

Thoughts about Sacrifice

“He died that we might be forgiven,

He died to make us good”....

We have sung this since we were children. Yes, I believed this but I did not understand it. Why did he die? And how does sacrifice work?

Christians have always viewed Jesus’ death on the cross as somehow in parallel with the Jewish rite of sacrifice in the temple. Jesus himself made this linkage at the Last Supper, before he was crucified.

“This is my body, broken for you. Take and eat it....

This cup is the new covenant in my blood...”

(Matt 26: 27 - 29)

Also, in St. John’s Gospel there is that very difficult passage (not found in the other gospels) where Jesus says that the food he would give his followers was his own flesh! (John 6: 51 - 58)

In the temple sacrifice, the meat of the sacrificed lamb was eaten by the worshippers. However the blood was forbidden them: This was dashed in the altar fire, given to God in sacrifice, pleading for him to forgive the sins of the people.

Jews do not drink blood! So when Jesus told his followers, *“This is my blood....drink this all of you...”* the followers must have been shocked!

“Was Jesus crazy? Had we better humour him? He often says things we don’t quite understand...” but they did it. Remember, at that point Jesus was there alive, the crucifixion had not happened. Afterwards, when they saw him broken on the cross, they saw his blood shed, perhaps parallels began to be clearer.

We still didn’t really understand it all. Now we know that he rose, that he is alive. We take the broken bread in the eucharist as his body, given for us. But to drink his blood? Yes, it was shed for us *‘and for many...’* Jesus said of the wine that it was to be the blood of the New Covenant. The blood of the old covenant was to be given to God in a plea for forgiveness: Why were we now to drink it? Can it be that God’s role, at least in part, is assigned to us? That we are to do the forgiving?

This fits in well with Jesus’ instruction in the temple, *“First be reconciled with your brother, then come and present your gift.”*

Obviously there may be secret sins against God that only He can know about, that He alone can decide to forgive; but surely we should start with those grudges we have lived with, the slights we have felt, whether intended or not. And do we carry perhaps prejudices against nations or groups within our own society for faults imagined, observed or passed on to us by others? Each of us is human, each of us fallible, each of us known and loved by God.

In the Lord’s prayer we say, *“Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those that sin against us.”* Look, we are saying, we have done it, we’re forgiving them.

Let’s make it true. If we can use the Eucharist in this way, coming not just for his gift to us but in a forgiving spirit to all around us and beyond, perhaps we can begin to build the Kingdom Jesus wants on Earth.

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