

Being the Church at Brentwood

Blessing and the Gory Bits

Ps 146 & Hebrews 9:11-14
(428, 425, 530, 563)

November 4, 2012

In the world of the Preacher in Hebrews,
blood sacrifices produced blessing.

It's a way of thinking and behaving that is foreign to us.
I remember as a kid and young adult,
especially on Communion Sundays,
wondering about all this talk about body and blood
in our celebration of the Lord's Supper
at Drummond Hill Presbyterian Church in Niagara Falls
where I grew up.

There was also a grave solemnity about the communion service –
male elders all dressed in very dark suits,
robed clergy speaking in a serious voice,
slow funereal music to Horatio Bonar's communion hymn,
"Here, O my Lord, I see thee" (#543 in the *BofP*),
all seven verses with their language about "cleansing blood."

[Horatio Bonar was a Free Church of Scotland minister
who lived from 1809 – 1889.

He served parishes in Leith, Kelso, and Edinburgh.
He was elected Moderator of the Free Church in Scotland in 1883.
He published many ministerial biographies,
wrote several hymns,
and edited popular magazines teaching the Christian faith.]

But his communion hymn
felt a bit too gory for me at that point in my life.

Now, to be fair, the bloody stuff doesn't show up until v.6,
and most of the hymn deals with eternal grace,
loving support, protecting fellowship with God,
and the "festal joy" of the great "feast of bliss and love."
But the gory bits distracted me from that.

Perhaps that was a unique reaction
to the theme of bloody sacrifice in the Scriptures,
but it was mine and it was strong.

So, in later years, I had to go back and revisit
that distorted reaction to this theme.
I had to face the way my revulsion to the gory bits
had blinded me to the meaning of passages
like the one we read from Hebrews this morning.

As with Bonar's hymn,
so with this passage.
Both are about the eternal salvation
God has offered to humankind in the work of Jesus Christ.

Both are about the reason we are able to serve the living God.

Both are about what God has done for us
so that we can witness to his love by blessing the world.

That's what this passage,
that's what this old hymn,
that's what this monthly celebration of the Lord's Supper,
are all about –
God's love that lifts us up
to be companions of Jesus Christ in serving the living God.

What's the real significance, then, of sacrifice in the Scriptures
and why is it important to understand it better?

Acts of sacrifice go back to the very beginning.
Able, the son of Adam and Eve,
offers an animal sacrifice in Gen 4:1-4.
The act of offering an animal sacrifice
is meant to show homage and loyalty,
seek favour and earn pardon.
Sacrifice is central to the Jewish imagination.
Abraham offers sacrifice at the making of the Covenant –
I will be with you, promises God, and make you a blessing to all peoples.

With Moses and the creation of the religious structures and rituals
that helped hold Israel together as God's servant people,
the practice of sacrifice became the prerogative of the priests.
The blood had to be handled very carefully.
It was seen to represent the life or the soul.

The animals sacrificed all shared an interesting characteristic.
They were all animals who were pursued and killed –
cattle, goats, sheep being persecuted by lions, panthers, and wolves.

So the sacrifice was intended to remind people that God was with the persecuted.

In the end, such sacrifices were seen as
the primary means by which humans are purified in God's eyes,
restored to their original status as companions of God created in the image of God.

In the prophetic literature, this sacrificial system is often criticized
as show and sham, empty of true devotion.
What God wants, the prophets insist, is gratitude and obedience –
gratitude for the gift of life and obedience to being a blessing.
This is the tradition of understanding the true significance of sacrifice
that we find in Jesus Christ.
It was not the original intent of sacrifice that Jesus was challenging,
but rather the domination and exploitation that came with the ways
the priestly class in the Judaism of his day practiced it.

The Preacher in Hebrews draws attention back to the original intent –
blood sacrifices as an expression of gratitude, a way to reconciliation,
and an empowerment to be blessings.

For him, and for us, the important fact here
is that God sacrificed himself to put an end to the need for blood sacrifices
once and for all.

In the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ,
God acted to purify humanity and restore them to their original status
as companions of God created in the image of God
to bless the creation.

Pardon is given, once and for all.
Favour is restored and loyalty enabled.

That is what we celebrate at this great feast of bliss and love
with festal joy and thanksgiving.

That is why we can consume the bread and wine
with gratitude and joy,
remembering what God has done for us in Jesus Christ
and devoting ourselves afresh to our calling to bless the creation.

So, come with me to the table of our Lord, Jesus Christ.
In his risen energy, he is welcoming us to this special meal.
We will be fed by and infused with the rich nourishment of his love.