

## Passion Sunday

### *Lent 5*

I take as my text from St. Paul's Letter to the Hebrews:

*CHRIST being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.*

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.*

Sacrifice — we hear that term so many times; it's found throughout both the Old and New Testaments and especially in the Eucharist. It is a concept with which we have become familiar, a concept not confined just to the heathen world, but also played a major role throughout the history of the Jewish Nation, vital to Hebrew worship, and reached its height in the Temple worship at Jerusalem.

But do we understand what is meant by sacrifice? Why it is so much a part of both Judaism and Christianity?

If we are to fully grasp the passage from St. Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews that we read today, we need a basic understanding of the concept of the Biblical sacrifice.

In simple terms, sacrifice is the substitution of one life for another. But it is more than that. Our first example of sacrifice comes to us in Genesis with the story of Abraham and his son Isaac.

Abraham binds Isaac and places him on a makeshift altar of sticks. Just before striking Isaac in a sacrificial act, Abraham's arm is stopped, stayed by the Angel. Abraham sees in the bushes a ram caught by its horns which is substituted for Isaac — one life for another — and the lad is spared.

This sacrifice is the first depicted in the Old Testament but the culminating sacrifice is recorded in the New Testament, that of our Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross — this time, one life for many — fulfilling the Old Covenant in and through the New Covenant.

Now, in the New Covenant the sacrificial system is continued in another way, this time with living sacrifices, where, while the sacrifice offered is life itself, the substitution in this case is substantially different: it is ourselves as living sacrifices.

Yes, our souls and bodies offered as a sacrifice, a living sacrifice wherein we commemorate the once-offered sacrifice of Christ on the Cross and join with him as he offers the same sacrifice in Heaven — it is a holy mystery that brings us into communion with God the Father through the Holy Spirit.

It is in the Epistle passage from Hebrews that we are able to see a direct relationship to the sacrifices of the Old Testament, the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross of Calvary, and the Eucharistic Sacrifice.

In this letter to the Hebrews concerning priesthood, sacrifice, and atonement, St. Paul tied all three together, pointing to sacrifices under the old Law as having only a temporary cleansing power which had to be continually renewed, while the Sacrifice of Christ effected an eternal redemption, once for all.

As the Perfect Sacrifice, Christ became a high priest and mediator forever, the *tabernacle* not made with hands, but eternal in heaven.

As we try to understand the message of the Epistle to the Hebrews, we must first understand that there were three elements basic to St. Paul's thinking:

First: Religion is access to God.

Second: as the world is veiled in shadows, the function of worship is to bring men into contact with eternal realities.

Third: there can be no religion without sacrifice.

All tie together, for access to God demands purity that is a costly thing that cannot be obtained without sacrifice.

The Hebrew sacrifices specifically referred to in the Epistle are two: the first, concerning the Day of Atonement, characterized by the sacrifices of bullocks and goats; the second, a cleansing ritual, characterized by the sacrifice of a red heifer.

The significance, under the Old Covenant, of the role of the Jewish priesthood was that of mediation between man and God; it is of special interest to note the manner in which it was performed and the symbolism.

In the sacrificial ritual, the priest first placed his hands upon the head of the victim, whether sheep, goat, or bullock, before taking the victim's life. This laying on of hands was not meant to transfer the sins of the priest to the victim; rather, it was to effect a substitution of the life of the victim for the life of the priest.

Sin was regarded as such a serious matter that it required the forfeiting of the life of the sinner. The laying on of hands, however, in the sight of God, constituted a substitution of one life for another: in the Hebrew Sacrifice, the life of the goat for the life of the priest.

But something was missing in this sacrificial system. That something was Jesus Christ, who being both God and man could be effectual as a mediator between God and mankind which relationship had been broken through sin.

In his letter to the Hebrews, St. Paul has represented Jesus as having undertaken the mediation office, interestingly, in two aspects, the first, not as priest, but as Son, in speaking to us on God's behalf.

In the second aspect of mediation, we see Christ's priesthood in the representation of humanity before God.

Christ is the **Ideal** of our humanity in the sight of God and, thus, the High Priest for the human race. As the Jewish priesthood represented mankind to God in the offering of sacrifices, so Jesus also made an offering; but it was himself that was offered. He was both priest and victim.

By the complete dedication of himself to the Will of God, culminating in the offering of his Body on the Cross, a sacrifice *not without blood*, our Lord translated the sacrifices of the Old Covenant into a New Covenant consummated with his own Blood.

Here the ancient worship of the tabernacle and its sacrificial elements take on a new meaning under the New Covenant: the *greater and more perfect tabernacle* being nothing else than the Body of Jesus. The earthly tabernacle of the Old Covenant is replaced with the *real* Tabernacle.

While the worship of the ancient tabernacle was to bring mankind into the presence of God, it could only be imperfect, whereas the coming of Jesus Christ really brought men into the presence of God, because in Christ, God took upon himself our humanity. So, to see Jesus was to see what God is like.

Whereas the sacrifices of the Old Covenant were imperfect, the Sacrifice of Christ was the *full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, once offered, for the sins of the whole world.*

In the Holy Eucharist, we plead before God *the One Sacrifice offered upon the cross, even as Christ himself presents the same offering in heaven.*

In this respect, the early Church fathers spoke of the Holy Eucharist as *the unbloody sacrifice*, not a repetition of the **Sacrifice of the Cross**, nor as any renewal of Christ's suffering or death; that all took place once and can never be repeated.

In the Passion of our Lord, we can see a beauty that distinguishes it from the ancient sacrifices of the Old Covenant, a threefold beauty:

First, it is not our bodies that are cleansed, but our souls. Only the sacrifice of Jesus Christ could take away moral uncleanness, sins that tear at the heart and burden the conscience.

Second, Jesus Christ won for us eternal redemption from sin by paying the price, by being obedient even unto the Cross.

And third, the victory won on the Cross brings us into a relationship with God.

In the Passion of our Lord, we see the example of perfect love and obedience that captivated the hearts and minds of early Christians. And his example, emulated by them, changed the world, a trail of men, women, and children willing to accept persecution, even death, for their faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

So now some hard-pressed questions:

How much sacrifice would we be willing to make for our faith in Jesus Christ? Could we stand up to the prospect of persecution, even death, for our belief?

How much humiliation would we be willing to undergo? How much pain would we be able to endure?

How much of a chance would we be willing to take to worship God as Christians, as Anglicans, if the world around us was openly hostile to our practice of religion?

Interesting questions, and more and more in the realm of possibility as we see in the world around us an increasing hostility toward Christianity, even in our own country where we witness a disdain of religion, a disrespect of God, and an increasing disregard of moral standards.

The question again: to what extent are we willing to sacrifice, in the Name of Jesus Christ, for our faith as Christians? to preserve that faith?

The choice is always ours to make.

When Jesus went to the Cross, he did so willingly. He gave his Life entirely as a product of love. This was not some prescribed ritual: it was God's Son willingly obeying his Father for the sake of mankind; and it was the choice of love.

Our world is filled with distraction, with challenges to our Faith and commitment; however, we who truly believe in Jesus Christ, are separated from this world, and share, with all the Saints, in the Spiritual Life of the Body of Christ, which is eternal. With his Death and Passion, and with his Resurrection, Jesus Christ redeemed us from the bondage of sin, and opened for us the gate to eternal life.