

Lent 2 – Holy Eucharist

Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18, Philippians 3: 17-4:1 and Luke 13: 31-end

Rev'd Emma Dinwiddy Smith

The Bible readings set down for this Sunday morning are among some of the more obscure passages included in the Lectionary.

God's promise to Abraham of a land of his own and a great dynasty may be clear enough, but the grisly sacrifice of animals and birds, cut in half and laid out on the ground, where they attract the unwanted attentions of birds of prey, is not one with which the 21st-century mind engages very readily.

The strange symbolism of the smoking fire-pot and the flaming torch which pass between the mutilated remains of the animals also remains entirely mysterious to the modern reader, and even theological commentators seem only to suggest that it is somehow representative of the binding nature of God's covenant with Abraham.

We may understand that Abraham wanted to express his gratitude for God's promise and to demonstrate that he would faithfully live up to his side of the agreement. But it is harder for us to see today how slaughtering several animals could be thought to have been pleasing to the God who called into being and loves all of his Creation.

This is a good example of why it is almost impossible for us today to read the Bible as a word-for-word manual for living. Clearly we have a completely different understanding of our relationship with God from that of an ancient society in which animal sacrifice played a large part in cultic ritual.

It has been suggested that, as we see so often, human beings are naturally resistant to and afraid of change, and that people moved slowly from a culture in which animal and even human sacrifice was considered normal, to an entirely different understanding of the praise and worship due to God. We see a progression from the practice of human sacrifice hinted at in the story of Abraham's conviction that God was calling him to sacrifice his son, Isaac, through the astonishingly gory sacrifices of huge numbers of sheep, oxen, and doves still happening in the society in which Jesus himself grew up, to the rejection of animal sacrifice, and demonstrations of human generosity in its place among the earliest Christians.

Jesus' loving and self-sacrificial death on the Cross brought an end to the culture of sacrifice – at least amongst his followers – and showed us what the Old Testament prophets had struggled to make clear: that God seeks the kind of sacrifice which offers unconditional kindness, generosity and compassion to others.

Our passage from Luke shows Jesus' pain as he looks at the city of Jerusalem, supposed to be the heart of Jewish worship, and the resting-place of God's Spirit, and remembers the number of times its inhabitants have failed to hear the messages of love and faithfulness brought to them by the prophets, and have turned violently against them.

In these Old Testament stories, he sees his own story foretold – the violent reactions he will encounter, the failure to hear the message that he brings, and ultimately, his own sacrificial death.

He cries out rhetorically to the people of Jerusalem, "You will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." The quotation comes from Psalm 118, and according to Jewish rabbinic tradition, was composed for the coronation of a king - possibly King David himself - but we have the strong impression in this passage that Jesus foresees it being used one day in a moment of genuine revelation, possibly after his Resurrection, or even at his return in glory.

Again, context is everything – to engage fully with this passage, we are required to have a knowledge of both the Psalms and the stories of the prophets not generally common today, although we can still empathise with Jesus' fear and deep sense of sadness as he looks at the city of Jerusalem and realises that his message will not be heard.

His death will be the sacrifice it takes for people to come to the realisation of their own blindness to God and to his word – something which the sacrifice of animals could never achieve. The phrase, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" features in our own liturgy; in many Mass settings the words are sung after the Sanctus during the Eucharistic Prayer, as we prepare ourselves to recognise and share in the body of Christ within the Communion itself.

This is the moment of our revelation – our flicker of understanding, week by week, as we acknowledge Christ both as Saviour and as Son of God - that moment of sudden clarity predicted by Jesus as he gazed sadly at Jerusalem. And the Eucharistic Prayer also includes the words, "We bring before you this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving."

The idea of sacrifice has not disappeared from our worship, nor has our burning desire to bring before God some tangible offering to demonstrate our gratitude, our love, our awe at his greatness. But through Christ's giving of himself, we are able to re-think our own understanding of a sacrificial dedication to God. Here and there in the Psalms and the writings of the prophets, there are hints that animal sacrifice is not what God wants, but rather, as we say at the start of our Confession throughout Lent, "The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart God will not despise."

Even though giving up one's prize animals for sacrifice may have involved generosity and the diminishing of one's own wealth (especially for the poor), it cannot compare to bringing the sacrifice of one's own contrite heart, in clear recognition of our own faults and flaws, and experiencing the love and forgiveness offered by God in response.

This is the message of the solemn season of Lent – we are called at this time to self-examination and repentance, to prayer, fasting and self-denial, and to the study of God's holy word.

As we pray together at the end of the service, "Through Christ we offer you our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice," we demonstrate our gratitude, our awe and our longing for God's love, and open ourselves up to the revelation of his care, forgiveness and hope.