

To appreciate as fully as possible the gift of Our Lord's body and blood in the Eucharist we have to go back, initially, to the books Genesis and Exodus in the Hebrew Testament.

In the twenty-second chapter of Genesis, we read the story of Abraham facing his greatest test of faith: God tells Abraham to take his son, Isaac, to Mount Moriah and offer him as a sacrifice. Abraham is obedient. He takes Isaac and the necessary components of the deed and together they travel to the place designated for the sacrifice.

The first key issue here is that Abraham places the wood for the sacrifice—the burnt offering—on Isaac's back; Isaac carries the wood for his own sacrifice without realising what it all means. As they walk to the place, Isaac says that they have the fire and the wood, but asks where the lamb is for the burnt offering. Abraham's profound response, in verse eight, is, "God Himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son".

This brings us to the second and critical key issue: we note that Isaac carries the wood for his own sacrifice; in the gospels of the Christian Testament, Christ carries the wood for His own sacrifice. In both cases, it's the son who carries the wood—Isaac, son of Abraham, Jesus, Son of

God. When Isaac asks where the lamb is for the sacrifice, Abraham says that "God Himself" will provide the lamb.

If we take this "God Himself" response to its Christian counterpart, we begin to see that this story of Abraham and Isaac prefigures the account of Jesus' sacrifice. God Himself will provide: it's the emphasis on "Himself" which is profound. God Himself provides the Lamb, Jesus, but as Jesus is God in human form it's also God *Himself* who carries the wood of the Cross out of pure love in the act of Good Friday.

The dual emphasis on "Himself" becomes the profound moment in the relationship to this gripping Genesis story of the sacrifice of the son. God, in His infinite love and mercy, halts the sacrifice of Isaac because this is God's test of Abraham's faith. As the Genesis account informs us, they find a lamb whose horns are caught in a thicket and that lamb becomes the burnt offering.

In the twelfth chapter of Exodus, we read the preparation for the Passover, the time when God, through Moses, delivers the Hebrews from bondage in Egypt. Again, like the story of Abraham and Isaac, this is a story about killing. Pharaoh has killed so many of the Hebrews and is now in the process of denying Moses the chance to take the Hebrews out of Egypt. God's instruction for the preparation again is profound.

The Hebrews are to take a lamb from their flock, one which is unblemished—in other words free of faults, marks, imperfections, or any physical damage—and prepare it for the symbol of their deliverance. On the designated day they are to kill the lamb and use the blood to mark the lintel and door posts of the house. When the “angel of death” passes that house, all the inhabitants will be saved from the killing of the first-born. They are not allowed out of the house until the slaughter is finished.

The Hebrews are to roast the lamb and eat it entirely. Nothing is to be wasted. Everything happens according to God’s instruction and the Hebrews are delivered from their slavery. The theme of this whole episode is freedom.

The profound awareness in this story is that it is the lamb who is God’s agent of their deliverance. The lamb sheds its whole being, body in eating and blood on the doorposts, and the race of people is delivered from their bondage to freedom, ultimately in the promised land. The Christian gospels tell us of another lamb, the Lamb of God, who sheds his body and blood for our freedom—freedom from bondage to sin and materialism and deliverance to another promised land, this time for eternity in the presence of God the Father. This Lamb of God sacrifices His entire self, body and blood, to redeem us.

When we come to Christ, the Lamb of God, and the final meal with His disciples, there is another profound moment. As they celebrate the Passover Meal—the meal which recalls Moses delivering the Hebrews from bondage in Egypt—He adds something to that meal. He takes bread—unleavened because it’s in memory of the haste in which the Hebrews prepared to leave Egypt—holds it up and tells his friends that He must leave them. When they remember Him and what He has done for them, as they eat this bread they will know that it’s His body—in other words, that it will be Christ with them at that moment, not just in memory, but with them in that bread. This doesn’t mean that it changes from bread into flesh, but it does mean that, when they intend to recall Christ’s physical presence with them, they will recall it in that bread and know that Christ is with them at that moment. As a Roman Catholic priest (who used to come to me for confession) once said when we discussed this issue, “You don’t worry about whether the presence of Christ in that bread is spiritual or physical; what you reach out your hands to receive is Jesus Christ, plain and simple”. The same applies to the wine. It will be for them His blood shed for their redemption.

This means that, just as Christ is the bringer of the word of God, as in the Prologue to St John’s gospel, Christ also *is* the Word of God, the living Word through Whom all things were made and in Whom they have their being.

Christ is the messenger *and* the message. So in this Eucharistic act, Christ provides the food and at the same time *is* the food. Through the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit Christ makes that bread and wine to become His body and blood for us. Every time we celebrate this sacred banquet, we recognise that Christ is present with us through His desire to be at one with us, even in physical separation.

Now we move to St John's gospel, chapter six, as we heard tonight. In verse 53 Jesus says, "*Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.*" We might have life physically, but the spiritual life might well be as good as dead. It's the spiritual life which brings us the fulfilment which Jesus promises because it's the spiritual life which *links* us to Our Lord. Eating and drinking the flesh and blood of the Lamb of God is the action which *unites* us with Him, the One who sacrificed Himself for our redemption and freedom.

As the Hebrews participated in their deliverance by eating the whole of the sacrificed lamb, so in the holy Eucharist we participate in the sacrifice of Christ for our own redemption and freedom by eating His body and drinking His blood. This does not mean that Christ is sacrificed again and again every time we celebrate this sacrament; it means that the whole redemptive act of Christ is made

present on the altar and it's in that presentation that we unite ourselves with Our Lord.

This means that the whole Eucharistic celebration is far more than simply a memorial where we remember all that Jesus has done for us. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, those gifts of bread and wine become Christ present to enliven and sanctify us for life in this world as well as for eternal life.

Like the lamb for the Hebrew Passover, the Lamb of God also is unblemished. This is why, at the time of the crucifixion, the soldiers don't break Jesus' legs as is the custom; they see that He has died already. The Lamb of God remains unblemished.

May this sacrifice and our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving be our sustaining power in the love of the + Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**