

## Solemnity of the Body and Blood: Reverence for the Eucharist

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Today's first reading presents a meeting between Abram, later to be named Abraham, and someone called Melchizedek.

Let's place this all in its biblical context. The setting is the area that we now call the Fertile Crescent, from the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers down through Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine and into Egypt.

Back in the days of Abraham, perhaps eighteen hundred years before Christ, this was an area of small city-states, often ruled by petty kings, and migrating bands of people. Abraham was one of the leaders of a migrating people. Only, he was different. He had been called by God to leave his homeland of Ur in Chaldea to a place where the Lord would establish his chosen people. Chapters 12 through 25 of the Book of Genesis presents the known history of Abraham, his battles against the enemies of God and his battle to be faithful to God. As we know, he is victorious and becomes the father of the chosen people and the Father of Faith. Abraham is recognized as the Father of Faith to this day by Jews, Christians and Moslems.

Abraham's story enters into the history of the world in chapter 14 with the presentation of the great

battle of Siddim, the battle of the kings, where nine kings met, five against four. The four prevailed and Abraham's nephew, Lot, who was allied with the King of Sodom, was taken prisoner by King Chedorlaomer of Elam and his three royal allies. That's when Abraham got involved. One of Lot's men escaped and pleaded with Abraham to rescue his nephew. Abraham pursued the four kings and, with God's help, defeated them.

When Abraham returned from the battle, the five other kings met him to celebrate his victory over their enemies. At this point a new king is presented. His name is Melchizedek. He is called the King of Salem, a name in Hebrew derived from Shalom, peace. Melchizedek is presented not just as a King, but as a priest of God the Most High, God the El Shaddai, the same One God whom Abraham served. Melchizedek brought out an offering of gratitude, of thanksgiving, to God for Abraham. The offering is bread and wine. Abraham recognizes Melchizedek's holiness. He also realizes that he owed his victory over the four kings to God. He accepts Melchizedek's blessing and gives him a tenth of all his possessions. By the way, this is the source of the biblical concept of tithing. Seeing God as the source of all that we have, we return a tenth back to him.

Back to Melchizedek. There is not much more to say. This is all that we know about this Melchizedek. It is enough. Melchizedek is a priest and king chosen by God to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving for his faithful ones. The sacrifice is in the form of bread and wine.

Christianity sees in Melchizedek a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ. Jesus, priest and king, is the Eternal Priest and King of Kings who offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving for his faithful ones in the form of bread and wine. At the same time, Jesus is infinitely greater than Melchizedek in that he is both the sacrifice and the offering, the bread and wine.

Today we celebrate the Lord's gift, the bread and wine, the Eucharist. The incident with Melchizedek can help us come to a deeper understanding of this mystery. Melchizedek offered a gift of gratitude to God. Jesus's gift is called the Eucharist, a name that means thanksgiving. When we receive communion we join the Lord in giving thanks to God, the Most High, for his protection of his people.

Melchizedek's gift was offered for those who were faithful to God. The Eucharist is the food that Jesus gives to his people, his faithful ones. It is not meant for those who do not profess and live his faith. It is not proper for non-believers or part time believers to take this gift. It is offered only to the faithful ones.

In the days of Melchizedek most offerings would consist in oxen or rams or sheep. After the victim was slain and offered to God, the people would celebrate by eating the sacrificed meat. A great feast would therefore be part of the celebration. But Melchizedek offered bread and wine. There would not be a barbecue following his prayers. Yet, Abraham saw in this sacrifice an eternal gift and valued it so much that he gave a tenth of his belongings to Melchizedek.

The gift of the Lord, the Body and Blood of Christ that we receive is the greatest gift possible. It is His sacrifice on the Cross made real in the Eucharist for us to eat and be nourished with. Somehow or other, many of us have lost the wonder and awe, the respect and reverence, that the Eucharist deserves. Just consider the number of people who cease attending Church in the summer. Six weeks ago about 70 children received their First Holy Communion. Where are their families now? Some will be in Church this weekend. Some are away on vacation, hopefully attending Mass elsewhere. But many, perhaps over half, simply do not put enough value on the Eucharist to attend Mass regularly. They will respond, "We are good people. We believe in God and that is all that matters." But the problem with their argument is that there is no place for God's greatest gift, the Eucharist, in their lives. The awe, the respect, the reverence for the Eucharist is missing from their lives.

But I do not have to look to others. There are times that the reverence for the Eucharist is not all it should be in my life, as perhaps also in yours. Too often I prepare for Mass focusing on the homily while not remembering that far more important than the homily is the reception of the Word Made Flesh in Communion. Perhaps, too often you join the line to receive communion without taking the time to consider what you are doing or whom you are receiving. Too often people receive communion and then head for the doors to beat the parking lot traffic.

The Solemnity of the Body and Blood of the Lord was established in the thirteenth century to promote respect and reverence for the Eucharist. The celebration has retained its purpose. We need to stop today and consider our reception of communion. We need to ask God to rekindle in us and in all our people the awe, the respect, and the reverence that is fundamental to understanding the reality of the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

Melchizedek, the King of Salem and priest of God the Most High offered bread and wine and blessed Abraham for his faithfulness. And Abraham gave him a tenth of his possessions. Abraham saw in Melchizedek the presence of God who had protected him in battle and rewarded his faith. Psalm 110 promised that a time would come when the people would be given a Messiah who would be a priest in the order of Melchizedek. Jesus Christ is this priest and king. His gift to his faithful ones, his gift of thanksgiving, his Eucharist, is to be celebrated and treasured by us, the descendants of Abraham, God's faithful people.

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