

The one true sacrifice.

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Thanksgiving for the Holy Communion (*Corpus Christi*)—18 June 2017
Reverend Martin Johnson

Exodus 24.3-8; Psalm 116; 1 Corinthians 10.14-21; Mark 12.12-16, 22-26

There was a man lost in Wales. He had driven around the hills and valleys and had completely lost his sense of direction. The weather was closing in and every village seemed to have a name beginning with two Ls and at least five syllables. Despite being a man after my own heart, he eventually decided to ask for directions and soon came across a local.

“Oh yes,” said the farmer, “if you travel about two miles down the road, you will eventually come to a junction at the bottom of a hill. There’s a parson there who will point you in the right direction. You can’t go wrong.”

“A parson?” says our lost man, picturing a clergyman waiting patiently for him.

“Oh,” says the farmer, “in these parts we call signposts ‘parsons’: they point you in the right direction ... but they never go there themselves!”

Today we celebrate and give thanks for the gift of Christ’s *sacramental* presence. At Easter, we revelled in his risen presence. At Pentecost, we celebrated the gift of the Holy Spirit in our midst and last week, Trinity Sunday, we were reminded that this Spirit is the Spirit of the God who in Jesus came among us and lived and died.

Today we recall and celebrate the continuing presence of Christ under the forms of bread and wine—the sacrament of the altar. These are no empty signposts that merely point the way, these are no “parsons”; these sacraments are promises, pledges that Christ is with us to end of the age. During the week, we celebrated the life of the Anglican theologian, writer and mystic Evelyn Underhill. She wrote: “symbols represent and suggest, whilst sacraments work.” In the sacrament, the power of Christ’s work, his sacrifice is present. Sacraments are born out of sacrifice.

Now I use the term sacrifice very specifically today, because it is the cause of a deal of angst across Christian thinking. And little wonder given the history of sacrifice in ancient cultures and the debates of the 16th century. The idea of human sacrifice to placate a capricious, vengeful God was abhorrent to the people of Israel; it marked them out from the peoples around them. But the idea of sacrifice remained central to temple worship, as both an offering for sin, for ritual cleansing, and as a way to seal a covenant.

In today’s reading from the Book of Exodus we experience the latter, an ancient ritual which—although totally alien to us today—is echoed in our Eucharistic celebration. Think of what we do today in light of the reading. Moses gathers the tribes around him, he builds an altar (this represents God in their midst) and he sets up twelve pillars representing the tribes of Israel. Then it gets messy as oxen are sacrificed and the blood collected. The book of the covenant is read, the commandments—the creed if you like. And then to seal this covenant the blood of the sacrifice is thrown against the altar and over the people! The life of the oxen, its vital essence represented by the blood, is shared God and God’s people are made one by it. The covenant is sealed.

Now you might rightly think, “What has all this got to do with us here at St Philip’s, and what will the cleaner say and who is going to pay my dry-cleaning bill!?” The New Testament is quite explicit. Those days are past, as it says in the letter to the Hebrews: Jesus abolishes the

first to establish the second. And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Even the Old Testament prophets called for an end to ritual sacrifice. Every time we leave this place we read above the door Micah—an old favourite here at St Philip's—who wrote:

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?

So sacrifice moves from the ritual to the practical and the ethical. Our sacrifice then, according to Micah, is to live in this way, a way epitomised in this our Mission Sunday as we consider our outreach. We endeavour to live this way day in day out and we receive the power to do this as we gather for Eucharist week in week out. We offer ourselves, our souls and bodies, as the old prayer book says. We bring our gifts at the offertory, our monetary offering and the bread and wine. They are the offering of our very selves and are made one with the offering of Jesus—as the new prayer book says: the “one true sacrifice.”

Through that sacrifice, through the blood of Jesus, we are made one with God. The altar is set up, we are gathered, we affirm our faith and, at the altar—as it says in the Book of Revelation in that strange language—we are made white in the blood of the Lamb.

So today we celebrate the Body of Christ—*corpus Christi*, and give thanks; but I think we can lay aside the contention of past ideas and thinking of sacrifice. We are the Body of Christ and we bring our gathering, ourselves, our offering, to be one with Christ, sacramentally present to us. Again in Hebrews: “Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God.” In so doing there is atonement, we are one with God.

The Body of Christ which we receive at Holy Communion is no mere sign or symbol. It is a sacrament, it doesn't just point the way, it works. Its sacrificial power gives potency to our offering. It strengthens us as we endeavour to walk humbly with our God—we, the Body of Christ.

Amen.