respected and not run on into one another. The sentence – "O precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his faithful" – may puzzle the reader and the congregation with its ambiguity. It is not meant to imply that the Lord takes delight in our death, but that the Lord seeks to save his faithful from death.

### **A reading from the letter to the Hebrews**

**9:11–15**

Now Christ has come, as the high priest of all the blessings which were to come. He has passed through the greater, the more perfect tent, which is better than one made by men's hands because it is not of this created order; and he has entered the sanctuary once and for all, taking with him not the blood of goats and bull calves, but his own blood, having won an eternal redemption for us. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer are sprinkled on those who have incurred defilement and they restore the holiness of their outward lives; how much more effectively the blood of Christ, who offered himself as the perfect sacrifice to God through the eternal Spirit, can purify our inner self from dead actions so that we do our service to the living God. He brings a new covenant, as the mediator, only so that the people who were called to an eternal inheritance may actually receive what was promised: his death took place to cancel the sins that infringed the earlier covenant.

### **A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark**

**14:12–16, 22–26**

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb was sacrificed, his disciples said to Jesus, 'Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the passover?' So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the city and you will meet a man carrying a pitcher of water. Follow him, and say to the owner of the house which he enters, "The Master says: Where is my dining room in which I can eat the passover with my disciples?" He will show you a large upper room furnished with couches, all prepared. Make the preparations for us there.' The disciples set out and went to the city and found everything as he had told them, and prepared the Passover.

And as they were eating he took some bread, and when he said the blessing he broke it and gave it to them. 'Take it,' he said 'this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and when he had returned thanks he gave it to them, and all drank from it, and he said to them, 'This is my blood, the blood of the covenant, which is to be poured out for many. I tell you solemnly, I shall not drink any more wine until the day I drink the new wine in the kingdom of God.'

After psalms had been sung they left for the Mount of Olives.

### **Second Reading**

Today's passage from Hebrews, like the letter as a whole, is steeped in the ritual and symbolism of Old Testament worship. It is also densely argued. Thus it will quickly become clear that this is not an easy text for readers to proclaim or for congregations to grasp.

There is a double contrast in play. For a start, the author argues that the old covenant and its system of worship are inferior and ineffective in comparison with those inaugurated by the one true high priest, Jesus Christ. And he also presents eternal heavenly realities as superior to those of earth, no matter how holy they seem.

A more specific part of the background is to be found in the annual Jewish ceremony of purification, described in Leviticus 16 and still well known today as Yom Kippur. One element of this ritual was the pouring of the blood of a bull and of a goat on the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies in the temple. If this achieved purification, the author contends, how much more will the blood of Christ cleanse our hearts once and for all.

Readers will need to study this text carefully to get the drift of the argument, keeping in mind the author's intention to present Jesus Christ, his sacrifice and his priesthood, as completely superseding the old priesthood and its sacrifices. Even if the standard lectionary is being used, it would be helpful to see how the reading is set out in the NRSV. This should help the reader distinguish between the core parts of the argument and what is secondary. Congregations need to be able to hear this distinction clearly in the reader's inflection and tone of voice. They will benefit from hearing the text read with appropriately varied emphasis and at a moderate pace. Strangely enough, the excerpt chosen for today does not extend to the next few verses where explicit reference is made to the "blood of the covenant" ritual described in the first reading.

### **Gospel**

Today's gospel passage incorporates the preparation for Jesus' final Passover meal with his disciples (noting that John has a different chronology) and the supper narrative. It omits the intervening verses treating of Jesus' impending betrayal. Apart from the reading of Mark's entire passion narrative on Palm Sunday in Year B, we only ever hear his account of the Last Supper on this feast day once every three years.

No two accounts of the Last Supper and the institution of the eucharist are the same, but those of Mark and Matthew are usually linked together, as are Luke and Paul (1 Corinthians). Both Mark and Matthew use the phrase "blood of the covenant", echoing Moses' words to the people in Exodus 24, whereas Luke and Paul write of the "new covenant in my blood".

Today's ensemble of readings focuses our attention on the symbolism of blood. The blood sprinkled by Moses on the altar and the people seals the covenant between God and Israel. The blood of Christ, offered in perfect sacrifice, achieves redemption and establishes a new and eternal covenant. We become the people of that covenant when we drink from the cup of Christ. We are fortunate that in recent decades the practice of partaking of both the body and the blood of Christ has become more widespread. However it has not yet become the norm that it should be everyone's right and duty at every Mass.

## **Solemn Blessing**

May almighty God bless us in his kindness  
and pour out saving wisdom upon us.

**Amen.**

May he nourish us always with the teachings of the faith  
and make us persevere in holy deeds.

**Amen.**

May he turn our steps towards himself  
and show us the path of charity and peace.

**Amen.**

And may the blessing of almighty God,  
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,  
come down on us and remain with us for ever.

**Amen.**

(Adapted from the Solemn Blessing for Ordinary Time III, Roman Missal p 715.)