

“...He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance” (Hebrews 9.15)

Today is the Fifth Sunday in Lent, commonly known as Passion Sunday for those of us who use the older calendar. It is the demarcation of yet another new stage in our journey to the Cross: and as such, the church has shifted from violet to dark red. Two weeks from today is Easter, and next week is the beginning of Holy Week. The relative joy of Mothering Sunday has given way to the muted looking ahead to Holy Week and the Cross. The sense of this word we're using, *Passion*, has lost its sense a bit in today's world. I know we all know what a passion is when it comes to our desires and ambitions: “I am *passionate* about this” or “she shows her *passion* when she does that”. But the sense of the word that we're using is one much older: *Passion* in this case means suffering and hurt, specifically Jesus' suffering and hurt as he bore the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Today begins *Passiontide*, the two weeks leading up to Jesus' crucifixion. It is an opportunity for us to enter into greater contemplation and preparation for *the* most sacred time of our year: Holy Week and Easter. The Church wears the colour red as we remember the blood that was spilled for all the world – that perfect sacrificial offering to end the need of further sacrifice. The blood that was spilled so that other blood could be spared. At Friday's Bible Study, I explained Passiontide almost like a 'soft opening' for Holy Week, with the 'grand opening' being Palm Sunday next week.

Our Old Testament Lesson gives us a bit of a window into the idea of sacrificial blood. After Moses built an altar to the Lord, young men offered burnt offerings, and Moses collected the blood. He threw half of the collected blood against the altar, and after he read the assembled people the Book of the Covenant, he threw the other half of the blood on the people as a sign of the promise of the Covenant. Why? Why did Moses do that with the blood of the sacrificed ox?

The answer lies elsewhere, in the book of Leviticus. In chapter 17, the Lord says to Moses that any person of the house of Israel who kills an animal of sacrifice anywhere other than the tent of meeting (the tabernacle) and does not bring it to the tent of meeting as a sacrifice to God will be guilty of shedding blood. The punishment for this is being cut off from the people. Spilling blood was a grave sin, unless offered up to God. The Lord says, “*the priest shall sprinkle the blood on the altar of the Lord at the door of the tent of meeting, and burn the fat for a pleasing odor to the Lord*” (Lev. 17.6), this way they bring their offerings to God, and not offering to other false gods. In this same chapter, the Lord also commands the people not to consume any blood, because it is the life of every creature: “*For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life*” To reconcile with God, the blood of the offerings was to be spilled in place of our own sacred, precious, blood.

The Epistle to the Hebrews reminds us of this custom associated to blood. Shortly before the passage we read today, the author describes the role of the High Priest and the other priests in these acts of atonement, and that on one day only – the Day of Atonement or *Yom Kippur* – the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies with the blood which he offers on behalf of all the people for the atonement of all their sins. But Jesus, says the author, is a new and *different* High Priest. He enters a different tent – one that is greater and more perfect, and not made by human hands. He enters once and for all into the Holiest of Holies, taking with him not the blood of goats and calves, but his own blood as the sacrifice, thus securing an eternal redemption (Heb 9.11-12, RSV).

Here, the writer to the Hebrews compares Jesus' ultimate offering and sacrifice with that which we read in Exodus: “*For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.*” (Heb 9.13-14).

Jesus, once and for all, sprinkled his sacrificial blood on the altar and on the people for their eternal atonement, for *our* eternal atonement. *“Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred which redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant”* (Heb 9.15). The sacrifice of Jesus, his death on the cross and his rising again three days later, brokered a new relationship between God and his people, one that fulfills the old covenant and establishes with his people a new one – an eternal inheritance. If the sprinkling of the unclean with the blood of bulls and goats sanctified them to the purifying of their flesh, how much more can the spotless blood of Christ gain?

Jesus’ sacrifice was different. He was a man without sin who suffered so that he would endure *all* suffering. His Passion was for the service of all humankind. It is just this element of servitude that we find in Jesus’ new kingdom which flows counter to so much of what we know about kingdoms, and rulers, and power. It certainly was counter to that idea of power which the disciples held, too. The mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, asked Jesus to ensure her sons had positions of power in Jesus’ new kingdom. Specifically, she asked if they could sit at his right and left hands. Jesus asks whether they can really do what they seek? They say “yes”, but they don’t know just what Jesus is all about. They don’t *really* know all that Jesus has been sent to do. He came as a high priest to offer all of humanity’s sins before God. Were they able to do the same? Were they willing to accept the same death Jesus faced, and the baptism of his blood? They said yes, there were willing and able. Jesus told them that they would, indeed, face these trials, but he could not give them the position they aspired to. That was the Father’s prerogative, not his.

Jesus did not come to earth to be a ruler who holds his power over others, instead he came fully to serve. He came solely to offer up himself as a sacrifice before God. So, he tells the disciples, *“It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (Matt. 20.26-28).

Christ, our great High Priest, became the servant of all. He presented his own blood on the altar of God, he “offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, [and] sat down at the right hand of God...For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.” (Heb 10.12-14, ESV). And he has left with us a command to remember this sacrifice through the celebration of the Eucharist, where we, too, are presented with his Body and Blood. That precious blood which was shed on the roads of Jerusalem as he carried his cross; the blood which was shed from the cross; and which was ultimately sprinkled on both the altar and all the people that believe in him for the eternal propitiation of their sins. Just as the first Covenant was confirmed and sealed with blood, so too is the New Covenant sealed with the blood of the Lamb of God – Jesus his son.

This is the Passion which we recall. This is the reason Jesus walked towards his death, and in which we are called to follow and participate.

Let us, therefore, follow Jesus to the cross this Passiontide. Let us remember the blood, sweat, and tears that were shed for our salvation. Let us strive to become servants of our fellow human beings, knowing that the sacrifice *that* requires pales in comparison to the sacrifices of our Lord. And let us rejoice in this new order: that through Jesus we have access to the grace of God because of the gift of his sacrifice. *“He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance”* (Heb 9.15).

And now unto God Almighty, the ✠ Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all might, majesty, dominion, power, honour, and glory as is most justly due. Henceforth and forevermore. Amen.