

The Body of Christ, Year A

In today's First Reading Moses recalls to the people the difficulties they encountered on their journey through the desert to the Promised Land. He recalls particularly how hungry and thirsty they were and how it was God who met their need through the manna and the water that gushed from the rock. What they learned from this is that they could not satisfy their own hunger and thirst no matter what they did. They learned to rely, not on themselves, but on God. They learned humility. Moses reminds them that God did more than see to their physical needs. To live we need more than bread and water. We need to experience communion with God. We need to realise that what we hunger for most is every word that comes from the mouth of God. We need to hear God speaking to us. What we thirst for most is to be in communion with God. We need to know that we are loved by God.

Reflecting on this, the great Saint Augustine came to a deeper understanding of the nature of sin. His early training had led him to think of sin as passion overwhelming reason: acting impulsively from our feelings can lead us to behave badly. Augustine came to see that sin is something more radical than that. It is self-reliance. It is refusal to accept that we are creatures and that everything we are and everything we have is gift. We sin when we act as though we were in charge of our own life. We make the terrible mistake of thinking we can determine what is best for us without accepting God's guidance, without listening to 'every word that comes from the mouth of God'.

This is what Jesus said so often. We must change and become like little children who know that they are not meant to be self-reliant. They simply and joyfully look to their parents for care and protection. Of course we are not children, and we have to learn to grow up and to be responsible; but we should never forget that we are dependent upon God and we should learn to delight in this dependence. We can never become mature without it, for human maturity is maturity in love and our deepest love is our communion with God.

Today's feast highlights this dependence. We are hungry and thirsty and we approach the table of the Lord and hold out our hands to receive the life-giving bread and to drink the life-giving wine. To paraphrase a famous saying from Saint Augustine: God has made us for himself and we are hungry and thirsty to receive the life and the love which he offers us. At the Eucharist we express our need and come to God to receive his most precious gift.

There are two levels at which we are to understand the nature of the gift which we receive in communion. Both are expressed in today's Second Reading. Paul says: 'We who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread'. On one level we are expressing our need to belong. We are not meant to be living in isolation. When we share the one bread and when we drink from the one cup we give expression to the communion which we have with each other. When we approach the table at communion, the priest says: 'The Body of Christ' and we reply 'Amen'. Saint Augustine reminds us that 'the body of Christ' is referring to us as a community. When we say 'Amen' we are committing ourselves to love our brothers and sisters and to live as a member of the body: 'What you hear', writes Augustine. 'is "the Body of Christ" and you answer "Amen"'. So be a member of the body of Christ in order to make that "Amen" true'(Sermon 3.7). When we drink from the cup we remember Jesus' words: 'Are you able to

drink the cup that I am about to drink?'(Matthew 20:22). When we say 'Amen' we are committing ourselves to give our lives for our brothers and sisters the way Jesus gave his, whatever the cost.

This is the more obvious level of meaning though perhaps one upon which we do not often reflect. However we must go deeper. We are one body because we eat the one bread. It is our communion with Jesus that binds us so closely to one another. As Paul says: 'The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?' It is because the risen Jesus is truly present here and giving himself to us in communion that we are bound so closely to each other.

To someone who did not know it would appear that we were eating small pieces of bread and sipping wine as a way of giving expression to the truths upon which we are reflecting. But we know that something far more marvellous than that is happening. It is true that we have some bread and wine which is brought to the altar. The prayer of consecration which we pray makes no difference to the physical structure of the bread and wine or to their chemical components. Obviously, no physical or chemical change takes place.

But there is a profound *metaphysical* change. If someone were to ask us when we come to communion what it is we are receiving, the reply 'bread and wine' is no longer an adequate expression of the truth. We understand because of what we know by faith that Jesus is truly present and is offering himself to us. He is offering us his 'flesh'. By this he means his weakness, his vulnerability, his acceptance of the human condition with its pains and disappointments, but also with its utter dependence on the Spirit of God if it is to experience life. It is the 'flesh' that connects us. It is the 'flesh' that draws us together in our common dependence upon God. We give our 'flesh' to someone when we give ourselves in all that it means to be part of the human condition. It means to give our time, our activity, our energy, our work. It means to give our real self in all its weakness. It means to keep loving them even when it causes us pain. This is what Jesus did and he is sharing his life with us.

He is offering us his 'blood'. To give our 'blood' for someone is to give our life when it is being poured out. It means to give our heart even when it is bleeding. It means to be willing to sacrifice everything for them. It is to give them our life, our spirit, our deepest self. Jesus is giving us the Spirit of love which is his life. Just as God poured water from the rock when Moses struck it, so, when the soldier struck at the heart of Jesus on the cross, there came out water and blood. We celebrate the gift of the water of life in the sacrament of baptism. We celebrate the gift of Jesus' life-blood when we drink from the chalice at communion.

What ultimately matters here is not what we are doing but what Jesus is doing. It may appear that we are acting out the Last Supper as a way of remembering something which Jesus did for us in the past. What is happening is that the Risen Jesus is truly coming into our hearts. Jesus is offering himself whether we believe it or not. Of course, we cannot receive him unless we believe. His offer of love is unconditional. Our receiving of love, however, is conditional upon our faith.

In today's Gospel, Jesus stresses that his flesh is real food. What we most hunger for is to share

in the communion of love which Jesus has with his Father. He stresses that his blood is real drink. Our deepest thirst cannot be satisfied except in this communion of love.

At the last supper Jesus 'took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me"' (Luke 22:19). He is sharing with us the intimate life-communion which he has with God as 'the only Son who is close to the Father's heart'(John 1:18). Indeed, it was for this purpose that he 'became flesh and lived among us'(John 1:14).

As we watch Jesus breaking the bread and sharing the cup we reflect on the fact that God's Word truly became flesh and suffered the same kind of brokenness that we all suffer. It is part of the human condition which he assumed. Jesus is inviting us to do the same. Whatever others might do to us, let us place our lives in the welcoming hands of God and thank him as we enjoy the blessing of his embrace. When our flesh is broken and our hearts are pierced we can respond by collapsing in on ourselves. This is natural and probably often unavoidable. But we can also do what Jesus did. Jesus is inviting us to 'believe in him'. He is inviting us to listen to his words, to trust what he is revealing about God and about our real hunger, and to reach out in love to others as Jesus is reaching out in love to them. This is what it means to believe.

Let us take others to our heart. Let us acknowledge them and how sacred they are, even when they fail to know this or to live up to it. They, like us, are broken in many ways. They are not able to love as they would like. They are hurting and confused. 'All flesh is grass. People are like the flower in the field. The grass withers, the flower fades'(Isaiah 40:6-7). But they have a lot to give. They have all the love in their broken hearts to give. Let us know this and honour it and learn like Jesus to welcome their gift.

Jesus is welcoming us to come to him and to join him in opening the hearts of others to believe and their arms to love. To eat his flesh and to drink his blood is to receive his offering of himself and to give ourselves to others. Everyone is hungering for 'eternal life'. We will find it through communion with Jesus, a communion realised powerfully in the Eucharist in which we abide in him and he in us (compare John 15:3-7).