

Twenty-first Sunday *per annum*
Year A, 2026

Is 22:19-23

Rom 11:33-36

Ps 138

Mt 16:13-20

What do you say: Who is Jesus? What is the Eucharist?

The context of today's gospel is important – the setting, the scenery – and something we're likely to miss if we don't do a little digging and research, if we don't ask questions about what we read or hear in the scriptures. *"Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi."* So what is the significance of that region? Caesarea Philippi was a town some 30 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, in pagan territory, near the headwaters of the Jordan river, at the base of Mt Hermon, where there are natural springs and a large cave. From ancient times that cave was thought to be a portal to the underworld – *"the gates of the netherworld"* – and had been built up as a site of pagan practice and worship, dedicated to the Greek god Pan, the half-man, half-goat god of woods and fields whose mysterious music (the pan-pipe) caused contagious, groundless fear and fright, hence the word panic. People would cast sacrificial offerings into the cave to please and appease the god Pan. Before the Greeks, this same site was used by the Canaanites, the ancient foes of the Israelites, whom we read about in the Old Testament, to honor their deities, the baals.

So Jesus is in pagan territory with his disciples, which is a world of disbelief and doubt, a world of darkness and error, a world of superstition and sorcery. But this region also represents the powers of the world: the military and cultural supremacy of the Roman

Empire that was then dominating the people of Israel, as the Greeks had done before them.

In the gospel episode that follows, Caesarea Philippi becomes the place where the disciples, in faith, will have to face off the seemingly unstoppable and untoppleable cult of the pagan gods. It is the place where truth and falsehood vie, where belief and unbelief confront each other, where the *one* God who *Is* encounters the many gods who are not, where the darkness of the cave meets the Light of the world (Jn 8:11, 9:5), where fear gives way to faithfulness and doubt to certainty.

In this context, then, Jesus asks his disciples some important questions, questions that we do well to reflect on in our own day and time. *“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”* and *“But who do you say that I am?”* Notice the structure and development of those two questions. The first question is general, theoretical. The second question is specific, personal, and practical.

The Son of Man is thought to be, might be, could be, John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah or another of the prophets. Not bad answers, any of them, as they are all possible, depending on how the scriptures are understood and interpreted. This is truly what people are saying, and so the disciples have answered rather well. But the next question is not just about reporting what others are thinking and saying. It is about what each of them thinks and knows and believes and says. Jesus asks this much more difficult,

much more intimate question of all his disciples, literally: *“But who do y’all say that I am?”*

As Jesus asked the first question, I imagine that different disciples gave the different answers. It went well: all the “class” responded. At the second question, though, I imagine a pause, the disciples looking at Jesus and at each other, perhaps unsure of the right answer, of what the Master was getting at, of who would go first. All eyes finally come to rest on Peter, who, bearing the weight of that moment, gives his answer. I don’t imagine Peter pronouncing his profession triumphally, all cocksure and confident. I imagine Peter taking a breath, gulping in his throat, feeling the weight of the moment, and then summoning a reserve of trust in Jesus that came from deep within, from all that he had ever heard Jesus say and seen Jesus do – how he had healed the sick, raised the dead, walked on water, fed the hungry thousands. Because Peter was about to say something that was radical, subversive, totalizing, terrifying, wondrous, and prophetic, something that would separate him from doubters and disbelievers, something that would ultimately cost him his life. He speaks, professes: *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”*

Peter saw past the external, past the human form and figure, past the human nature before him, past the man. And beyond what senses could perceive, Peter’s faith caught hold of the greater reality. Before him stood God, God-made-man, God-in-the-flesh. God incarnate, God enfleshed. God with human body and human

blood. What the *senses* failed to perceive, *faith* grasped. What faith grasped, Peter professed: “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*”

Then Jesus answered Peter, in words that praise not Peter, but Jesus’s heavenly Father for revealing to Peter this great mystery. Jesus clearly delights in Peter’s response, and all because of what the Father has done in Peter, because of the faith that the Father has given to Peter as pure gift. Perhaps we could even say that the Father’s true gift was to his Son, that Peter’s faith was in some way the Father’s gift to Jesus. “*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah.*” Blessed, the same word that Jesus used in the beatitudes. “My Father has blessed you, Simon,” “*for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you.*” Jesus is well pleased. Pleased at how the Father is at work in the disciples, pleased that Peter is allowing the Father’s gift and grace to grow in him.

“*Flesh and blood,*” Jesus says, referring to human realities, human understanding. Peter, though, has pierced and peered past the outer appearances to perceive the inner reality, an inward truth. Jesus is standing before them all as flesh and blood, but that flesh and blood is also God himself. This is what so many would fail to see, fail to understand, and so fail to believe about Jesus. By all outer appearances, he is a man, only a man, a *mere* man. But in truth, God himself. Truly God and truly human. The incarnation. The enfleshment.

I would like to take these questions of Jesus and develop them a little, to ask new, but intimately connected questions. “What do people say that the Eucharist is?” And then, “what do you say that the Eucharist is?”

People say that the Eucharist is a sign and a symbol. People say that the Eucharist is a memorial. People say that the Eucharist is a meal. People say that the Eucharist is a sacrifice. People say that the Eucharist is a communion with God and with others. People say that the Eucharist is a spiritual thing.

All these things are right ... as long as we do not say that the Eucharist is *merely* any one of these things. Just as we can say that Jesus is truly human, but he is not *merely* human; he is also God. So, yes, the Eucharist is a sign and a symbol, a memorial of Christ, a sacrifice and a meal, that which brings about a spiritual communion with God and others. Yes. The Eucharist is all these things, but not *merely* these things.

The Eucharist is a *mysterion*, a sacrament, which by definition is an outward sign that makes inwardly present the grace that it symbolizes. This is what the Church, together with Peter, professes, and it is upon this profession of faith that Christ has built his Church. So, yes, I say, Peter says, the Church says, we Catholics say that the Eucharist is all these things.

What do we say the Eucharist is? It is the body and blood of Christ, which comes to us under the appearance of bread and wine. What

the *senses* perceive are the bread and the wine. What *faith* grasps is the inward reality, that this is truly Jesus, true God and true man. What the *senses* cannot perceive, *faith* more surely receives. The eyes, in this matter, are to no avail, but never mind, for here “*we walk by faith, not by sight*” (2 Cor 5:7).

In this matter, the words and the will of Jesus are determinative. Taking bread he said, “*this is my body*” and taking the cup filled with wine he said, “*this is my blood*” (Mt 26:26-28). “*Do this ... in remembrance of me*” (1 Cor 11:25).

If all we go on is what we can take in by our senses, then we will certainly miss the greater truth and reality, which lie beyond the merely sensory and sensible. Look all you want at the Eucharist, even with an electron microscope. Taste all you want, even with the most refined and trained palate. All you will perceive in and by the senses is bread and wine.

But, like Peter, recall the teachings of Jesus, remember his power over the elements and things of the world, summon to your mind Jesus’s goodness, his works, his gentleness, his words, how everything about him is simply ... true, even the things we can hardly begin to understand, and say to yourself as Peter once spoke up – Peter again, in a time of great stress and distress – when Jesus had spoken to the disciples words of “*spirit and life*” about how he himself was the living bread come down from heaven, upon whose flesh and blood we must feed if we wish to have eternal life, whose words were so hard that few could accept them and so many

murmured and walked away, after which Jesus asked the Twelve if they, too, wanted to leave... Bear all this in mind and heart, and with Peter say and profess: “*Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life*” (Jn 6:52ff).

By Jesus’s word wind and waves were stilled. By Jesus’s word the sick and the lame were healed. By Jesus’s word the dead rose to life. By Jesus’s word the thousands were fed. By Jesus’s word, then, bread becomes his body and wine his blood. Obedient to his word, we do this in his memory. By *his* word, not by our power, not by our faith, but by *his* word alone, which can do all things, which alone will remain even when all that is in heaven and earth passes away (Mt 24:35; Mk 13:31; Lk 21:33). All this by his word, and so by that word alone, I believe.

If, therefore, you do not believe that Jesus is “*the Christ, the Son of the living God,*” then you have no share here today in the midst of those who so believe and so profess. Likewise, if you do not believe that the Eucharist is Jesus, his body and blood – a symbol, but not a mere symbol; a memorial, but not merely a memorial; a meal and a sacrifice and a communion, a spiritual thing, but not merely any of these – then you *must not* come forward to share in this great mystery of faith with those here who profess and believe that the Eucharist is truly, really, and substantially the body and blood of Christ.

Jesus is *truly* present in the Eucharist, not merely by sign or figure, not merely symbolically or spiritually. Jesus is *really* present in the

Eucharist, with an objective presence that does not depend on mere human thought or imagination, on personal piety or devotion. Jesus is *substantially* present in the Eucharist, meaning that the Eucharist is the body and blood of Jesus – no longer is it bread and wine, but body and blood. It *is* the body and blood of Jesus, in the fullest and most complete sense of the word *is*.

Though we are dealing here with the flesh and blood of Jesus, our belief in Jesus and in the Eucharist is not a matter of *mere “flesh and blood,”* but something that has been revealed by the heavenly Father, whose “*gracious will*” Jesus in another place praised for having “*hidden these things from the wise and the learned,*” while “[*revealing*] them to the childlike” (Mt 11:25-26).

It is the Father’s will that all should come to the knowledge of the truth and so be saved (1 Tim 2:4). But that saving truth lies beyond what mere eye can see and mere ear can hear. Such knowledge is accessible by faith, which alone can grasp the One who is Truth, the Truth that leads to the Way of Life (Jn 14:6).

So before this great mystery of faith, and as we profess our abiding faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Living Bread upon whom we feed in humble faith, I leave you with the words of St Paul, which were given in our second reading, a cry of mystical wonder and awe: *O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways! ... For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.*