

THE 23RD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Proper 27 B, 8 November AD 2009

Once and For All (Hebrews 9:24-28)

Though the Letter to the Hebrews is anonymous, we can determine that its writer was very concerned to demonstrate *for you* how Jesus Christ, the Son of God, fulfilled all the hopes and promises of Old Testament religion. The writer explains how our Lord is superior to angels, prophets, priests and kings, and even Moses. In today's pericope Jesus is shown to be superior to the sacrificial system of the Temple.

A religion of blood

I suppose if you are to properly understand the historic Christian faith, its dogma and its liturgical practices (its worship), you have to come to terms with blood. We tend to be a little squeamish with blood. At some point we old timers got over it. I can remember as kid we'd go to the butcher with mom, or to the fish market; there was always sawdust on the floor. For us it was fun to slide around on, now it's considered a hazard. But it had a purpose, it was there to soak up the blood.

In those days too, our old hymnal had in it such goodies as "*Not all the blood of beasts*" and "*There is a fountain filled with blood.*" Our last hymnal removed it. But some of you will recall that in the Revelation to John there is that a picture of the saints "*washing their robes and making them white in the blood of the Lamb.*" (7:14) Still, there are times still when the bloody language of our prayers and worship smack me in the face and I get squeamish; I lose my nerve and I begin to second guess the wording, I fish around for a more delicate way to say what needs saying; praying.

The lambs may be gone, but blood is still at the heart of our faith because our faith is about matters of life and death. Without blood there is no life. The shedding of blood in the sacrifice means there is forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Some say it goes back all the way to Eden where God took the life of some creature to make clothing for Adam and Eve.

I prefer to take you to the day when Moses enacted the covenant between God and Israel at the foot of Mt. Sinai. A spotless lamb was killed, its blood collected in a basin. There they all stand: Yahweh on the mountain top, Moses, Aaron and the elders at the altar, the people gathered all around. Moses reads from the book of the covenant, perhaps the blood still moist on his hands. The people give their

consent; “*we will obey,*” they say. Then Moses pours some of the blood over the altar stones and the rest he sprinkles over the crowd. The people and God are one; united in the Words of the covenant and by blood. Can you imagine going home from church with little droplets of blood on your clothing? Salvation is a messy business.

But I haven’t gotten to the best part yet. (Exodus 24) After the covenant is enacted, Moses, Aaron and the elders climb the mountain, and there at the summit, they eat a meal in the presence of God. This is awesome! If I’ve narrated the events even half right you know that the blood-stained book Moses read from is on the way to becoming the Word of God as Scripture. You know the lamb is a type of the One to come. You’ve made the connections between the altar and the crucifix, between the sacred meal on Sinai and the Supper of our Lord—the supper of the new and superior covenant.

**Heavenly realities,
earthly copies**

Hebrews gives us vivid pictures which lead us to the final and ultimate realities. The tabernacle and the Temple at Jerusalem are copies of a truer (more real) sanctuary in heaven. The sacrifices enacted in our earthly religion, and the prayers offered in the sacred spaces point toward a truer and holier sacrifice, a self-offering unlike any other gift.

Priests enter the sanctuary repeatedly, to offer the sacrificed which atoned for sin. Our priest, Jesus Christ entered “*once and for all.*” That phrase is used three times in Hebrews, emphasizing the finality of Jesus’ work. He takes not the blood of lambs and goats, but his own life-blood. Christ’s offering is singular, unique, it is complete. Christ’s sacrifice is our reality. Jesus is the real thing. All the sacrifices which came before only pointed to Christ; they were illustrations, like rehearsals.

Theologian, Susan Eastman, points out that there is a difference between the real deal and the facsimile. The facsimile has no lasting effect, it can be done over again, endlessly. She notes how little girls playing house at some point rope an unsuspecting boy into being the groom at a play wedding. They can play this over and over because it’s not real. But at rehearsals couples do not repeat their vows: not because of superstition, but because if they exchange their vows to each other, they will in effect be married.

The reason Dan Brown’s novel, *DAVINCI CODE* was so vilified by Christians was that it wove historic fact into the fiction to help suspend disbelief. But there is a difference between what is real and what is fictitious. In this case a fiction threat-

ened to rob people of their faith because they could no longer distinguish between fact and fiction.

Hebrews is not about a fiction, it's the real deal, as Christ's sacrifice is the real thing. The gospel is a once and for all time self-offering, Jesus' sacrifice is the offering that atones for your sin today, tomorrow and for always. It's permanent and it's complete. You can't add a thing to it. The story of the gospel is the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ; it's a messy story. It involves love, betrayal, deceit, corrupt government and death; but above all it involves blood. But the risen Lord will return in glory and power—a *second time*, but not to deal with sin but to “mop up” and bring us home.

We live in a sanitized world; and we've learned to fear blood. The lambs may be a thing of the past, but blood is part of our faith from beginning to end. This letter to the Hebrews testifies to the importance of the blood; there are some 21 references in thirteen chapters. Yes, lambs may be a thing of the past, but there is one Lamb who endures forever, the One who sits with God on the throne; he embodies the priesthood, the sacrifice, the angels and all the kings—Jesus Christ. He gives us still his body and his blood as pledge of his love and grace.

The Supper of the Lamb keeps before our eyes always the heart of the Gospel; *“for without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”* (9:22) There is a gift in the blood, in it we find comfort, hope, peace and the promises of eternal life, all of this through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Would it be so terrible if a little wine spilt on your blouse/ shirt?

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