

Homily
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St. Bernard Church

What does it mean to drink from the cup?

We'll begin with the first book in the Bible, the Book of Genesis, Chapter 4, verses 8-10, from the story of Cain and Abel:

8 Cain said to his brother, Abel, "Let us go out in the field." When they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. 9 Then the Lord asked Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

The question Cain then asks God is a passage we are all familiar with:

"Am I my brother's keeper?"

But listen to the Lord's response in verse 10:

"The Lord then said, "What have you done? Listen: your brother's blood cries out to me from the soil!"

So Abel dies, and his blood is crying, screaming, out from the ground, begging for understanding. The cry of Abel, the shrill cry of his blood for appeasement, for justice, for an explanation, is not just his cry, but it's also the cry of all the oppressed people in the world: the starving, the neglected, the abused, the poor, the aborted babies, the Christians that are being persecuted by ISIS and other radical Muslim groups.

And so a fundamental question for every Jew or Christian is this: "Can you hear the cry of Abel's blood? Can you hear the cry of the blood, the cry of those in the world who are in desperate need?"

This is the first clue, early in the text of the Bible, in the first book, that God is going to respond to Abel's blood crying out to Him from the ground. He hears that cry.

We now turn briefly to the story of Noah and the great flood. At the beginning of the passage in Genesis which describes the flood, God enters into a covenant with Noah:

Genesis 9:1, 3-4: 1 God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them: Be fertile and multiply and fill the earth... 3 Any living creature that moves about shall be yours to eat; I give them all to you as I did the green plants. 4 Only meat with its lifeblood still in it you shall not eat.

Our next encounter with the theme of the blood in the Old Testament is in Chapter 12 of the Book of Exodus, verses 1-14, where God gives to Moses the ritual of the Passover:

*1 The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt 3 Tell the whole community of Israel: On the tenth of this month **every family must procure for itself a lamb**, one apiece for each household. 7 **They will take some of its blood and apply it to the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it.** 12 For on this same night I will go through Egypt, striking down every firstborn in the land, human being and beast alike, and executing judgment on all the gods of Egypt – I, the LORD! **13 But for you the blood will mark the houses where you are. Seeing the blood, I will pass over you; thereby, when I strike the land of Egypt, no destructive blow will come upon you.** 14 This day will be a day of remembrance for you, which your future generations will celebrate with pilgrimage to the LORD; you will celebrate it as a perpetual institution.*

Next, we will turn to the Book of Leviticus, the book of Laws in the Old Testament, Chapter 17, verses 10-14:

10 And if anyone, whether of the house of Israel or of the aliens residing among them, partakes of any blood, I will set myself against that one who partakes of the blood and will cut him off from among his people, 11 since the life of a living body is in its blood, I have made you put it on the altar, so that atonement may thereby be made for your own lives, because it is the blood, as the seat of life, that makes atonement. 12 That is why I have told the Israelites: No one among you, not even a resident alien, may partake of blood. 13 Anyone hunting, whether of the Israelites or of the aliens residing among them, who catches an animal or a bird that may be eaten, shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. 14 Since the life of every living body is its blood, I have told the Israelites: You shall not partake of the blood of any meat. Since the life of every living body is its blood, anyone who partakes of it shall be cut off.

Explain how a blood covenant worked back in ancient times

Now we turn to the New Testament, to the Gospel of Matthew 26:17:

On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples approached Jesus and said, "Where do you want us to prepare to eat the Passover."

It's obvious that they are going to follow the Passover ritual set forth in Exodus 12, which we looked at earlier. Now we will turn to Matthew 26:26-29:

26 While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, "Take and eat; this is my body." 27 Then he

took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you, 28 for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins. 29 I tell you, from now on I shall not drink this fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it with you new in the kingdom of my Father."

In the Mass of the Catholic Church, which is based upon the Passover ritual, after the reading of the Gospel, bread, wine and water are brought forward. The wine, signifying Christ, is poured into a chalice. A few drops of water, signifying the faithful who are present, are added to the wine in the cup. Then, the priest asks that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the wine mingled with the few drops of water become the blood of Jesus Christ. Catholics believe that this prayer is heard and that the Holy Spirit comes upon these gifts and turns the wine with a bit of water into the blood of Jesus. Accordingly, the Catholic belief is that, when a Catholic who is properly disposed drinks from the cup, that person receives the blood of Jesus. We participate in the blood covenant. Because the life of a living body is in its blood, the essence of Jesus, what makes Him who He is, is taken into the bodies of believing Catholics. Our lives are merged with His in the most powerful way possible. At the same time, in a lesser but very real and meaningful way, our lives are joined with those of other members of the faithful, our brothers and sisters in Christ. The Eucharistic ritual has an astoundingly unifying impact.

The Church brings us the true blood of Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, we read:

16 The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? 17 Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

And so, in the next chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 12, at verse 26, Paul writes, in his description of the Body of Christ:

If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy.

The Letter to the Hebrews speaks eloquently of the power of the blood of Christ in Chapter 9, verses 11 to 15:

11 But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that have come to be, passing through the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made by hands, that is, not belonging to this creation, 12 he entered once for all into the sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

Finally, in Hebrews 12:22-24, we are taken back to Genesis, to where we started our discussion:

22 No, you have approached Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and countless angels in festal gathering, 23 and the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, and God the judge of all, and the spirits of the just made perfect, 24 and Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and the sprinkled blood that speaks more eloquently than that of Abel.

In today's Gospel, Jesus says to James and John, who want Jesus to promise that they will have high places in heaven:

You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?" They said to him, "We can."

Jesus is asking each one of us the same question: "Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?"

This is a bottom line question for each Christian. First of all, do we hear the cry of Abel's blood? Do we hear the cry of those who are oppressed? Of those who are suffering? Starving? Homeless? Abused? Neglected? Aborted? Do we hear this cry whether it comes from our own country or from the far side of the world? If we hear this cry, are we willing to drink from the cup, to give of ourselves to respond to the cry? We are incapable of responding to this cry without God's grace.

Jesus hears the cry. He gives His blood for the sake of Abel's blood and then He offers His blood to us, saying to us, in effect: "With my presence in you, with my life in you, with my power in you, I want you to reach out and respond to the cry of others. Through my grace working in you, I want you to offer your life for the sake of your brothers and sisters who are in need."

The most serious commitment a Christian can make is to participate consciously in the blood of Christ, to come before the altar, to say, "Jesus, I believe that You are here present, that You are offering Your blood, Your very life to me, and I am about to consume Your blood to that Your divine presence will be in me. I am about to unite my life with Yours and, through the grace that comes from that unity, I ask You, Lord, to help me to give my life, to offer up myself as You did, to respond to the cry of my brothers and sisters." This is what the blood covenant requires. There is a price. And if we are willing to pay that price, we have access to the supernatural power of the blood of Jesus, and our lives will take on a whole new dimension.