

## Reconciled

[Colossians 1:11-20](#)

[Luke 23:33-43](#)

Today we celebrate the Reign of Christ! This is the last Sunday of the Church's year so today we remind ourselves that at the end of time everything will be brought into balance, the earth will be redeemed, Creation will sing for joy, the dead will be raised and we all get to live happily ever after!

So it's a bit jarring to hear the gospel reading from Luke where Jesus is hanging on the cross being mocked -this is the King of the Jews – a common criminal strung up like a chicken. It's like Palm Sunday when we have the joyful and perhaps slightly silly march around the parking lot only to come into church and be hit by the agony and pathos of the crucifixion. In a way, this is a mini Palm Sunday

First we heard that wonderful passage from Colossians:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers-- all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

And then we see him on that cross, which doesn't look much like making peace or reconciliation of all things. It just looks like bloody pain and disaster, the end of the disciples' hope.

And of course this is the great paradox. The great paradox of our faith that something so difficult and painful as the crucifixion and murder of our beloved Rabbi and Master actually leads not just to a new religious movement but to the resurrection of the Christ, and through him, "God was pleased to reconcile all things, whether on heaven or on earth, by making peace through the blood of his cross."

I don't think I've ever preached about the blood of his cross. It's not an image I usually find particularly helpful. I don't think we are expected to dwell on the

agony of Christ as the central theme of our spiritual imagination but more on the lies and betrayal which are perhaps especially relevant at this time of snarkiness and false news, and on the joy and healing of the resurrection

Yet the resurrection and crucifixion cannot be divorced, and in our scriptures the blood of his cross is important. So, there's a first time for everything. Let's take a deeper look at the blood of the sacrifice which is after all a central image in our Eucharist – our central common practice.

We are not a culture that practices blood sacrifice and so the nuances and deep understanding of this image are alien to us. To the people of the first century blood was very potent and powerful. And not just to people of the first century. Last week when Lorraine and I took communion to John between the services he shared with us a poem by the twelfth century abbess Hildegard of Bingen (in a translation which was almost incomprehensible) that focused on the blood of the martyr Ursula and her companions and then took us on a quick survey of blood sacrifice from Abraham onwards.

You will remember that Abraham believed God was calling him to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. But in that terrible moment before he drew his knife, God stayed his hand and showed him a ram caught by his horns in the thicket which was the one to be sacrificed. Scholars suggest that this story represents or perhaps explains for the Hebrew people a major cultural change away from child sacrifice. But it also acts as a powerful background narrative in which to understand the crucifixion.

Instead of Abraham providing the sacrifice which he believed God demanded, God Godself provided a different sacrifice and the life of Isaac was spared and of course with that the life of all his descendants. Without the ram caught in the thicket, the Jewish people might not exist and the world would be a very different place.

In the Hebrew tradition, sacrifice was not so much to appease God as to seal a covenant or to offer a thanksgiving, or a special prayer. They were a way of coming closer to God. Because of the interpretations of New Testament writers, we tend to think of sacrifice as being about atonement for sin, but that was occasional

rather than the regular practice. In ancient Roman practice, sacrifice might be used to placate a god but usually sought the harmonization of earth and heaven<sup>1</sup>

This seems to be what the Letter to the Colossians is referring to when it says, “through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

There are three different ways of looking at the crucifixion as sacrifice depending on who you think was making the sacrifice. Let me tell you in advance that the first way is wrong. Put this on the end of sermon test and you will get an F.

The first way is to think that the sacrifice is one that humanity made in order to appease God. This is wrong because as I have already mentioned, sacrifice is first and foremost about reconciliation not about appeasement. Also, although Jesus the Christ was fully human and although it was humans who crucified him, in the wider spiritual context which we are discussing, the sacrifice is not ours. There has been confusion through the millennia about this point which is why in some of our liturgies we talk specifically about “our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.” That’s what we bring to the table, not a victim Jesus.

The second way is to think of it as Jesus’ sacrifice. It was of course an enormous sacrifice. Because of his obedience and dedication to this mission, Jesus went on to the bitter end. He did not step aside from his calling though we know he was certainly tempted to do so and would have liked an easy out, but he remained steadfast and that meant that he walked into the trap and into his death. We remember the words of Isaiah, “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” Is 53:7. Jesus sacrificed his life. But this is a slightly different use of the word sacrifice. Jesus did not literally kill himself. This use of sacrifice is closer to when we say “My parents sacrificed so that I could go to college.” It means that one person went without something, gave something up in order that another might flourish. As Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.” Jesus sacrificed his life for our sake. To not complete his mission would have left us believing that the sin matrix has greater power than love.

The third way is to think of the crucifixion as a sacrifice that God made in order to bring about reconciliation. The danger with this is that we start to think about child

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animal\\_sacrifice#Ancient\\_Rome](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animal_sacrifice#Ancient_Rome)

sacrifice. We forget the ram caught in the thicket and place God the creator in the role of Abraham, but this time there is no-one to stop him pulling out the knife and killing his only son.

Is this an act of the God we follow? the God of infinite love and compassion? I don't think so.

Let's try again. Why would God the Creator offer a sacrifice, and not just any sacrifice but a sacrifice of his or her own being? Back to Colossians, because "through [Jesus] God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." For the purpose of reconciliation.

In the ancient sacrificial system, humans brought an animal - food which they thought God would like and having killed and cooked it, they usually ate it. (A side note for the vegetarians among us – sacrifices could also be made with grain.) So a sacrifice usually involved a meal in which God and human ate together. And Jesus said "Truly, truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.... (John 6:53,54)

From this perspective, Jesus is the sacrifice and God is the host of the sacrificial meal. What a complete turnaround! Instead of humans providing a sacrifice and hoping that God will turn up, God provides the sacrifice and hopes that we will turn up.

And that's why we celebrate the Eucharist so often when we meet, because in this meal as we eat the bread which is become for us the Body of Christ and drink the wine that is for us Christ's blood, his very life force, we symbolize that "God is pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of Jesus' cross." Somehow – and many books have been written trying to work this out – somehow in this holy sacrifice we are reconciled with God and all sin, which is what keeps us separate, is wiped away.

And when we and all things whether on earth or in heaven are fully reconciled with God THAT is the reign of Christ. So today we celebrate the happy ending of the Reign of Christ which is and is not yet; giving thanks that because Jesus, the King of the Jews and Gentiles, out of his infinite love, made the sacrifice of his life, we are reconciled with God.

