

Whose Sacrifice?

[Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16](#)

[Luke 14:1, 7-14](#)

As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, the project of the writer to the Hebrews, that's our second lesson today, is to interpret the work and resurrection of Jesus the Christ in terms of Jewish religious understandings and particularly temple practices. So its no surprise that many of the symbolic ideas and concepts have been brought from Hebrews into our own worship. One of those stood out for me today.

“Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name.” A sacrifice of praise, or as we sometimes say, a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.

We tend to think of Hebrew sacrifices as involving a lot of dead animal and being offered as a way to please or appease God. That is one interpretation of Jesus' death on the cross – that he sacrificed himself in order to appease a God who needed us to die because of our sin. Jesus, as the pure lamb, was the human sacrifice that was needed for reconciliation between God and human.

Sacrifice of animals is one way that atonement for sin took place in Old Testament times, another being the scapegoat who had all the sins of the people put on his head and then he was sent out to the desert. (Lev. 17) As an animal lover of 21st century sensibilities I find all this cruelty to goats, sheep, cows and so on quite revolting.

I would not want to worship a God who demanded that I kill even a worm in order to be reconciled with them. I am grateful that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was once and for all and we don't need to keep making sacrifices in the old way.

So if Jesus' death on the cross was a sacrifice, and we understand God as fundamentally Love who does not need to be appeased, how do we understand that sacrifice?

What if it was not God who needed a sacrifice but humanity?

What if humanity needed to be reconciled to God through blood and death? I know it seems a little foreign to us but we only need to take a quick mental world tour to think of the blood that is being shed even as we speak between humans who have power differentials, resource needs and different ideologies. When serious conflict arises we quickly turn to violence. Our gang will be more powerful and life will be good once we have killed you.

So, what if we didn't sacrifice Jesus the son of God, but God did? Remember Abraham taking Isaac his only legitimate son up into the mountains to sacrifice him because he believed that that was what God demanded? And instead of child sacrifice, God provided a ram?

It turns the whole sacrificial system on its head. Instead of God expecting humans to bring a perfect sacrifice, God provides the sacrifice. In Isaac's case it was a ram, but in our case it is God's very self. Instead of us providing what we think will be a good feast for a god, God provides a feast for God's people. Instead of us trying to reconcile with God by killing, God offers reconciliation to us by allowing Jesus to die. Except that as you know it didn't turn out that way. Humanity killed Jesus but God raised him back to life, proving that nothing we can do will ever separate us from God's love.

Our eucharist is a symbolic remembrance of the fact that Jesus the Christ died to save us from our sins – in other words to reconcile us with God. And that it is God who prepares the sacrifice. Often in the ancient world, the meat of the sacrificed animal was shared between the person making the sacrifice and the priest but now it is God who lays the table and invites us to the meal. Which leads us to a different but related image – that of the heavenly banquet where at the end of time everyone will get to eat their fill and there will be no strangers at the table.

At times in the past it was thought that when the priest celebrated the mass, he was literally re-sacrificing Christ. Even today a Roman Catholic writer can say, “In the Mass, by the agency of a human priest who acts “in the person of Christ” (Vatican II, LG # 10) Christ continues and repeats His offering.’¹ This is one place that we differ from our Roman Catholic brethren. Our understanding is that Christ made his offering – his sacrifice – two thousand years ago and that is not repeated.

What we are doing today is remembering that sacrifice in a way that makes it real for us – we are renewing the covenant that it represented.

Another use for dead animals and blood in the Hebrew world was to seal an agreement, a covenant, between two people. So, in the bread and the wine we renew the new Covenant with God – the one that Jesus said was sealed with his blood; the covenant that we were brought into through our baptism – so the eucharist is also a continuation of our baptism.

Which brings us back to that wonderful phrase “a sacrifice of praise.” That my friends is what we bring to the table. We don’t, thank goodness, bring dead animals. We bring our praise and thanksgiving.

A couple of chapters before today’s reading from Hebrews, the writer tells us, “When [Christ] said..., ‘You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt-offerings and sin-offerings’ (these are offered according to the law), then he added, ‘See, I have come to do your will.’ He abolishes the first in order to establish the second.” (Hebrews 10:8,9). Our sacrifice of praise is not just words but our willingness and intention to do God’s will.

It is this attentiveness to God’s Spirit working in and around us and in and around us in the world which is our sacrifice. Jesus abolished the old covenant by establishing the new covenant, where God’s path is in our hearts, where we follow that path and give praise and thanksgiving to God at all times and in all places. We give up our way to follow God’s way.

I imagine that the people who first heard Jesus telling them to take a less honored seat at the table and to open their homes to the common riffraff were shocked and appalled. We are less so. Because we know that this is the path of Jesus. And our sacrifice is to follow that path rather than the path of ego which seeks to accumulate more power, more honor, more wealth, more stuff.

We don't have to keep appeasing God. When bad stuff happens, it is because bad stuff happens, not because God is punishing us. God wants that to be very clear. So clear that instead of keeping accepting sacrifices from us, God provided the ultimate sacrifice – God's very self. And in response we bring our offering – our sacrifice – of praise and thanksgiving and of our very lives. We become a living sacrifice, living and being Christ's body in the world, sharing ourselves and all that we have been given.

As the writer to the Hebrews says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God."

¹ <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/teachings/sacrifice-of-the-mass-234>