

5th Sunday of Easter B

This Sunday's Gospel, the Vine and the Branches, reminds us why we are here right now. We are Catholic Christians. This is more than membership in a society or social club. It is even more than membership in a family. We are united to Jesus Christ as branches are united to a vine. His Life flows into us. We come to Mass to be nourished with His Life through Word and Eucharist.

I would like to take this opportunity to delve more deeply into these realities of Word and Sacrament and into the Mass itself, into these beautiful mysteries by which our God feeds and nourishes us.

With respect to the Liturgy of the Word we hear these words from Psalm 95: "If today you hear His Voice, harden not your hearts." The Liturgy of the Word is not a preliminary requisite to the celebration of the Eucharist. The Liturgy of the Word is an encounter with our God who is passionately in love with us, who is present in the Word and who gives us His Promise of Eternal Life through the Word. May our Minds, Lips, and Hearts be open to God's Word. Those disciples on the Road to Emmaus said, "Did not our hearts burn within us as he spoke to us on the road?" Their eyes were opened because their hearts were laid bare by the word. Judeo-Christians saw a direct link between the ears and the heart. Divine Revelation comes first through hearing, "Hear O Israel". God spoke, and He created the Light. His Word will not return to Him empty.

And we consume the Word of God. "Taste and See," the prophet Ezekiel was told by the angel, and he ate the scroll. The prophet Jeremiah also found God's words and devoured them. To consume the Word of God is to be assimilated into the Divine Message. St. Ambrose said, "Drink the Old Testament to slake your thirst. Drink the New Testament so you will never be thirsty again. Drink the Word. Drink Christ. How? Let the syrup of God's Word flood every section of your being, for it is not by bread alone that we live but from every word that comes from the mouth of God." In the middle of the world's bad news, there is the promise of God's Good News, all summed up so beautifully in Matthew 28:20: "Know that I am with you always until the end of time."

The Liturgy of the Word is not a preparation for the Liturgy of the Eucharist, but a communion with God speaking to our hearts. After we have heard the words of God from the Scriptures, we then hear the priest break open those words in his homily that we might grasp them with our minds and our hearts.

Next is the Preparation of the Gifts, a time to recognize the Blessings of God and a time to Bless God. This is a very Jewish part of our spiritual ancestry. Good Jews were told to direct 100 blessings to God a day. All that we have is bestowed upon us by God's graciousness. We thank Him for all. "Blessed are you, Lord God of all Creation, through your Goodness we have this bread, we have this wine."

Then we come to that wonderful prayer that leads to the Eucharistic prayer, the prayer we call the preface. We lift up our hearts, we acknowledge that it is right and just to give Him thanks and praise, among the many reasons for our gratitude we enumerate a few that are united to this particular Mass, and then we join the angels in saying, "God is God, and we are not." For that is what the Holy, Holy does in fact say. Once more, we are back to the Preparation of the Gifts as we realize, in the words of Gerard Manly Hopkins, that the world is charged with the Grandeur of God.

And so we go to our knees, in profound humility at the Gift He Is. We begin the Eucharistic Prayer with prayers with the saints and angels and in union with the Church as in the First Eucharistic Prayer, or with prayers in union with all creation as in the other three Eucharistic Prayers, but all leading to the invocation of the Holy Spirit. This is called the Epiclesis. We call upon God to send His Holy Spirit down upon the offering so that He may make the bread and wine His Body and Blood. That which the Holy Spirit touches becomes consecrated and transformed.

And so the priest, acting in the Person of Jesus Christ, recites the words of institution: Take this all of you and eat it...Take this all of you and drink it. We look at the elevated host and chalice and join St. Thomas in saying, "My Lord and My God." And then the priest says, "Do this in memory of me." For centuries, every time we obey Jesus and "Do this" we make the Body of Christ real in the world. For more than just the Bread and Wine, **we** also are transformed into the Body of Christ.

Then the most profound offering takes place. Jesus is offered up to the Father for us. We remember how he loved us to his death, and still we celebrate. **We** also are offered to the Father. "May He make us an eternal offering to you," we pray. "Accept us together with your Son." "May He take away all that divides us." "May the Church be a sign of unity and an instrument of peace." We are united with the whole Church throughout the world. We are united with those who have gone before us. We pray for those who have died and for all.

And so we come to the Great Amen, our affirmation of Who God is and whom He has transformed us into: God has entered into our history through His Son Jesus Christ. In the living, dying and rising of Jesus Christ, we have been made One with Him. And we pray, "Through Him, In Him, and with Him, in the Unity of the Holy Spirit, all Glory and Honor is yours, Almighty Father, forever and ever."

We proclaimed the Great Amen and are immediately ushered into a singing or reciting of the Lord's Prayer. The Lord's Prayer is our proclamation of faith in a God who has chosen to be a Father, a parent, rather than a terrifying deity: Our Father. And yet, we recognize that even though he is as gentle as a parent, he is as awesome as the heavens; *Who art in heaven*. All Creation praises Him. Hallowed be thy name. We believe that He will ultimately triumph over the forces of evil. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. We ask Him to nurture us, and to forgive us, as

we pledge also to give His Bread to others, and to forgive others. And we seek His protection from the evils of the world that would keep us from His Kingdom.

After remembering that we have no business approaching the Eucharist unless we are willing to extend His Peace to all for that is what the Sign of Peace is, we then come to the Lamb of God. And we pray again for mercy. Have mercy on us, Lamb of God, for all that we have done to destroy the unity of your Church. Have mercy on us, Lamb of God, for our refusal to see you in others, particularly when you reach out to us in those who are hurting. Have mercy on us, Lamb of God, for the times that we have not been open to your Grace. And we recognize, that when we live as He has called us, He, Jesus Christ and He alone, gives us peace.

And then we receive Him. We receive communion not in eating until we are full, but eating to find out how to fill our hungry hearts. We receive Jesus acting in us. Communion is the union of Christ, head and members. We don't just receive. We celebrate. We become. Become what you eat. Don't just receive Christ, become Christ to others. That is what it means to be a Eucharistic People. The Eucharist is not what we do, it is who we are. The Eucharist leads us into the world to die for others as Christ died and then to live forever. We eat the Body and Drink the Blood.

God is Love. Communion brings us into an encounter with His Love. We have to be careful that we do not turn this action upon ourselves. We have to be careful that we do not allow our communion to be about us here, or about each of us as individuals. It is important that we take moments after Communion to reflect upon our union with Him, moments of profound silence, and yet, not the silence of individuals, but that of the community of God calling upon Him to give us the Grace to render the Real Presence we have received a reality in the world. For we as Catholic Christians are called to make His Love, His Sacrificial Presence our very lives. We are called **to Become What we Eat**.

"Remain in me and I will remain in you," the Lord tells us in today's Gospel. That is what we are called to do, and that is what we do when we live the Mass.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella