

Homily-TheLivingBread
Proverbs 9:1-6
Ephesians 5:15-20
John 6:51-58
Fr. Mark Watson

Today we celebrate the fourth reading from the Bread of Life Discourse in the Gospel of John. I compared with the past two readings in the discourse the reading that we hear this evening is most clearly Eucharistic. The past two Sundays have focused on Jesus as the Word of God who comes down to reveal the Father to disciples. Today's reading says that we also experience Jesus as the Bread of Life when we receive the Eucharist. My inspiration for this homily is taken from the book *The Models of the Eucharist* by Fr. Kevin Irwin.

THE EUCHARIST AS BANQUET

Our first reading helps us to understand the meaning of the Eucharist. The first reading is taken from chapter 9 of the Book of Proverbs. In this reading Wisdom builds her house, provides a feast, and sends out her maids to invite people to the feast. The reading speaks of God inviting the faithful to a meal in which they can receive understanding and insight. In the same way the Eucharist is a banquet to which we are invited. In this meal we receive the real presence of the risen Christ and come closer to Christ and to one another.

The Eucharist comes from the Sabbath meal and the Passover meal. For the Jews, to be invited to dine with another was a sign of deep and intimate relationship. To be invited to share in the Passover meal was a sign of deep bondedness—in fact to be considered one of the family. Table sharing signifies a relationship; it is not just about consuming food. The Eucharistic prayer is a significant reminder of the powerful bonds forged and sustained with Jesus during his earthly ministry and after his resurrection.

In the Passover meal there are four prayers prayed over cups of wine and a prayer prayed over the wine. BETWEEN THE BLESSING OVER THE BREAD AND OVER THE THIRD CUP IS THE SHARING OF THE SEDER MEAL. Just as the Jews eat a meal during the celebration of Passover so the Eucharist is a meal.

The blessing of the cup of wine in the Eucharist is taken from the third blessing of the cup of wine in the Passover. The declaration at the third cup in the Passover recalled God's covenant with His people. The cup that is blessed in the Eucharist recalls the new covenant in Jesus' blood. In the Passover the third cup signifies unity—we share in the one bread and the one cup and through this act of dining we participate (literally – take part in) the eternal sacrifice of Christ.

When I reflect on the meaning of the Eucharist there are two sets of life events which I think about. The first of those are the many times that families invite me to their homes. I think especially upon invitations to the home of one family in which the husband is a great cook. To eat at their house is truly a banquet. When I eat at the house the youngest daughter will always say grace allowing me to not worry about this task. These meals speak to me about the unity which Eucharist builds.

Other life experiences which have taught me about Eucharist are the meals that I have shared with my own family. At these meals there is a sense of bondedness and love as we are a family. At the same time members of my family are often opinionated. Members often say things about politics and religion without considering how the statements will affect others. At times there is negativity towards other members of the family. Family meals are a time of sharing but at the same time they are a time in which we often need the grace of God to keep us close.

SACRAMENT OF UNITY

Just as the meals that I share with the family that makes me a member of their family and just as the meals that I share with my biological family the Eucharist is a meal both of unity. The Eucharist reminds us that just as our families are not perfect and need the mercy and forgiveness of God so do we as we come together as a church family. The Eucharist reminds us that as a church family we have not completely made it. We are all individuals who are in need of God's grace. As a community Eucharist reminds us that we are also in need of greater unity. With our faults and sinfulness the Eucharist strengthens us and brings us closer to one another and closer to Christ. Eucharist is a meal of unity and a meal of reconciliation and forgiveness.

In I Corinthians 10:16-17 Paul writes:

The cup of blessing that we bless,
Is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?
The bread that we break,
Is it not a participation in the body of Christ?
Because the loaf of bread is one,
We, though many, are one body,
For we all partake of the one loaf.

The cup is first as there are four declarations over cups of wine at Passover meals and a declaration over the bread occurs only once. Baking and sharing from one loaf signifies unity in and through Christ. The many grapes crushed and fermented signify the unity that we share in Christ. In partaking of the one bread we seek to become more fully one with Christ and with each other in the Eucharist. The partaking of the Eucharist allows us to be less imperfect and more fully the Body of Christ on earth.

SIGNS OF UNITY

Various aspects of the Mass speak to the unity which the Mass celebrates and builds. One of the symbols which show unity is in the attempt to distribute hosts to the faithful which have been consecrated within that Mass. As early as the Pontificate of Benedict XIV taking hosts from the tabernacle was understood to be an abnormality. Pope Benedict was Pope in the late eighteenth century. Benedict decreed that the Eucharist received should be consecrated at the Mass at which the person attended. This separated sacrifice from presence.

When we receive the Eucharist we respond "Amen." This respond is not only an affirmation that we have faith that the host we receive is truly the Body of Christ and the cup that we drink is the Blood of Christ. St. Augustine invites those who respond "Amen" commit themselves to affirming the reality of Christ present in the Eucharist as well as affirm that the Eucharist builds up the body of Christ, the Church.

We process to receive communion to show that we are pilgrims on this earth and stand in readiness for the coming of God's kingdom. Once we receive communion we remain standing until all have received communion. This posture of standing during communion is a symbol of our unity as a community. This is true of our standing as a group as Mass begins and as Mass ends.

FORGIVENESS

As we reflect on our families and on this church community it becomes clear that we are in need of the forgiveness of God. The theme of forgiveness is central to the Passover meal. In the Gospel of John Judas is a central character in the meal. Judas betrays Jesus immediately after the meal. The attitude of Jesus towards Judas during the Last Supper is to welcome Judas into the fellowship of the Twelve rather than to send him out of the meal. Judas is seen as rejecting Jesus and leaving the meal where he betrays Jesus. Each Eucharistic prayer speaks of the truth that Christ's blood is "shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven (Matt 26:28)." The paschal mystery of Christ is the source of reconciliation and forgiveness. The altar where the last supper is enacted is now the place where betrayal is overturned and reconciliation established once more.

FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY

When we receive from the cup we make the connection between the Eucharistic banquet and the eschatological banquet in the Father's kingdom. The new and eternal covenant is ratified in the blood of the Lord. The celebration of the Eucharist reminds us that while we journey to eternal life during our earthly journey we are not there yet. God has acted in a new way to change the course of salvation. The celebration of the Eucharist on earth reminds us that we have not yet reached the fullness of salvation.

In the early church Christians prayed the acclamation "Come, Lord Jesus." People of covenant faith prayed and yearned for all to be accomplished—as we pray daily in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom Come." The real presence in the Eucharist leads to its completion in the kingdom of God for all eternity.

The Eucharist reminds us that we lack the full realization of Christ's promises in our lives.

We live in the "already" and the "not yet." We are already members of Christ's family, but we have yet to receive the fullness of that reality in our lives. The Eucharist is the place where the church realizes as fully as possible the fullness of God's kingdom on this side of eternity.

In the Eucharist we realize among us as fully as possible the paschal victory of Christ – past, present and future – with its final, future completion something we year for at every liturgy.

Knowing what lies ahead each Mass is a celebration of hope. There is a hopefulness that springs from every liturgical celebration of the Eucharist until the second coming.

We look forward to the fulfillment of salvation which began in the prophets and which has been continues to be fulfilled in The Word of God which has been spoken and become incarnate among us in Jesus, whose rule and kingdom are both gifts and realities that make demands upon us.

The liturgy is the supreme experience of what has yet to be revealed. "Our future in God is already present in the liturgy." The liturgy is the unique and privileged experience for the church of God's kingdom among us. Eschatology is not only looking ahead to what will happen at the end of time. Eschatology also means that our daily lives are to be lived in hopefulness as we faithfully await the second coming of Christ and our final union with him. The pressing issue of eschatology is not only what will happen but also what happens now in light of what we believe.

VIATICUM

Whenever I visit the dying I attempt to not only anoint the person but also give the person communion. While a dying person can be anointed the special sacrament for the dying is Viaticum or Food of the Journey. The symbolism is that a dying person receives communion which becomes food for the journey into eternal life. Every act of communion is viaticum. Every time we receive communion we receive food for the journey to eternal life.

All liturgical prayers remind us that we are not alone. We are part of a community that is in need of complete redemption in and through Christ. Christ has come and accomplished our salvation and we can begin to share God's life now. We pray that we might share the completion of our earthly life by being called to eternal life in God. We are truly a pilgrim people on a journey to the fullness of life in Christ.

HOPE FOR THE JOURNEY

We often experience God's absence in our life. An experience of God's absence can be God's grace at work. The challenge is to name that absence and to pray in hope for a deeper experience of God in the midst of the struggle.

We need to name the absence of God, an emptiness that can be filled only by coming to believe ever so weakly that God is indeed Emmanuel. God is present even when we don't experience it. The Eucharist can become our hope which connects us to Christ when we experience the absence of God in our life.

As pilgrims we will never experience God totally and fully in this life, even at the Eucharist. But it is the Eucharist that offers us the promissory reality of what is to come. In God's kingdom all our longings will be fulfilled and the winters of our discontent will be turned into the eternal spring of life in God. The Eucharist gives us hope for the journey to the kingdom.

RELATION OF THE EUCHARIST TO DAILY LIFE

The Eucharist not only calls us to celebrate the hope that is ours as we are pilgrims on a journey of salvation. The Eucharist calls us to help others experience this same hope. Eucharist calls us to work toward a more equitable distribution of this world's goods. This sense of Eucharist being about justice is captured will in the following prayer from the Second Week in Ordinary Time: "Lord, you have nourished us with bread from heaven. Fill us with your Spirit, and make us one in peace and love."

I am pleased to announce that I have decided that our parish will sponsor a student who has begun her studies at the University of Bethlehem. Our parish is sponsoring Jihan Gideon who just began to study biology at the University of Bethlehem. Our support will help her to break through the cycle of poverty that is part of the lives of so many in Palestine. Hopefully her studies will help her to remain in the Holy Land. For us supporting the cost of Jihan's education will bring hope to her life and in a small way bring hope to the land in which our savior was born, died and rose. Let us remember that Eucharist calls us to live in hope and to bring that hope to others.

CONCLUSION

As we celebrate the Eucharist let us remember that we are a family. As we come together to celebrate the Eucharist we should feel like a family. The Eucharist is a prayer that God will bring us closer together as a family. Within this prayer we remember as well that we are broken and incomplete and in need of God's forgiveness. Let us give thanks that our God is a God who forgives us in order that we might draw close to him in this life and one day share the fullness of life with him. Eucharist is a celebration of hope. Let us not only celebrate this hope but let us build hope in the life of others.