

Monday in Holy Week Year A

The Ultimate Act of a Merciful God

[RCL] Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 36:5-11; Hebrews 9:11-15; John 12:1-11

At the regular celebration of the Holy Eucharist, we hear these familiar words: “After supper he took the cup of wine; and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and said, ‘Drink this, all of you: This is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.’”

These words, the “words of institution,” are basically a quotation from the scriptural account of the last supper that we find in Mark’s and Matthew’s Gospels. For many, these are comfortable words that speak of the great sacrifice Christ made on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. But for others, these are uncomfortable words because they worry that talk of Christ’s blood as a sacrifice implies notions of an angry God demanding the death of his innocent Son to appease his anger toward sinful human beings. Both the comfort and the discomfort people take in these words are legitimate. Indeed, we may find both reactions within the self-same heart.

Is it possible to disentangle some of the elements involved in this tension and to ease the conflict we find in ourselves?

I think the answer is a qualified “yes.” Our reading from Hebrews can help. A proper understanding of Hebrews shows that the idea of Jesus’ death as a sacrifice to an angry God is not biblical. However, a proper understanding of Hebrews may raise challenges of its own. So, yes, I think we can help ease the discomfort we have with the idea of Christ’s death as a sacrifice to an angry God. But a better understanding of the biblical background of Christ’s death as a sacrifice may cause a different type of discomfort. Perhaps there will be some comfort in knowing we are troubled by the right things.

In Hebrews we hear, “For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!” The appropriate background for understanding this passage is the Old Testament notion of a sin offering. Sin offerings in the Old Testament are decidedly not sacrifices made by humans in order to appease an angry god. Such an idea may be found in other ancient religions, but not in ancient Israel. To understand how the author of Hebrews used the notion of sacrifice to interpret Christ’s death, we need to know what the Old Testament actually says about sin offerings.

Sin offerings in the Old Testament deal with the purification of the sinner and the sinful community. The first thing to note is that sin offerings are not made by humans to God. This contrasts with thank

offerings which are made by humans to God. But in sin offerings it's actually the other way around. Sin offerings were given by a gracious God to humans as a means for the removal of sin. God is not the object of appeasement. Rather, God is the giver of the means of the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of God's people. So sin offerings should properly be seen as the gracious gifts of God to a people who are thereby cleansed from their sins and restored to covenantal relationship.

The central act in a sin offering involved the blood of a pure and unblemished animal being poured out and smeared on the altar. We need to keep in mind that for the Israelites blood was the symbol of life. The life of the unblemished animal had the power to restore the defective life of the sinner. Therefore, it was the life-bestowing power of blood – not the death of the animal – that resulted in the change in the sinner.

It does this by covering the sinful life by the pure life-blood of the sacrifice. Once the offence that divides humans from God is covered, the barrier between them is removed and the way is opened for renewed relationship. Note, the blood of the sacrifice is directed toward the sin. It is not directed toward an angry God. It is actually God's gracious gift for the removal of sin.

Hebrews draws on these ideas about sin offerings to interpret the death of Jesus. In Jesus' death, he offers a sacrifice for the purification of our sins. What we need to keep firmly in mind is that if Jesus is offering a sacrifice for us, it is not primarily about his death, but rather about his pure life-blood poured out for us. It is not a death that appeases an angry God, but rather a pure life that covers human sin. The sacrifice cleanses us from sin by covering our offenses and restoring us to covenantal relationship with God.

This means that Jesus' death is not something that is offered to appease the anger of a wrathful God. Rather, Jesus is the self-offering of a gracious God to forgive our sins and to restore us to right relationship. The point isn't the death of Jesus, but rather the life-giving power of his sacrifice offered for us.

Hebrews says Jesus is both high priest and the sacrifice. In the Old Testament priests would make sin offerings using the blood of goats and bulls. These sacrifices needed to be offered over and over again for the recurring sins of the people. The sacrifice of Jesus is different because he is the perfect Son of God, who offers his life once and for all. Therefore, Jesus mediates a new covenant in his blood.

This is the ultimate act of a merciful God who gives his own life for the restoration of God's people. It is not a human act offered to an angry deity. It is the self-offering of a gracious God for us and for our salvation. When we hear the words of institution in the Holy Eucharist, "This is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins," we should think of God's love and God's life offered for us.

An understanding of Hebrews helps with the discomfort many feel about seeing Jesus' death as a sacrifice made to an angry God. As we have seen, it is more properly understood as the gracious self-

offering of a merciful God to forgive human sin and to restore us to covenant relationship. It is an act of grace not an act of appeasement.

As we move ever more deeply into the Paschal Mystery of Christ's death and resurrection that we celebrate in Holy Week, perhaps we would do well to remember that there are other biblically informed ways of understanding Christ's death.

In Peter's sermons in Acts, he sharply distinguished between the crucifixion as an evil act done by evil people and the resurrection as the true saving act of God who reverses the evil of the crucifixion. Paul often speaks of the crucifixion as Christ's defeat of the enemies of sin and death. And John's Gospel faces the shame of the cross with irony and paradox because to the eyes of faith the cross is actually Jesus' exaltation and glorification.

The church in its wisdom has never officially defined how Christ's death is saving. That it is saving and that it is an act of a loving God for the life and salvation of the world seems bedrock to Christian faith. But the stark reality of the crucifixion of Jesus will always cause some discomfort no matter how we interpret it. And perhaps that is how it should be.

For without that discomfort what would resurrection mean?

Amen.

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