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MAKE JESUS YOUR VALENTINE!

Today's Text: Matthew 26: 17-30

Extracts:

And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it; and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new in My Father's kingdom." And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives [Matt. 26: 26-30]

*On June 19, 1899, Dr. Louis Klopsch, a Columbia University-educated journalist, was writing an editorial for the **Christian Herald** when his eyes fell upon **Luke 22:20** where Jesus said: "This cup is the new testament in My blood, which is shed for you." Klopsch realized that those were the words of our Saviour when He instituted the Lord's Supper. So, reasoning that all blood was red, he asked himself, "Why not a red letter Bible with the red words to be those of our Lord?" That is the origin of the red letter Bible that we now take for granted.¹ Red is also associated with 14 February every year when people send red roses to their loved ones. It is called Valentine's Day, named after a Catholic priest who was executed by a Roman Emperor on 14 February 270 AD for daring to challenge his ban on marriages.²*

*Both events were motivated by the shedding of blood that was driven by selfless love. Two thousand years ago, God sent His only begotten Son in the form of a man to die for our sins. God did so because He loved the world [**Jn 3: 16**]. If we can commemorate St. Valentine's sacrifice, what of the bigger one by his Master and Saviour? During His Last Supper, as it is popularly called Jesus instituted a ritual that symbolizes His sacrificial death "for the remission of [our] sins" [**Matt. 26: 26-28**]. Today, we call it the Holy Communion. It was a show of Christ's love for His bride, the church. It was in a sense the first Christian Valentine's Day because, on that occasion, Jesus revealed that He is in deed our Valentine. Let us find out more from this week's study the import and impact of that event.*

¹ "The Red Letter Bible," <http://www.beyondthenativity.org/redlettr.php>

² "History of Valentine's Day," http://theholidayspot.com/valentine/history_of_valentine.htm

1. Background: The Last Supper or the First ‘Valentine’s Day’ dinner!

For a fuller understanding of this week’s study, it is advisable to read **Matthew 26: 26-30** in conjunction with **Mark 14: 22-25**, **Luke 22: 19-20** and **1 Cor. 11: 23-36**. Perhaps to underline the fact that the event looked ordinary when it first occurred, the apostle John who is usually audacious in his writings about the divinity of Jesus did not report it! Instead, he focused on His washing of the disciples’ feet, an event that followed the Last Supper [**Jn 13: 4-12**].

Let us go back in time to that night of the first Passover. God was about to strike Egypt with the last plague, the death of every firstborn, to force Pharaoh to let the children of Israel go. God gave Moses specific instructions that the children of Israel should each:

- Take a lamb “without blemish, a male of the first year” and kill it at twilight [**Ex. 12: 5**];
- Take “some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses where they eat it” [**v. 7**];
- Eat the flesh on that night with “unleavened bread and with bitter herbs,” leaving nothing of it before the morning [**vv. 8-9**];
- Keep it as a feast “by an *everlasting covenant*” [**v. 14**].

The blood would be a sign for them on the houses where they lived. When the Lord saw the blood, He would pass over them and the plague would not be on them to destroy them when He struck the land of Egypt [**v. 13**]. So when the disciples asked Jesus where He expected them to prepare for the Passover, that was the event that they thought He was going to commemorate [**Matt. 26: 17-19**]. But He had bigger plans for that night, the last one before His crucifixion.

As they were eating the Passover dinner, Jesus “took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat, this is My body.’” He also took the cup and, after giving thanks, He gave it to His disciples and said, “Drink from it all of you, for *this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many, for the remission of sins*” [**vv. 27- 28**]. Luke’s Gospel adds, “Do this in remembrance of Me” [**Lk 22: 19**]. This was definitely a new thing that He had not done in the two previous Passovers that they had had with Him. What was new? Let us note some of them:

a) *The Lamb of God replaced the lamb without blemish*

He told the disciples, “This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many, for the remission of sins.” That suggests there was an old covenant, that is, the one that operated under the Law of Moses. Each time Moses spoke with the congregation of Israel, he would take the blood of animals (calves and goats), with water, scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkle both the book and the people, saying, “This is the blood of the

covenant which the Lord has made with you according to all these words” [Ex. 24: 8; Heb. 9: 19-20]. He did so because “without shedding of blood, there is no remission” [Lev. 17: 11]. In like manner, the high priest would each year take the blood of animals and go into the *Holiest of All* for his sins and those of the people [Ex. 30: 10]. That he had to do that every year suggests that there had to be a better and more perfect way, promised in the prophecy of Jeremiah, saying, “Behold the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah... not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt” [Jer. 31: 31].

So, Christ, our Paschal Lamb [1 Cor. 5: 7], a High Priest of the order of Melchizedek [Ps. 110: 4] was by His action that night substituting His blood for animal sacrifice as our Advocate before His Father and as the *final* propitiation for our sins and for those of the whole world [1 Jn 2: 1-2]. He became, in the words of John the Baptist, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world [Jn 1: 29].

b) *It marked Christianity’s break with Judaism*

Jesus told His disciples, “Do this in remembrance of Me” [Lk 22: 19]. He meant it. For example, on their way to Emmaus after the death and resurrection of Jesus, two disciples recognized Him by the breaking of bread [Lk 24: 30-35]. Even to Paul who was not there when the Holy Communion was instituted, the Lord subsequently revealed it to him. In Paul’s account, the Lord said, “This do, *as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.*” Paul added his own comments, namely, “As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes” [1 Cor. 11: 23-26].

Therefore, the Holy Communion was going to mark the Christians out as different from the Judaists who did not accept Jesus as their Messiah, suggesting that the Judaists would continue with animal sacrifices in their worship. In practice, the early Christians went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, apparently to win converts but “on the first day of the week” (Sunday)... the disciples came together to break bread” [Acts 20: 7]. In due course, they stopped going to the synagogues but they had left an indelible mark. I do not know of any Jewish temple today where they offer animal sacrifices even though they are still supposedly upholding the Law of Moses!

From the foregoing, we can see that Jesus expects what He began on His Last Supper to be a love bond between Himself and His body of believers, the church, and as often as we partake in the Holy Communion, we are proclaiming the Lord’s death until He returns for the judgment of the world.

2. Communion in practice

Paul has said that what he has delivered to us is what he has received from the Lord [1 Cor. 11: 23]. After delivering his message, Paul warned, “Therefore, whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord... for he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. For this reason, many are weak and sick among (the church at Corinth) and many sleep” [vv. 27-30]. That is a clear warning that Holy Communion is never to be trivialized or treated disrespectfully. If taken unworthily, it can lead to sickness and death.

Different denominations and congregations have different practices, ranging from benign neglect to central focus. For example, in the Catholic Church which has over one billion members worldwide, worship service (daily or Sunday) is built around the Holy Communion. The Holy Mass is nothing but a *celebration* of the Holy Communion, and there is so much that we non-Catholics can learn from that model. Here are the *key components* of the Holy Mass:

a) *Confession of sins*

Catholics who wish to receive the Communion are expected to be in a “state of grace,” that is, that they have confessed their sins against God and their neighbours before coming forward. Unlike those of us in other denominations, Catholics are required to confess their sins *before* a priest in the confidential setting of the confessional (a quiet place where both the priest and the person confessing cannot see each other). The word of God says, “Confess your trespasses to *one another*, and pray for one another, that you may be healed” [Jam. 5: 16]. After hearing the confession, the priest is required to pray for the sinner which is a form of ablution (washing the sinner clean of sin), in line with the instruction of Jesus to His disciples when He said after His resurrection, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained” [Jn 20: 22]. In addition, at the beginning of the Holy Mass service there is general confession when worshippers publicly acknowledge their sins (not in specific terms!).

Clearly, you get the impression right away that reverence is imperative for the Holy Communion. Yet, many people treat it lightly and ritualistically. They hide grievous sins from the priests, especially if they perceive that they will be recognized from their familiar voices! Some people may not go to their priests at all, claiming that, after all, other denominations do not go to their priests and God forgives them. It is a total package. Get out if you cannot obey their rules.

b) *Praise and Thanks*

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men” [Lk 2: 14] is a common phrase to lead off praise and thanks in the Catholic Mass. The celebrant leads the congregation in acknowledging God’s glory and the need to adore and worship Him. The word of God says, “O give thanks to the Lord for He is good, for His mercy endures forever” [Ps. 118: 1]. The Lord has given you the privilege to come before His “gates with thanksgiving” and “into His courts with praise” [Ps. 100: 4] to partake in an important meal of love. Therefore, you must come with great expectations before the Lord who is on the throne looking at your heart that very moment. Are you instead already looking at your watch and thinking that the service is taking too long?

c) *The Word*

Two readings (from the Old Testament/Epistles/Psalms) are taken by the laity, followed by a reading from one of the Gospels by the celebrant who also gives the homily (based on the theme of the day’s readings). The sermon is followed by the reciting of the Apostles’ Creed.

Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God [Rom. 10: 17]. Many people in the congregation do not even have a copy of the Holy Bible, not to talk of bringing one to the church. Therefore, they do not pay sufficient attention to the sermon. Take the Biblical example of the young man called Eutychus in the church at Ephesus during Paul’s Communion Service there. Paul’s sermon continued “until midnight.” The young man sat on a window. He fell into a deep sleep and did not know when he fell down from the third floor and was picked up dead. Happily, God showed him mercy and he revived after Paul had prayed for him [Acts 20: 7-12]. That is a serious warning for you! If the word of God is the sword of the Spirit [Eph. 6: 17], how can you war against demonic forces that make you weak and impatient during the service?

d) *Collections and Offerings*

Writing to Timothy, Paul said, “I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and *giving of thanks*, be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence, *for this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour*” [1 Tim. 2: 1-3]. That is exactly what follows after the sermon. A number of petitions are raised in prayers, followed by collections. Then the offerings and Holy Communion items are carried by the ushers to the celebrant who receives them with joy and puts his blessings on those in the procession. It is a celebration of love by a community of believers operating in one accord.

e) *The Communion Service*

From this point on, especially when the celebrant reenacts the breaking of bread as Jesus did it during the Last Supper, you can almost hear a pin drop. When the “meal” is ready, worshippers who are in “a state of grace” to receive Communion queue up row by row, on the ushers’ cue, to go before the altar to receive it. The choir renders angelic songs throughout the period.

The rest of the service (Thanksgiving and Recession) is as orderly. What is important here is that the Communion Service itself is a small part of the whole Mass but by the time you get to that stage, nobody will tell you how important it is. It is a meal of love from the Christ who loves His bride, the church. As often as the church marks it, so often will it be strengthened as it awaits the Groom’s imminent return. Should it then surprise you that the Catholic Church remains the biggest and fastest growing denomination in most parts of the world?

3. Conclusion: Communion is the food for the Community!

Jesus once said to the Jews that confronted Him [**Jn 6: 48, 51, 53-57**]:

I am the bread of life... ..and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world... Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day; for My flesh is food indeed and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me.

That word has been fulfilled in the Holy Communion which He instituted the night before His crucifixion. So, today, as your mark another Valentine’s Day, Jesus is standing by the door of your heart and knocking. If you hear and open, He will come in and sup with you and you with Him [**Rev. 3: 20**].

Make Jesus your Valentine!