

## **The Logic of Sacrifice**

### **Corpus Christi 2018**

June 3rd

Today we celebrate the great Feast of Corpus Christi. This is the day on which the Church invites us to think about the great sacrifice Jesus made on the Cross as we give thanks for the Sacrament of his Body and Blood.

So in this homily I want us to think about the Mass as Sacrifice, a theme that ties our readings together from Exodus, Hebrews and the Gospel According to St. Mark.

Now for a Biblical Jew the place that was most important in his life would have been the Jerusalem Temple, built by Solomon 950 BC, destroyed 587 by the Babylonians, rebuilt after the return from Exile around 520 and then greatly expanded by Herod during the time of Jesus. We cannot understand biblical Judaism apart from the Temple. The life of the Jewish people was shaped by their relationship to the Temple. It was the dwelling place of God on earth. Yahweh had chosen to make his home on Mount Zion. The Temple was a re-capitulation of the Garden of Eden, It was the place where God was rightly praised and hence his people were rightly ordered. It was the place where all the nations of the world were to stream. The Temple was the centre and magnet of Jewish life.

The central reason the Temple existed was for sacrifice. It was here that the offering of grain and animal sacrifices to God took place. The basic logic of sacrifice is straight forward. Take a small aspect of God's creation and return it to him. The first fruits of the field or an animal. Not because God needs it but because we need to return it to God as a sign of thanksgiving, communion or reparation. One would seek atonement meaning – that is becoming one with God. This is why people over this thousand years brought animals by the millions and why smoke went up non-stop day and night. You could smell the Temple before you could see it.

At the Temple the Sacrifice of the Cross had been anticipated for hundreds of years. St. Justin Martyr, whose Feast Day we marked on Friday. He grew up in the second century in Syria, had witnessed certain Jewish Passovers. In one of his writings he describes the practise of preparing the Passover Lambs.

***The Lamb is roasted and dressed up in the form of a cross. For one spit is transfixed right through from the lower parts up to the head, and one across the back, to which are attached the legs of the lamb<sup>1</sup>***

Think about this. Tens of thousands of Passover lambs were sacrificed on Holy Thursday, on the day the Eucharist was instituted, they would all be spitted, they would all be roasted in the form

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of a cross. So you can imagine Peter and John, they are going up into the city and what would they have seen? They would have seen crowds of men coming out of the Temple with lambs on their shoulders elevated and spitted in the form of a cross. In other words, they would have seen lambs being crucified before being eaten as the Passover lamb. From Jewish tradition we learn that from the beginning God has the crucifixion in mind, God has the cross in mind, that the Passover lamb associated with the Exodus is really just a shadow of what is going to be accomplished on Calvary on Good Friday. <sup>2</sup>

Now with this background we can approach the readings with understanding.

The first reading refers to a time around 1400 BC - 450 years before the Temple. Israel is engaging in sacrifice. The Israelites are making sacrifice as a peace offering to the Lord. Moses took the blood of the sacrifices and sprinkled half on people and half on the altar. He is signaling the communion between God and humanity, People become as it were blood brothers. Here we see the logic and the poetry of sacrifice.

Our second reading is taken from the Letter to the Hebrews, which is one of the most extraordinary books in the New Testament. It was written in the late first century by someone who knew the Temple system very well. Here is a well-developed and highly nuanced theology of sacrifice. The writer is alluding in today's reading to the work of the high priest on the Day of Atonement, the high point of the Jewish liturgical calendar. It is also known as Yom Kippur, the day when the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies and would sprinkle the blood on the Holy of Holies and on the People. He is repeating the action of Moses. The writer then makes a staggering claim. He shows that all Israelite Sacrifice - from Moses to the First century - finds its fulfillment in Christ Jesus and His great sacrifice upon the Cross.

*For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God.*

Here is the whole Gospel in this line. He is acknowledging the validity of the line of Old Testament sacrifice that finds its fulfillment in Christ. So he emphasizes how much more now will the blood of Christ cleanse our consciences. Why? Because Christ's sacrifice restores us to right praise.

Listen to how the reading begins:

**When Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent – not made with hand, that is, not of this creation – he entered once and for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.**

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

See what he is doing here. He is imagining the Feast of Yom Kippur when the high priest enters the most holy place in the Jerusalem Temple. Jesus the Son of God did so much more than that. Why? Because by his blood sacrificed on the Cross he entered the great sanctuary in heaven thereby effecting by this the definitive unification between God and his people. He brought not the blood of bulls and goats but his own blood not into the Holy of Holies but into heavenly holy of holies. And thereby reconciled divinity and humanity. Jesus is himself the offering made to God to express thanksgiving, communion and atonement.

It is only with this background and understanding that we can grasp what Jesus is doing and saying the night before his death. He was gathering for a meal, for sure that is why it is called the Last Supper. But listen to the way he talks.

***After blessing and breaking the loaf of bread he gave it to them saying take and eat this is my body.***

This is Temple talk. This is the language of sacrifice. Like the offering of the body of a lamb. But he is now saying it is my body. It is Jesus himself as high priest offering his own body in the heavenly Tabernacle.

***Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them and said This is my Blood of the Covenant, which is poured out for many.***

This language is unintelligible apart from the language of sacrifice. I am now the victim whose blood seals all sacrifice. My blood is now the blood to be sprinkled around the Holy of Holies and upon the people.

I want you to think about this now as you come forward to receive the Eucharist. Here is the body and blood of Jesus not being just sprinkled on you but offered for your ingestion. To eat it to take Jesus' sacrifice into yourself. On this Feast of Corpus Christi we want understand that the Mass as the representation of this great sacrifice. We are in a Temple at the heart of which is an altar behind which stand a priest wearing the vestments of the Temple priesthood - recapitulating and representing the sacrifice of Jesus. His body offered his blood outpoured by which we are reconciled unto God. That is what this Feast of Corpus Christi the body and blood of Christ is all about.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church in paragraph 1340 has a great summary of the relationship between the Eucharist and the Jewish Passover.

***By celebrating the Last Supper with his apostles in the course of the Passover meal, Jesus gave the Jewish Passover its definitive meaning. Jesus' passing over to his father by his death and Resurrection, the new Passover, is anticipated in the Supper and celebrated in the Eucharist...<sup>3</sup>***

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<sup>3</sup> Catholic Church. (2000). [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) (2nd Ed., p. 338). Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.

This is why as Catholics we profess the Eucharist is really the body and blood of Christ. On this Feast of Corpus Christi we want to remember the sacrifice of the Passover lamb wasn't completed by the death of the victim, it was completed by eating the flesh of the lamb, and that is what we do on the Feast of Corpus Christi and every time we come to the Mass.