

Sometime after the year 2000 BC, Abram's shepherds got into an argument with the shepherds of his nephew Lot. They called a truce by dividing the land in half, and Abram, being a loving uncle, gave Lot the first choice. Lot looked to the east, saw the Jordan River watering the plains, and being no dummy said, "I'll take that." Well, with prosperity comes trouble. Five kings from the Jordan plain got into a battle with four invading kings, and in the melee, enemies kidnapped Lot and his family, and stole their property. Abram, who is not otherwise known as a warrior, was determined rescue his nephew. He got up an army of 318 men – a fairly small militia, but Abram won. Lot and his family were set free, and their property was restored. The losing king came out to meet Abram, but before he could say a word, a priest named Melchizedek walked onto the scene, carrying bread and wine. He blessed Abram and blessed God. Then Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth of the spoils of war, and Abram concluded the rest of the postwar business with the losing king. The end.

This little story has played a surprising role in how Catholics understand the eucharist. We know nothing else about Melchizedek. He reappears in the book of Psalms as an eternal priest, and in the Letter to the Hebrews as an image of Jesus Christ. Here's why: Melchizedek brought out bread and wine, which Jesus also did at the Last Supper. Melchizedek was a priest, and Jesus acted like one when he offered the sacrifice of his own body and blood on the cross. Melchizedek was a king of Jerusalem, and Jesus is the descendent of David who rules forever in the new Jerusalem, a city whose name means "peace". The bible says nothing about Melchizedek's parents or descendents, making him an image of the eternal God, who has no beginning or end, and a foreshadowing of Jesus, who began and ended his life in mystery. Melchizedek praised God on the occasion of a victory in battle, and Jesus is the supreme victor over the ultimate enemy, death. He rose from the dead and offers eternal life for those who believe in him.

When we gather for the eucharist, we bring out bread and wine with a similar purpose. We offer the sacrifice of ourselves. We receive strength to be ministers of peace. We celebrate the victory that is ours in baptism. Once a year we remember all this on the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, a Sunday that many people still call by its title in Latin, Corpus Christi, which is more than a city in Texas; it is the feast of the body of Christ.

During mass today I'll use Eucharistic Prayer I. The earliest version of it dates to the fourth century, and it has always included a reference to Melchizedek as it prays that God will find our sacrifice acceptable. We are going to offer God the body and blood of his own son, so we know that the offering will be acceptable. We're concerned that we will be acceptable too. We want to be as pleasing in God's eyes as was the man who dedicated his life to ruling in peace, praising God, and sharing bread and wine. If we live an honorable life, centered on the body and blood of Christ, we will be as acceptable to God as one of the most mysterious figures in the bible, a man named Melchizedek.