

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST (CORPUS CHRISTI) – YEAR A



Corpus Christi (the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ) celebrates the gift that Jesus gives us in the Eucharist – his very self as our food and drink. In the Roman Catholic church in Britain and Ireland, the feast is celebrated on the Sunday after Trinity Sunday. Some other churches also keep it as the Day of Thanksgiving for the Institution of Holy Communion.

Second Reading 1 Corinthians 10: 16–17

(The background to 1 Corinthians is given in the Prego Plus for Pentecost.)

Today's reading comes from that part of the Letter (from Chapter 7 onwards) where Paul answers questions put to him by the Corinthians. In Chapter 8 their query concerns eating food which came from animals sacrificed to idols – a real everyday problem for Christians. As only a small part of an animal was burnt as an offering to the idol, the rest belonged to the Temple priests, who often sold it to local butchers. Festive family meals would often take place in the Temple, so Christians had to decide whether or not to eat that meat.

Paul's answer follows two general principles: the faithful should be free from following the Law slavishly, and above all, should behave in a charitable manner.

In Chapter 10, which includes today's reading for Corpus Christi, Paul gives practical advice on this topic. Taking part in meals in the Temple is too much like worshipping demons and idols (10: 18–22). For Christians, it is breaking bread and drinking from the blessing cup that makes you enter into communion with the Lord. The blessing cup mentioned here is the third ritual cup of the Passover meal over which thanksgiving prayers were pronounced.

This breaking of bread and drinking from the cup, which we now call Eucharist ('Thanksgiving'), strengthens and cements the union between Christians and the Lord. We who believe in his words and choose to partake of the Eucharist become one with him and with each other.

Gospel John 6: 51–58

'I am the living bread'

For people today, Jesus's words can be very difficult to understand and accept, and indeed some respond as the Jews did. To this day, Jews do not drink blood; it must be removed from any animal that is to be eaten.

However, the idea would have been quite normal in ancient times to anyone familiar with sacrifice. At that time, when an animal was sacrificed, part of the raw flesh was given to the priests and worshippers to make a feast within the Temple precinct. They believed that the 'god' they worshipped was a guest who entered into the sacrifice, and therefore that the worshippers were literally eating the 'god'.

Today's Gospel is from the final section of the Eucharistic discourse in Chapter 6 and the vocabulary changes radically from previous verses. The significant words are no longer 'bread from heaven' or 'bread of life'. The Jews were familiar with these ideas since their ancestors were sustained by the manna as they crossed the desert. Now they are '*flesh*', and the words '*blood*' and '*eat*' are repeated often. There is a constant reference to food and drink.

The flesh of the Son of Man

The meaning of the discourse has changed. In the preceding section Jesus nourished those who believed through 'revelation'. The verb 'to believe' is now replaced by 'to eat'. John is now speaking of the Eucharistic nourishment provided by the 'flesh of the Son of Man' (v. 53).

Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever

Jesus's discourse has come full circle. He refers back to the pivotal phrase '*He gave them bread from heaven to eat*' (6: 31).

Jesus is first of all the giver of the bread, a new Moses.

He is also the bread of wisdom and revelation who nourishes all who come to him in faith.

He is, finally, the Eucharistic source of eternal life for all who eat and drink the flesh and blood of the Son of Man.

Corpus Christi and devotion to the Eucharist

This feast has led people to meditate on the Eucharist and to discover new depths to the Sacrament. Popular devotion found its expression in street processions of the consecrated host in a monstrance protected from the sun by a canopy. Although such processions have all but disappeared in Britain, other signs of devotion remain: the burning lamp by the tabernacle, benediction services, Holy Hours, 24 hours for the Lord or 'quarantore exposition' (continuous prayer for 40 hours before the Blessed Sacrament).