

“God So Loved The World”

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Psalm 51 (VU 776), Micah 6: 6-8, I John 4: 7-12, John 3: 16-17

As we move through Lent, and approach Good Friday, it seems a good time to explore the whole matter of Jesus dying “for us.” The lectionary for today prescribes John 3: 16, where we hear that God “so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.” And in the first letter of John, we’re told that Jesus died as “the atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

What do we make of this talk of Christ as a sacrifice? Does it still speak to us today about our own sense of guilt, and our need for forgiveness?

Let’s start with some reflection on John 3:16: This is the first thing to be said: “God so loved the world...”

These words express the rock bottom faith conviction of Christians, and of Jews as well, that the Creator loves the creation, and loves humanity, and loves every human being.

That’s not something we can prove. It’s a conviction. It’s our faith. We choose to live, and to die, in light of it.

It’s noteworthy that the text doesn’t say that God loves Christians, or even that God loves human beings, but God loves “the world.” The Greek word here is ‘kosmos,’ the whole creation. She loves the whole creation, including us, her human creations.

It shouldn’t be too much of a stretch to believe that God loves what God has created. Even we love our children; so, also, God the Creator loves us, as a mother loves her children, unconditionally, with a love that never lets us go.

By “God” we mean the ultimate Source, the infinite, eternal Womb of all that exists. But all these little human words fall short to speak of an unimaginably great Mind, Intelligence and Power that lies behind all things.

Consider our amazing humanity, with all our intelligence, ability to think, to build, to do science, to heal, to create art and magnificent music...

Our ability to love, to care and to live unselfishly. The text is telling us that God takes delight in all of this. God loves it!

One of the remarkable things about our humanity is that we are conscious of ourselves, and we have a conscience. We do not live by mere instinct. Our consciousness and conscience are a stunning miracle of God’s evolutionary process.

As creatures of conscience we know that we sometimes do wrong, and we fail to do good. We are aware of sin, and we fear the consequences.

This is where the long tradition of religious sacrifice comes in. Our distant ancestors felt guilty, and vulnerable. They feared that God, or the gods, were angry, that the gods would send calamities upon them because of their wrongdoings.

And so they made sacrifices to placate the gods.

The distant ancestors of most of us here lived in western Europe, or Britain, and before they were Christians, for millennia, they practiced the religion of Druidism. The Druids worshipped many gods, especially the sun God. They also revered the world of nature, and no doubt possessed wisdom and genuine spiritual life.

But the Druids also offered sacrifices, usually animal sacrifices, to the sun God, (in places like Stonehenge, in England, for example), hoping that their sacrifices would secure good weather: enough sunshine, but not too much, and the right amount of rain, so that the crops would grow and they would prosper.

Knowing nothing of the laws of nature, they believed that drought, or floods, or hurricanes, were signs of the gods' anger about their sins. By their sacrifices, they hoped to fend off disasters of the weather, of disease, or even of foreign invasion.

They sacrificed their domesticated animals, valuable possessions, sometimes as a sign of thanksgiving, but also as a sign of sorrow for their guilty deeds.

Historians tell us that sometimes the Druids would even sacrifice human beings. They believed the gods would not forgive unless someone died; God or the gods required payment in blood.

But sometimes it was the first born son that the priests demanded; infant children would be thrown into a fire. Or sometimes it was a fertile young couple, sacrificed as an appeal to the gods for the fertility of their land.

The priest would say: This time it's not enough to bring sheep or goats. No. Find a fertile young couple, just married. The most beautiful ones you can find. Bring them here, to be slaughtered on the altar. Then the gods will be satisfied. And the rain will come.

Sacrifices of this kind were widely practiced throughout the world. Not only our ancestors in western Europe, but also in parts of Africa, in China and other parts of Asia, the Aztecs in South America, and so on.

And, of course it was practiced by the ancient Hebrews, and we read of it in the Bible.

You'll find it especially in the Book of Leviticus, that the God of Israel required sacrifices – not human sacrifices, but burnt offerings of sheep, bulls, goats, and sometimes certain kinds of birds. They believed God required blood offerings as a condition for the forgiveness of sins. We read in the book of Hebrews: "There is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood."

That's what the temple of Jerusalem was all about. People brought their animals for sacrifice to the temple; the priests sacrificed them at the altar. Sometimes they also brought grain offerings as well. These might be signs of gratitude to God, but also guilt offerings, to atone for their sins.

But, the prophets who came a few centuries after Moses threw doubt upon the sacrifices.

In Jeremiah 7, the prophet speaks in exasperation: "Oh, the temple, the temple, the temple." "Thus says the Lord... I did not command burnt offerings or sacrifices..."

Jeremiah goes on: Act justly with one another, do not oppress the foreigner, the widow, or the orphan."

In Isaiah also we read: "I have had enough of your burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls or lambs or goats...; seek justice, learn to do good, defend the widow and the orphan...."

The text most familiar to us in this regard is the one we read this morning from Micah, who lived in the eighth century before Christ. Micah said:

"With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of lambs..., Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

But the prophet says No: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

We hear the prophets reflected in Psalm 51 that we read this morning: The Psalmist says to God: "You desire no sacrifice, or I would give it, you take no delight in burnt offerings. The sacrifice you accept, oh God, is a broken and contrite heart...."

We find this in the teaching of Jesus also. In Matthew and Mark, we find on the lips of Jesus: "I desire mercy and not sacrifices."

In fact Jesus himself constantly offers the forgiveness of sins with no sacrifice required. Often he says, especially to people who are sick: "Your sins are forgiven." He does not send them to the temple to offer a blood sacrifice.

In his parable of the prodigal Son, remember, the father, representing God, forgives his delinquent son freely, runs out to meet him and embraces him, with no payment whatsoever.

Jesus offers forgiveness to the woman caught in adultery. He says: "Whoever is without sin, cast the first stone." He does not condemn her, but tells her "go and sin no more." He does not send her to the temple to offer a sacrifice. No sacrifice, no blood payment required.

The central element of Jesus' teaching was this free grace of God. This is the whole point about grace: it cannot be paid for or earned in any way. Just as a mother's love cannot be earned or payed for.

Well, despite the teachings of the prophets, centuries later in Jesus' time, the sacrificial system was still carried on. After all, it was profitable to the priestly class.

As we heard last week in the story of Jesus' attack on the temple trade, the exchange of money, and the sale of sacrificial creatures, was highly profitable.

Jesus saw it as a wicked system that exploited the people's piety, cheating them, making money off them. He shouted out angrily that they had turned the temple into a "den of robbers."

Interesting that, in Mark's gospel he refers to the temple, not as a place of sacrifice, but as "a house of prayer for all nations."

Now, given the long historical practice of sacrifices, it's not surprising that the first generations of Christians interpreted the death of Jesus as a sacrifice to God in payment for the forgiveness of sins. Surely, they believed, Jesus died as a sacrifice for our sins. They believed that on the cross he took our punishment in our place.

We hear this from many New Testament texts. In I John 4, which we read this morning, we hear that Jesus died as an "atoning sacrifice for our sins."

In the book of Hebrews, we read that there is no longer any need to offer up sacrifices of bulls, sheep or rams, because Jesus himself, on the Cross, has become the sacrifice for everyone, once and for all.

These are difficult concepts for us today. We must recognize though, that for its time, this was a liberating message. Imagine such a message being preached by the first Christian missionaries to our Druid ancestors in Britain and Europe.

There's no longer any need, they said, to sacrifice sheep or goats! And certainly it is not God's will that we ever sacrifice a human being. No!, because Jesus Christ is the one necessary and final sacrifice for all time to come.

These are difficult concepts for us, but this message must have been very good news to our European ancestors 1500 years ago. What a relief it must have been. And wherever Christianity has gone, ritual sacrifice has been abolished. Surely that is a very good thing.

But, today it's very difficult for us to identify with the message that God required the sacrifice of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins.

After all, our ancestors, under the influence of Christianity, gave up ritual sacrifices 1500 years ago or more. The ritual practice of sacrifice of animals is simply not part of the way we think.

We ask: Why would killing an animal be pleasing to God? Does God really need to be placated? Does God need to be “satisfied” by the shedding of blood? The prophets, long before Jesus, said No.

And are we really to think that God was pleased by the crucifixion of Jesus? As though God was so angry with us that She required that Jesus must die this terrible, tortured death?

In fact, it's perfectly obvious from the New Testament texts that Jesus of Nazareth died a political death.

He was crucified by the Romans because he questioned their power. They would not tolerate for a moment anyone disturbing the peace, or questioning their authority. They would crucify people at the drop of a hat.

Jesus also made enemies of the powerful Pharisees, who taught the strict keeping of the law of Moses. Jesus questioned their narrow minded legalism, and attacked them harshly: He said they “devoured widows houses, and for pretence made long prayers.” His teaching of the free love and grace of God was anathema to them. They hated him for it.

And of course the powerful priestly class who ruled the temple, had reason to hate him also, especially after his attack on the temple trade. His apparent criticism of the sacrificial system, and his teaching of God’s free grace, threatened their hold on the people, and their livelihood as well.

So it wasn’t God who wanted him dead, it was people.

All these powerful people cooperated to get rid of Jesus. He was subjected to crucifixion, that hideous form of Roman judicial execution designed to keep conquered people quiet and obedient.

So, can we still say that Jesus ‘died for us’? Yes, we still say this.

We recall that he himself said at the last supper: “My body broken for you, my blood shed for you.” What can that mean?

Well, today we still speak of people dying “for us.” On Remembrance Day we commonly speak of the soldiers as having died “for us.” They died to defend our freedom.

We might also speak of some of the great martyrs of our time as having “died for us,” or “for their people.”

Martin Luther King would be a good example in our own time. By sticking his neck out, courageously, as leader of the civil rights movement in the United States, he “died

for black Americans, and for their freedom.” By threatening white power in America, he put himself in danger, and he knew it – no surprise! - he was shot dead.

Now Jesus’ death was surely in some ways comparable to that. He died because of the way he lived. He defended the little people of his country, angered the powerful people, undermined the religious authorities. It should be no surprise that they used their power to eliminate him.

I don’t think that today we need to believe that God required or needed a blood sacrifice.

God didn’t need to get paid off by someone dying. Such an idea runs contrary to the teaching of the prophets, and everything Jesus taught about the freedom of God’s grace.

Such an idea undermines our sense of the goodness of God, and the generous love of God for the world. It legitimizes the worst of harsh, domineering human behaviour.

Nevertheless, we can still say that Jesus died for us, and for all people. But not as a blood sacrifice to buy off God’s wrath.

At the same time, I suggest that the death of Jesus is something much more significant than the death of a heroic political martyr. To understand this, we need to understand about Who Jesus was, and Who Jesus is.

The gospel tells us that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world....”

We acknowledge him as more than a prophet. He is the one who reveals God, in his own person. He not only taught us about God’s grace. He also enacted and embodied God’s grace.

As the risen Lord, he is the one in whom God overcomes the power of death and offers us a glimpse into the eternal realm.

Our faith is more than moral admonitions. Let us not reduce Jesus to just another moral teacher. There is a supra-mundane dimension to Jesus. He is the one in whom we encounter our Creator, reaching out to us with love and grace.

Throughout the New Testament we hear of a unique unity of Jesus with God. We call him “Lord.” He is called “the only Son.”

We hear that he is “in the Father, and the Father is in him,” that he is “one with the Father.” He is called Emmanuel, God with us. He is the Word of God made flesh.

These are all different ways of saying the same thing. In Jesus we have a unique human embodiment of God’s presence in the world.

As the crucified and risen one, he speaks with authority, and his authority is God’s authority.

Yes, he is the 100% human person in whom God is uniquely present.

At the cross, he cries out, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”

Yes, we can say that he truly dies “for us.”

Because Jesus is God’s outreach to us, and God’s outreach to us was costly to Jesus, and costly to God, for God’s grace is not cheap.

Indeed we can say that in Christ, God suffers on that cross. Jesus’s suffering is God’s own suffering. In the suffering of Jesus, God tastes our human agony, despair and death.

In the cross, God in Christ reaches out to us with inexhaustible love and grace. In him God bears our human hatred and rejection, and through that suffering and death, opens the way to resurrection and eternal life.

Jesus, then, is not a sacrifice given to God; rather Jesus is God’s gift to us.

Through him we learn that our Creator loves us without condition, as a mother loves her children, and will never let us go.

And so, we need not live with a great burden of guilt. However much we fail, we are loved.

That is why, at Christmas, we celebrate Jesus’ birth; why at Easter, we are jubilant about his resurrection, and why, on Good Friday, we will solemnly remember his death, with great reverence.

Thanks be to God. Amen.