

## **Sacrifice and Love**

***Jeremiah 31:31-3***

***Hebrews 5:5-10***

***John 12:20-33***

Jesus does it again: he uses that rather pregnant phrase 'lifted up'. In last week's reading, taken from much earlier in John's gospel, Jesus tells Nicodemus

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness  
so must the Son of Man be lifted up

John 3:14

We saw, last week, how the words 'lifted up' had overtones of exultation, glorification, triumph. That conversation with Nicodemus took place in Jerusalem at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and Jesus followed that by a grand tour of Galilee in the north. By the time we come to today's conversation with Philip, Andrew and Peter he is back in Jerusalem. In fact this is his last visit: he has made the dramatic entry which we commemorate on Palm Sunday and we are now in what we regard as Holy Week. And this conversation brings together all those ideas of being lifted up, exalted, glorified. Jesus tells his listeners.

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified

John 12:23

And then a little later

when I am lifted up from the earth  
I will draw all people to myself.

John 12:32

His death and resurrection will be a means of bringing people together in the Body of Christ.

But let us go back to the Old Testament reading from Jeremiah. Here we have a man whose lifestyle looked forward to that of Christ. Like Jesus he was critical of the behaviour of religious and political leaders. Like Jesus he suffered for his outspokenness. Although Jeremiah escaped with his life it would seem that he feared for it for he wrote

I was like a gentle lamb, led to the slaughter.

Jeremiah 11:19

But this is not just the language of persecution. This is the language of ritual sacrifice. Jeremiah would have known he was referring to the Passover lamb, slaughtered every year. But we now read that as a reference to Jesus. John's Gospel make this association of Jesus and the Passover lamb quite explicit. At the very beginning of Jesus' ministry John the Baptist points to Jesus and says,

Look there goes the Lamb of God

John 1:29;

and John tells us that Jesus died at the very moment the paschal lamb was offered.

It is left to the writer to the Hebrews to take this just a little bit further. Not only is Jesus the sacrifice but he is also the priest who offers the sacrifice:

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest,  
but was appointed by the one who said to him,  
"You are my Son, today I have begotten you";

Hebrews 5:5

We sing of this from time to time in the hymn 'Alleluia Sing to Jesus':

Thou on earth both priest and victim.

But Jesus is not like all the other priests who were so familiar in his time. They had to offer sacrifice for their own sin before they could do anything for the sins of their people. They had to offer sacrifice year in year out. Jesus offers the sacrifice once only. We sing of this in another hymn:

Once, only once, and once for all,  
his precious life he gave;  
before the Cross our spirits fall,

and own it strong to save.

One off'ring, single and complete,  
with lips and hearts we say;  
but what he never can repeat  
he shows forth day by day.

To make the point the author of Hebrews likens him to Melchizedek,

as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever,  
according to the order of Melchizedek."

Hebrews 5:6

The quotation is from Psalm 110; it is probably David who is there being referred to as Melchizedek. So when the comparison is now made with Jesus, Jesus is being linked to David. But the association of Jesus with Melchizedek has a direct significance. Melchizedek was a mysterious figure who made one brief appearance in the story of Abraham: he is described as a priest and a king, he offers Abraham bread and wine and Abraham offers him in return 'a tenth of everything', (Genesis 14:20). The significance of the bread and wine is immediately obvious; but the other point the author of Hebrews makes is that Melchizedek's priesthood is unique and totally different from that of the priesthood given by God to Aaron and his descendants.

The likeness between Jeremiah and Jesus is not only in the way that they suffer. It is also in their teaching. Jeremiah teaches a faith based not on keeping rules but in knowing God personally. He writes

This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Jeremiah 31:33

It is important that he describes this new relationship as a 'new covenant': this looks forward to Paul's distinction between the old covenant based on law, on keeping rules and ritual and the new covenant based on grace, generosity and love.

There is nothing unique about what Jeremiah teaches even in the Old Testament. The prophet Joel had no time for dramatic gestures – what mattered was how you treated your fellow man and women:

Rend your hearts and not your clothing.  
Return to the Lord, your God,

Joel 2:13

This matters as we approach Holy Week. I would not want for a moment to do away with all the drama; but we need to remember that unless it leads to or reinforces a change in our lives for the better, it is a waste of time.

This emphasis on the heart and the law being within us is exactly what Jesus teaches in the sermon on the mount. It is not just murder that is a problem but anger; not just adultery but lust; we need to love not just our friends but our enemies as well. In this regard we came across a telling quotation last week in our Lent Groups, it was from Moshe Dayan who served successively as Defence Minister and Foreign Minister in Israel. He said:

'if you want to make peace you don't talk to your friends.  
You talk to your enemies.'

I hope you will not take offence if I speak to you after the mass!

Perhaps we need to make a conscious effort to speak to our enemies; or if we have no enemies then with those with whom we have little in common, those who are strangers. Someone once observed that the hardest part of a church service for those who are new is the coffee that follows because everyone makes a beeline for their friends. I once made this observation in a church meeting and was offered the reply that after the Eucharist is the only time we get to catch up. My considered response to this is - tough! It's great to catch up with friends – but we do it after we have welcomed the stranger.

I said this two weeks ago when I was talking about our relationship with our Muslim neighbours. But it is just as true of our relations with visitors to this church – even the ones we find difficult. Through the scriptures there is an emphasis on welcoming a stranger. It is there in the Law of Moses:

When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Leviticus 19:33-35

It is there in the New Testament

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,  
for by doing that some have entertained angels  
without knowing it.

Hebrews 13:2

And so was Jesus:

I was a stranger, and you invited me in.     Matthew 25:35

So there are two strands to today's readings. There is one about ritual sacrifice and Passover lambs; there is one about a religion of the heart, a faith based on love. And the two complement each other. Jesus and Jeremiah not only teach about loving our neighbour but they also demonstrate it by their own willingness to suffer for right. In the case of Jeremiah that is an inspiring example. But in the case of Jesus it is more. Not only does Jesus actually die, but it is God who dies on the cross. The sacrifice that took place on Good Friday made every other sacrifice redundant. That is why Christians do not offer sacrifice. And as God, he does what no-one else can do: he offers himself to die on the cross and so defeat the power of Satan. That above all is what we declare at Easter.

N Clews  
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