

Sacrifice.

Sunday 21st March 2021.

Sacrifice.

The concept of Sacrifice is not popular today. Was it ever? Well, yes, it was central to the culture of Jesus's time – but not today. As we work our way into the 21st century, 'sacrifice' is not on the agenda. We are happy to acquire more security, more wealth, more of almost everything, though the pandemic has put a check on that. For during the pandemic we have seen our carers put their own lives and the lives of their families on the line for the good of the whole. No need for elaboration there except perhaps to define 'sacrifice' as a giving up of life or possessions for a greater good.

Religious people nibble at the concept of sacrifice because it is in their vocabulary. We give up chocolate for Lent; we sacrifice a morning to do the flowers or clean the church but we do not consider it a sacrifice to take the children to the cinema or to volunteer in the shop That is duty, joy even; entertainment certainly. However, some people are called to really sacrifice their lives to care for a dependent relative or to go to war for the good of the nation. Here we get closer to the biblical idea of sacrifice.

The Letter to the Hebrews.

The scripture we have just heard from The Letter to the Hebrews (5. 5 – 10) takes us to the heart of the Jewish concept of sacrifice. The letter was written to conservative-minded Jewish converts to Christianity who were thinking of lapsing in the face of imminent persecution. The writer uses imagery which they would readily understand about sacrifice. They would know that it is only priests who sacrifice and on the Day of Atonement it was only the High Priest who was allowed to go into the Holy of Holies. There he would wash the altar with the blood of a bull. Then, placing his hands on a goat, transfer the sins of the people onto the scapegoat which was then driven out into the wilderness. Here, the sacrifice of bull and goat absolved the Jews of their sins so that they could be at-one with God.

Another instance: central to the Jewish Feast of The Passover is a spotless lamb whose blood is smeared on the doorposts of their houses as a sign that the Angel of Death should pass them over.

There are many other examples of sacrifice in the Jewish culture, all of which are about bridging that gap between God and humankind. Archbishop Michael Ramsey suggested that for his theological students to understand the messy nature of sacrifice, a bull should be sacrificed on the college lawns. That would make a mess of the grass!

Some of these examples of Jewish sacrifice have been rolled together and applied to the work of Christ on the cross. From the first of these examples we can take the form of a man who effects the sacrifice in the Holy of Holies and from the second, a lamb but a perfect lamb used at The Passover.

For prayer, for action.

Some of you will remember a conversation after our service 2 weeks ago. It focussed on a popular hymn that made much of an angry God venting his wrath on human-kind. As clewed-up contemporary Christians we were unhappy about propitiating an angry God. The hymn was cheekily tweaked so that we could sing it last week with Jane leading the way, obviously singing her heart out on mute.

Our reading from Hebrews draws out some elements of sacrifice relevant to Christians today.

Firstly, Christ was ‘appointed’ as a priest by God so the sacrifice is part of God’s plan to sacrifice himself for us. Just as the bull and the goat were chosen on the Day of Atonement, God chose Christ to be the sacrificial victim. God bears the pain of loss for us through Christ, the perfect offering. So, it is God’s work.

Secondly, the passage reminds us of Christ’s suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane, wrestling with his vocation to be an obedient son in the face of adversity. Here is an identification with our own experiences as fallible human beings caught up in the process of service and sacrifice.

So we can see from these two observations that the death of Christ was a part of God’s plan from the beginning and continues to be so. God takes the initiative. God is the rescuer of human kind. However, we can’t just sit back and do nothing in response to the cross. Jesus himself wrestled with sin and temptation in the Garden so humankind is drawn into the action, following Christ as our exemplar. Psalm 51 balances it thus:

“For you will not delight in sacrifice or I would give it;

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken

And contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” Psalm 51. 16,17

The notion of sacrifice is complicated. Justice cannot be done to it in a short address nor to its modification by the sacrifice of Christ.

But let me reinforce the major points of God’s initiative and humanity’s response by reminding you of ‘The Herald of Free Enterprise’, a tragedy which happened to this cross-channel ferry in 1987. The bow doors were left open as it left the port of Zeebrugge and immediately capsized in icy waters. Panic ensued. To enable some passengers to get from a lower deck to an upper deck a man reached across the rails to form a human bridge for others to climb over to safety. That was his initiative, his sacrifice and an escape-route for those who could take it. Amen.