

## *The Words of Jesus*

### **Holy Thursday 2018**

*Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14; Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-15*

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Peace be with you! There's a famous line from German playwright Bertold Brecht. It goes like this: "Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral." It roughly translates, "First comes food, then comes morals." Brecht penned these lines in his famous "Die Dreigroschenoper" or "Three Penny Opera." The opera tells the story of the grinding poverty of London's beggars in Victorian England.

The plot is simple. Mackie marries Polly Peachum. Polly Peachum's father becomes enraged and schemes to have Mackie – known as Mack the Knife – be put to death. Musical greats like Louis Armstrong and Frank Sinatra popularized this tune "Mack the Knife."

"Erst kommt das Fressen und dann kommt die Moral." What makes this line particularly powerful is the fact that there are two words in German for the word "eat." "Fressen" and "Essen." "Essen" is what humans do. So, when Bertold Brecht uses this line about humans, "Erst kommt das Fressen und dann kommt die Moral," he likens ravenous human greed to animals who – like cows – chew the cud or like vultures who circle dead kill. "Erst kommt das Fressen und dann kommt die Moral."

This is precisely what St. Paul uplifts in our second reading tonight from his message to the Corinthians. Echoing language from the fifth chapter of the Gospel from St. John, St. Paul speaks of eating the body of Christ and drinking the blood of Christ. Just as German has two words for the verb "to eat," so too, does the original Greek of our scriptures: "Trago" and "Phago." "Phago" is like "essen" in German. It's the regular verb "to eat." But "Trago" is somewhat akin to "Fressen" and it mean "to gnaw" or "grind."

Literally, when we receive Eucharist, we receive the Body and Blood of Christ in all of his humanity and all of his divinity. This is the theology embedded in the fifth chapter of the Gospel from St. John and echoed by St. Paul in this letter to the Corinthians – one of the earliest writings of the New Testament.

Does this make us cannibals? No. This is where St. Thomas Aquinas is so very helpful. Drawing from Greek philosophy, he notes the difference between "substance" and "accidents." The words of Jesus and the words of the priest change the "substance" of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ but the "accidents" remain bread and wine.

The point here is that words change reality. In our daily world we are used to having words describe reality: The book is red. The church is white. But we also know that words change our reality. Think of the social discourse where the words of our leaders can create either comfort

or fear, unity or polarization. The words we hear in our second reading, "This is my body for you," change reality. God comes to us. God feeds us. God gives us a share of his divine life through Jesus.

Our Holy Father Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI has a beautiful way of describing this. Some years ago, during his Wednesday audiences, Pope Benedict noted that in the ancient world "The Body" referred to the Roman empire. Subjects of Roman rule were incorporated into its "body." St. Paul picks up this Roman image to describe our relationship as a community of believers. We are the Body of Christ. Pope Benedict goes on to note that when we eat, we physically assimilate the food. But when we receive the Eucharist, it's just the opposite. We are assimilated into the Body of Christ.

This is why the fourth century St. Augustine makes very little distinction between the Body of Christ we receive in the sacrament and the Body of Christ gathered at worship. To receive one is to receive the other. When we receive the Body and Blood of Christ in all of his humanity and all of his divinity, we are also receiving each other regardless of who we are or where we are from or what our legal status may be.

"Erst kommt das Fressen und dann kommt die Moral." As followers of Jesus, we reverse what Bertold Brecht observed in our hard-edged world. Our "Amen" in response to the phrase "The Body of Christ" means we are saying "yes" to being assimilated into the Body of Christ. Our "Amen" means we accept a share in the divine life of God. Our "Amen" means we receive those around us as co-sharers in this great God-given dignity. Our "Amen" means we leave on a mission to bear witness to the Body of Christ in a world still needing this great spiritual nourishment. May we do on the weekday what we celebrate on Sunday. May we become what we receive: The Body and Blood of Christ. Peace be with you.