

Corpus Christi  
3 June 2018  
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Listen again to a few words – the key words – from the First Reading, from the Old Testament:

Moses sent young men of the people of Israel, who sacrificed offerings of oxen to the LORD. And Moses took half of the oxen blood and put it in bowls, and half of the oxen blood Moses threw against the altar. Then Moses took the blood in bowls and threw the blood upon the people, and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you."

With that warm, sticky blood dripping down their bodies in the desert heat, the Jews are made the holy people of God. *Holy* people, because it is the blood from the oxen offered in sacrifice to the Lord, and half the blood has been thrown upon the altar of sacrifice making it all holy blood that purifies and removes sin from everything it touches. And they are made the holy *people of God* because the blood of the sacrifice is how the Lord chooses to mark them as *His* people, the people with whom the Lord is making a *covenant*. A covenant is a *contract*, a *bond*, an *agreement*, and this *covenant* is the contract that the Lord will be their God, and they will be his people forever, a *covenant* sealed in blood. Another word for *covenant* is *testament*, so this is the first *testament* between the Lord and his people – the *Old Testament*.

A *New Testament*, a *new covenant* between the Lord and his people is established centuries later, when on the night before he died on the cross, Jesus takes the bread at supper and says, "This is my body," and then takes a cup of wine gives it to his followers, and they all drink of it, and Jesus says, "This is my blood of the *covenant*, which is poured out for many." In saying that, Jesus is looking ahead to the next day when Jesus will offer the sacrifice that establishes the *new covenant*: the sacrifice of Jesus, Son of God, when divine, holy blood spills onto the altar of the cross and divine, holy blood is not splashed on us, but comes to us through the bread and wine of the Eucharist – the body of Christ and blood of the covenant Jesus speaks of, just as Moses speaks of the blood of the *old* covenant, but here the sacrifice of Jesus himself, the Lamb of God, instead of the sacrifice of oxen, or bulls, or goats, or calves, the sacrifice that purifies us of our sins, the sacrifice of Christ's Body and Blood that establishes the *new* covenant between us and the Lord, that we will be his people and he will be our God. It is all set out in our Second Reading, from the

Letter to the Hebrews, where the unknown author describes what Jesus accomplished by going to the cross:

Christ entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God. Therefore he is the mediator of a *new* covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death – his death – has occurred which redeems you from the sins under the first covenant.

We renew this *new* covenant between the Lord and ourselves every time we offer the Sacrifice of the Mass on the altar, and the whole sacrifice of Jesus on the altar of the cross – his Body and Blood, his soul and divinity, what we call the Real Presence – all that is brought into the present and offered once more to the Father through the appearances of bread and wine, and we ask the Father to look upon the Sacrifice we are offering and recognize the sacrifice of his Son on the cross. And then we eat and drink the sacrifice of Christ's Body and Blood, marking us as God's holy people, just as Moses splashed the people with the blood of the sacrifice to make them God's holy people.

This gift of God through his Son Jesus to establish an everlasting bond between God and us is what we celebrate today. Nine years ago, I travelled to the village in Switzerland where my brother had lived, to bury him there. The next day I drove up into the hills to another village, the village of Einsiedeln. Einsiedeln is a Catholic pilgrimage town, where village life centers around the old and beautiful monastery. The woman at the village tourist office told me – in German – that the prayer schedule at the monastery would be different today, and some shops would be closed, because today was *Fronleichnam*. I was stumped, "*Fronleichnam?* What is that?" I wondered. My German is pretty good, but I didn't know that word. Then, given that it was early June, a thought came to me and I asked, "*Corpus Christi?*" Yes, she said, that was what today was, both of us knowing the traditional Latin name for *Fronleichnam*, the Feast of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ – *Corpus Christi*, the old name by which today still is best known throughout the world.

Today is that Feast of *Corpus Christi*, celebrating the Real Presence of Jesus Christ: his Body and Blood, soul and divinity, wholly present in the bread and wine consecrated and offered in sacrifice on the altar, and consumed by us to renew the *covenant* and become God's holy people once more. I grew up being taught and believing in this Real Presence of Christ in Holy Communion - and as many of you know, I was not brought up Catholic. But this Real Presence of Christ - Body and Blood, soul and divinity - in the bread and wine offered in the Eucharist is so *biblical*, straight from the lips of Jesus and the first Christians, that my non-Catholic household could not ignore that this is the great gift of God that we welcome into our lives each time we eat and drink the bread and wine, the Body and Blood of Christ: this gift of the *new and everlasting covenant* brought into existence at the moment Jesus offered himself in sacrifice on the altar of the cross, the new covenant we bring forward into this present moment every time we offer on this altar the Sacrifice of the Body and Blood of Christ.