

19th Sunday (B)

11th August 2024

‘Eucharist: Sacrifice & Banquet’

1 Kings 19: the Lord feeds Elijah

Ps 33: *Taste and see that the Lord is good.*

Eph 4: *follow Christ by loving as He loved you.*

Jn 6: 41–51: *I am the living Bread which has come down from heaven.*

As we have discovered over recent Sundays, in the summer of this year (‘B’) of the lectionary, instead of hearing from the Gospel of Mark — as we do on most of the Ordinary Sundays of this year — because St Mark’s is the shortest Gospel and won’t quite stretch to the whole year, we get to hear passages instead from *Jn 6*, the great and beautiful chapter on the feeding of the 5000 followed by Our Lord’s discourse on ‘the Bread of Life.’

A couple of weeks ago I referred to the fact that almost all the recent Popes, from Pius XII onwards, have made significant contributions, such as via ‘Encyclical Letters,’ to the Church’s perennial appreciation of, and adoration of, the Most Holy Eucharist. A *tour de force* amongst these magisterial documents, in my opinion, is the 2003 Encyclical Letter of Pope St John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* — written just 2 years before he died. I quoted the opening words of it a fortnight ago, when we began this

itinerary of Eucharistic study through the Gospel text of Jn 6. I promised, then, that we would take a further look at some aspects of Pope John Paul’s Letter, and we will do so today.

It’s important that we do that, I think, because Jn 6 only gives us certain dimensions of the Holy Eucharist. It’s a masterly discourse, of course, but it only forms *a part* of Jesus’s teaching, and one has to wait until the Last Supper for other aspects of it — especially its intrinsic link to His Sacrifice on Calvary. Jn 6 focusses on Our Blessed Lord’s gift of Himself as the “Bread of Life” — food for our souls. Quotations abound throughout the chapter, such as in today’s passage, in which He specifically urges us to eat of this sacramental gift: “*I am the living Bread which has come down from heaven. Anyone who eats of this Bread will live for ever; and the Bread that I shall give is My flesh, for the life of the world.*” Our consuming this sacred food, this flesh of His, is truly an intimate and holy encounter with the Lord Jesus, His feeding us with His very self. But it is still true that the Sacrament is not *only* this, it is a richer source of grace than that alone. For the Mass is not just a way of

getting this *food*, this divine life of the Eucharist, into our hearts. It is much greater than that. It is wrong to think of the Mass solely as a way in which Jesus feeds us ... in the sense that it is wrong for us just to think of the whole of Mass as a mere preamble to our coming up to receive Holy Communion. The Pope says in his recent letter:

“By virtue of its close relationship to the sacrifice of Golgotha, the Eucharist is *a sacrifice in the strict sense*, and not only in a general way, as if it were simply a matter of Christ’s offering Himself to the faithful as their spiritual food.” (n. 13)

For the Mass is also known as ‘the Holy Sacrifice’ because what we offer on the altar is the sacrifice that Jesus made when he gave His life on the Cross. It is only because he made that offering on the Cross — giving up His life, out of love for us — that we can make this same offering of His love, to God the Father today. And only once we have offered this *Sacrifice*, can we share in the *Banquet*. It is not just that we feed on the life of Jesus, drawing our spiritual life from His eternal divine life, but that we celebrate that this life of His is one that is offered in pure love to the Father, to the point of death, and has risen again in His human body.

Let’s hear a bit more from Pope St John Paul as he expounds this rich teaching about the Mass as *Sacrifice*, and not only as *Banquet* ... or, rather, why it is only a *Banquet* because it is already, in a prior sense, a *Sacrifice*. The two are inseparable; both are necessary dimensions of the Eucharist — one cannot have one without the other. The Pope reminds us that:

“the Church has received the Eucharist from Christ her Lord not as one gift — however precious — among so many others, but as the gift *par excellence*, for it is the gift of Himself, of His person in His sacred humanity, as well as the gift of His saving work.” (n. 11)

It is, as he says, “*the gift of His saving work*,” or, in other phrases that he uses to describe the fullness of this gift: “*the sacrifice of the Cross perpetuated down the ages*,” “*the memorial of [the] Lord’s death and resurrection*.” In other words, the Eucharist is the very *bridge* by which the Lord’s saving sacrifice, the Passion and the Cross, is able to reach us, and have efficacy for us. The grace of Jesus’s victory is brought into the present for us, and becomes a spiritual reality for us, in our own day, by means of the Eucharist which we are given by the Lord for perpetual celebration.

Pope John Paul expresses it admirably:

When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the memorial of her Lord's death and resurrection, this central event of salvation becomes really present and "the work of our redemption is carried out." This sacrifice is so decisive for the salvation of the human race that Jesus Christ offered it and returned to the Father only *after he had left us a means of sharing in it* as if we had been present there. Each member of the faithful can thus take part in it and inexhaustibly gain its fruits. This is the faith from which generations of Christians down the ages have lived. (n. 11)

He goes on, describing the divine origin of this sacramental gift, its origin in the love of the heart of God for us:

What more could Jesus have done for us? Truly, in the Eucharist, he shows us a love which goes "to the end," a love which knows no measure.

This aspect of the universal charity of the Eucharistic Sacrifice is based on the words of the Saviour himself. In instituting it, he did not merely say: "This is my body", "this is my blood", but went on to add: "which is given for you", "which is poured out for you." Jesus did not simply state that what he was giving them to eat and drink was his body and his blood; he also expressed *its sacrificial meaning* and made sacramentally present his sacrifice which would soon be offered on the Cross

for the salvation of all. "The Mass is at the same time, and inseparably, the sacrificial memorial in which the sacrifice of the Cross is perpetuated and the sacred banquet of communion with the Lord's body and blood." (nn. 11–12)

So, we are right to call the Holy Eucharist "the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass" precisely because what we come to at Mass is the very same one sacrifice of Jesus. Much ink — and much blood, sadly — was spilt during the Reformation over debates surrounding this fact. But it is the only way we can fully understand the Lord's own divine intention for the gift that He offered His apostles on the night before He died. Through it, we are able to have direct, immediate, connection with the Lord's redeeming act:

"The Church constantly draws her life from this redeeming sacrifice: she approaches it not only through 'faith-filled remembrance,' but also through a real contact, since *this sacrifice is made present ever anew*, sacramentally perpetuated, in every community which offers it at the hands of the consecrated minister." (n. 12)

The Pope re-iterates:

The Mass makes present the sacrifice of the Cross; it does not add to that sacrifice nor does it multiply it. What is repeated is its *memorial* celebration, its "commemorative

representation" (*memorialis demonstratio*), which makes Christ's one, definitive redemptive sacrifice always present in time. The sacrificial nature of the Eucharistic mystery cannot therefore be understood as something separate, independent of the Cross or only indirectly referring to the sacrifice of Calvary. (n. 12)

This helps us, surely, to appreciate why the Church emphasizes the Mass so much, and centres her life on it; and asks that *as a bare minimum* we are present here at Mass on Sundays, whilst urging us to work towards *daily Mass* if at all possible, because the whole reality of God's saving of us is contained within these sacred elements, this sacrificial rite.

It is also worth pointing out, as Pope John Paul does, that the Eucharist is the memorial of the whole Paschal Mystery, i.e. not only of the Lord's *Cross*, but also of His *Resurrection* "which crowned His sacrifice." The flesh that He offers us is not the mortal flesh of someone dead and buried, but the risen and glorious flesh of the immortal Son of God, and hence is truly life-giving in the sense that Jesus re-iterates throughout Jn 6: "*I am the Bread of Life ... I am the Living Bread ... A man may eat of it, and not die.*"

All this means that, when we come to Mass we are truly in the presence of Jesus, God-made-man, our sacrificed and risen Saviour, and we are present to receive the graces of His Paschal Triumph over sin and death. There is nothing this side of heaven that affords us so close an encounter with the salvific Lord Jesus. It is, truly, the awesome 'mystery of faith' that He wishes, with all the love of His Sacred Heart, to be with us in this way. He desires this wondrous Sacrament to be at the heart of our lives, and it is why it forms the centrepiece of the Church's prayer and liturgy: the Church constantly promotes it as the greatest means of salvation, for by it we can win — with Jesus our Lord — those necessary victories against temptation; against selfishness; against neglect of our neighbour; against indifference to bettering our world, its morals, its environment and its peace.

Taste and see that the Lord is good;

He is happy who seeks refuge in Him. (Ps 33:9)

Let's always consciously seek refuge in the Holy Eucharist, for it is to seek refuge in the Lord Jesus's own wounds, wherein He won the victory that is now ours, His gift to us.