

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST CORPUS CHRISTI – YEAR B



Corpus Christi (the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ) celebrates the gift that Jesus gives us in the Eucharist – his very self as our food and drink. In the Roman Catholic church in Britain and Ireland, the feast is celebrated on the Sunday after Trinity Sunday. Some other churches also keep it as the Day of Thanksgiving for the Institution of Holy Communion.

Psalm 115 (116)

Today we read a section of this typical psalm of individual thanksgiving. It is part of the ‘Egyptian Hallel’ psalms (113–118 (114–119)), which give praise for the return of God’s chosen people from Egypt and the slavery imposed by Pharaoh. ‘Hallel’ means ‘praise’, and is the main root for the word ‘Halleluiah’: ‘Praise the Lord’. In Jewish households, during Jesus’s lifetime and up to this day, this psalm is sung at the end of the Passover meal.

The setting for the psalm is the Temple, when a member of the congregation tells their story, reports the answer given to their prayer (as, for example, when the Lord took Israel out of Egypt, he ‘loosened [their] bonds’) and then offers promises to God in return.

As Christians, we pray this psalm both today and on Maundy Thursday as we recall the institution of the Eucharist and the Last Supper. Jesus, too, will have sung this psalm, and the verse ‘*O precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his faithful*’ takes on a particular significance. The phrase could also be translated as ‘the death of his faithful grieves the Lord’. God considers the death of all his faithful as a very serious and significant event.

Carried by a heart-felt expression of thanksgiving, the psalmist suddenly addresses the Lord personally: ‘*Your servant, Lord ...*’

As for the promises made to the Lord, ‘*a thanksgiving sacrifice*’ is as prescribed in the book of Leviticus (7: 12–15), while ‘*calling on the Lord’s name before all his people*’ refers to the public nature of the thanksgiving offered in the precincts of the Jerusalem Temple, the Jews’ main site of worship at that time.

Gospel Mark 14: 12–16; 22–26

‘You will meet a man carrying a pitcher ...’

It was a woman’s role to carry water, so a man carrying a water pitcher on his shoulder would be very easy to spot. In keeping with Jewish custom, Jesus plans to use the upper room, which was often used as a place where Rabbis taught their most intimate disciples.

Preparing for the feast of Passover



Every detail was a reminder of the time when God liberated his people from bondage in Egypt (Exodus 12). Preparation began with a ceremonial search for leaven, a fermented dough. The first Passover had to be eaten in a hurry, and so bread without leaven was eaten since it could be made very quickly. On the afternoon before Passover, the worshippers went to the Temple to sacrifice one of their own lambs. The carcasses were taken

home to be roasted, not boiled. Apart from lamb and bread, another of the main ingredients was wine, mixed with water. There were to be four cups of wine as a reminder of God’s four promises, made through Moses to the Israelites. (Exodus 6: 6–7).

As they were eating he took some bread ...

Jesus will have followed the familiar steps of this ancient feast. He will have said the set prayers and sung the traditional *Hallel* psalms (see opposite) at appropriate intervals.

‘This is my body ... this is my blood, the blood of the covenant ...’

The word ‘covenant’ is a common word in Jewish religion. It roughly means an arrangement, a relationship, or a bargain. The acceptance of the *old covenant* is found in Exodus 24: 3–8 (today’s First Reading). Now Jesus introduces ‘*the new covenant*’: a new relationship between God and humankind, which is dependent on the shedding of his own blood.