

Blood Sacrifice or Love

Today we consider some Christian thought, and ideas, and theology from ancient times to modern. Christian thought has never been static but has always been changing and developing and progressing. There are those who study these developments in faith in *the history of religions* and they help us see how our faith has developed through the years. For example, there are changes in our faith that we have seen in our own lifetime including children participating in Holy Communion, female ordination, the ecumenical movement, and new theologies like liberation theology and new ministries like chaplaincy... and there are new theologies being constructed all the time – these new theologies are always controversial for the first 50 years or so... sometimes a bit longer – but then they become established and folk consider that it has always been this way! The world in which scripture was written was quite different from that in which we live.

The Bible writers' style of writing was different from ours, just as their understanding of the world, the universe, and the gods was different from ours. Reading back into these writings, which are over 2000 years old, we mustn't be ignorant concerning what we are reading. We must bear in mind that the Bible is a lot of books, written by a lot of authors, which have been brought together – sometime with one book (*Isaiah for example*) having multiple authors. At times any one of these writers may be writing about spirituality, or about liturgy, or worship; sometimes the writer shares other well-known mythological stories of the time; or sometimes the writers share an ancient song or piece of poetry.

John the Baptist declared, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." These are famous words to us. The theology these words represent something from long before the time of John. The *theology of sacrifice* is very ancient and we see various strains of sacrifice in the Old Testament. We also see how the theology of sacrifice developed over the centuries – *the language of sacrifice is not as straightforward as some make out*. Too often in our century we approach the language of sacrifice far too simplistically forgetting that it's a gruesomely bloody practice.

The language of sacrifice is the theology that pertains to an Old Testament understanding of God: the theology of sacrifice struggles to survive in the New Testament and *more so today* (in our world of animal rights). Sacrifice is something that many Christians have debated, puzzled, and struggled over – many have never been satisfied with the contradiction or inconsistency of a God of sacrifice and the revelation of "God is love" in Jesus.

The language of sacrifice is powerful and evocative, it's rich and dramatic, but it can also be just as powerful and evocative, just as rich and dramatic when taken *figuratively* and not literally. The Jews who wrote the New Testament struggled to free themselves from their inherited language of sacrifice. They try to free themselves from it – and we see them try, for example, in the letter to the Hebrews where the writer tells of no more need for sacrifice. Still some churches have altars and still offer sacrifice – as in the Roman Catholic Mass. The Protestant Church has no altars, we have a Communion Table and there is a huge difference as we are NOT those who offer sacrifice.

In saying that, we are still those who struggle to shake off the language of sacrifice to the gods or to God. In our earliest Christian liturgies the language of sacrifice lies at the very centre of the Communion service. The reformer John Calvin wrote: "By taking away the

sins of the world by the sacrifice of His death, He reconciles men to God. Christ certainly bestows other blessings upon us, but the chief one, on which all the others depend, is that by appeasing the wrath of God He brings it to pass that we are reckoned righteous and pure.”

This is an example of Hebrew sacrificial language being used to interpret the life of Jesus rather than the Trinitarian language of “God is love” and the language of forgiveness. Christians who want to emphasise the justice of God are probably suffering from reading too much Old Testament and need a good dose of Gospel reading. And those who persist with “God is just” are taking the language of sacrifice too literally and not sufficiently metaphorically.

Leslie Newbigin a Church (of Scotland) missionary in the 1950’s said, ‘To take away sin is...the purpose of the whole vast apparatus of ritual sacrifice.’ In the Old Testament, in the Book of Exodus, it was the slaying of the lambs and the marking of the doorposts with the blood of the lambs, which secured the safety of the Hebrew people; it saved them from the wrath of God. It is a gruesome brutal story with a theology, which requires to be handled with extreme care. If we literalise the metaphor, as Calvin did, we end up with *substitutionary atonement*, which is grotesque and immoral. Behind the word ‘lamb’ we hear the story of Abraham about to sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 22), when the boy asks his father, ‘Where is the lamb?’ Abraham replies, ‘God will provide the lamb.’ Jesus, God’s own Son, is then taken to be that lamb, which God provided.

Believing that God’s justice requires a blood sacrifice is Old Testament and derives from long before the Hebrew tradition. Their kind of God, which required such blood sacrifice looks nothing like the God of Jesus. The gods who required sacrifice were gods of war, gods of brutality, and gods to be feared. In the Old Testament we see the faith of the Hebrews passing through a phase like this where they thought of Yahweh in this way.

In contrast, in Jesus’ Parable of the Forgiving Father (Luke 15), there is reconciliation without the Father requiring a human or animal sacrifice. The killing of the fatted calf is a thanksgiving, *not a sacrifice* to appease an angry vengeful father.

On other occasions Jesus pronounces forgiveness without repentance or confession. And to the thief on the cross - *without confession or repentance or sacrifice* Jesus pronounces paradise.

Jesus is the One who takes away the sin of the world, and because he has pronounced the love and forgiveness of God he is “the Lamb of God”. He spoke of, and revealed God’s unconditional love... vast immeasurable... boundless and free. He introduces an altogether New Testament image of God.

In Jesus’s story God is the Forgiving Father who welcomes his returning son without sacrifice but with a forgiving embrace.

God runs to greet... welcoming and forgiving.

God *bears the pain of the wrong within Himself*: as the letter of 1 Corinthians states:

“Love is patient and kind;

Love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude.

Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;

Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love will never come to an end.

In a word, there are three things that last forever: faith, hope and love; but the greatest of these is love.”

Love bears all and endures all – takes the pain to self, bears it and endures it - without the need for placation, appeasement, or pacification. Love has no limits.

Even in the Old Testament there were prophets like Micah, 700 years before Jesus, who were telling of no more need of sacrifice. God’s revelation to them was not like the other gods of the nations. This God required no sacrifice.

⁶ ‘With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?

Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,
with calves a year old?

⁷ Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’

⁸ He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

The language of sacrifice is our inheritance but we need to understand it carefully. We still talk of the ‘sunrise’ but we know that it is *not the sun that rises*: we now know that it’s the earth that rotates round the sun. The sun doesn’t rise *earth does!* Just because we still talk of sunrise does not mean that we believe in sunrise. The language of sacrifice is our inheritance from our faith ancestors, and just because we talk of sacrifice does not mean that we believe in sacrifice. Love is all you need.

God is love.