

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 the term sacrifice so many times, more especially during the Eucharist; it's found throughout both the Old and New Testaments. It is a concept with which we have become familiar, a concept that played such a major role throughout the history of the Jewish Nation. Indeed, religious sacrifice was not confined just to the heathen world; it was vital to Hebrew worship, and it 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?

An understanding of the concept of sacrifice is necessary to fully grasp the passage from St. Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews that we read today.

In simple terms, sacrifice is the substitution of one life for another. But it is more than that.

Out first example is in Genesis, the story of Abraham and his son Isaac where Abraham is stopped just before striking Isaac in a sacrificial act. His arm, stayed by the Angel, Abraham sees in the bushes a ram caught by its horns. This ram is substituted for Isaac — one life for another — and the lad is spared.

That being the first sacrifice depicted in the Old Testament, we find the culminating sacrifice 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, continuing the sacrificial system in another way, this time with living sacrifices, where, while the sacrifice offered is life itself, the substitution in this case, one life for another, is substantially different: it is ourselves as living sacrifices.

Yes, our souls and bodies offered as a sacrifice.

But it is this 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. He pointed 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.

Now, 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*, he translated the sacrifices of the Old Covenant into a New Covenant consummated with his own Blood.

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...

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.*

Whenever we speak of the Holy Eucharist as a sacrifice, we do not imply nor understand it as 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. This is confirmed in **Article XXXI** of the **39 Articles of Religion** and, in affirming this **Article of Religion**, we do not alter the sacrificial connection in the Holy Eucharist, else how could we receive the Body and Blood of our Saviour, as in the words in the Administration of the Holy Communion:

*The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee...
The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for thee...*

To quote from Vernon Staley's *The Catholic Religion*, one of the foremost manuals of instruction for Anglicans:

All that our Lord Jesus Christ did when he instituted the blessed Sacrament was sacrificial; it was all done in sacrificial terms, at a sacrificial time, and for a sacrificial end.

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.

From the earliest days of the Church, we find a trail of men, women, and children willing to accept persecution, even death, for their faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Over the centuries, there were those who became so well known that we have recognized them as *Saints*.

Though the names of the thousands and thousands who have died in the Name of our Lord may not be known, they are joined with those who have become revered for their faith in Jesus Christ and their contributions to the spread of the Gospel.

Saints who were martyred, such as Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, are joined by others who were not martyred, such as Augustine, Ambrose, and Athanasius, all who have greatly influenced the course of Christianity by their extraordinary spiritual insights, as well as great sacrifices.

We are also quite familiar with such as St. Barnabas, who was stoned to death in the year 61, or St. Perpetua, ultimately beheaded in 201, or St. Sebastian, who was martyred in 288 after standing before the Emperor Maximian and denouncing him in person for his persecution of Christians.

Even the man most responsible for what was to become our *Book of Common Prayer*, Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, was burned at the stake in 1556, during the reign of Queen Mary, when she sought to restore the primacy of Rome in the English Church.

Cranmer held fast to his faith to the very end, refusing to give in to the Romish Queen who labeled him a heretic and, thus, he went to his death on the pyre.

We come to the present age, the dawn of the 21st century, with 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.

When we view the world around us, we can see increasing hostility toward Christianity.

In our own country, we see open hostility to Christianity and our institutions are being challenged daily in the media and in the courts in order to divorce them from any *taint* of their Christian origins.

The human being is now elevated to a status equal with God, if, indeed there is a God as so many are denying. For many others, if God is acknowledged at all, he is accorded little if any respect.

I often wonder how far we, as individuals in today's society, are willing to go, in the commitment of self to a spiritually rewarding relationship with God, not to be confused with the common, often enthusiastic, superficial, display of religion.

The focal point is willingness. How willing are we to sacrifice, or to what extent are we willing to sacrifice, in the Name of Jesus Christ, for our faith as Christians?

The choice is always ours to make. Unlike the sacrifices of the Old Covenant, where the victim had no choice, we, under the New Covenant, sealed with the Blood of Christ, do have the choice.

More to the point, the offering of self is an essential part of our worship. It is an essential element of the Celebration of the Holy Eucharist:

And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee..."

Do we deeply believe that Jesus Christ is indeed the Son of God who died and rose again that we might have eternal life?

Do we really love God, God the Father who created us, God the Son who redeemed us with His Blood, God the Holy Spirit who sanctifies us?

Are we committed in our faith to the extent that we would willingly make any sacrifice necessary to preserve that faith?

When Jesus went to the Cross, he did so willingly. He gave his Life entirely as a product of love. He knew what he was doing. 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; 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, which does not end with the grave, for with his Death and Passion, and triumph over the grave with his Resurrection, Jesus Christ redeemed us from the bondage of sin, and opened for us the gate to eternal life.