

Easter 3 Year B

John 2.2

if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the expiation for our sins

One can't get very far in scripture or in the church without encountering the language of sacrifice. The central words of this central Christian act of worship – the eucharist – are a case in point. This is my blood of the new covenant, this is my body which is given for you. Our hymns and our prayers are riddled with sacrificial language – “Love the victim, love the priest”, we sang in our first hymn, and at the offertory we will find “Thou within the veil hast entered, robed in flesh our great high priest, thou on earth both priest and victim in the eucharistic feast”. The writer here expects us to know the Epistle to the Hebrews, where Christ is described as the great high priest who has entered once for all into

the holiest place to offer the one true eternal sacrifice for the sins of the world; and he also expects us to know the context of that imagery, the rituals of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the one day in the year when the holy of holies, the place in the heart of the temple where God himself was thought to reside, could be entered, and entered only by the high priest himself to sprinkle the sacrificial blood upon the mercy seat where the Lord sat enthroned amid the cherubim.

These words and phrases may be familiar to us, and we may also have never paused to think much about their meaning. This is particularly the case in the history of Anglican worship, where the Book of Common Prayer – for centuries the only liturgical option in the Church of England – goes out of its way to remind us over and again that the sacrifice of Christ was made once for all upon the cross of calvary, and is not, repeat not, being re-enacted in the memorial supper which the prayer book calls Holy Communion. This, however, makes the prayer book somewhat out of step, because for most of

Christian history, most of the world's Christians have understood the eucharist as something sacrificial, something in which our offering allows us to share in the eternal offering of Christ to the Father. At the Reformation, Protestants criticised what they thought was the attempt of the church to rehearse the sacrifice of Christ, to conjure up the power of Christ's death as if the priest were a magician. The concern is that the human institution seemed to some to behave as if it had divine power under its control, rather than being subject to it, and so this particular dispute was one of the strongest dividing lines in early modern Christianity.

The extent to which the Church of England retained a sacrificial understanding of the eucharist, remains rather controversial. The Tractarian propagandists of the Oxford Movement in the 19th century were emphatic that the sacrificial character of the eucharist had never been abandoned because the Book of Common Prayer was not, as they saw it, a Protestant

document. They were completely wrong about that, as it happens: no church historian would now defend the view that the Elizabethan church was anything other than thoroughgoingly Protestant. But being wrong has never stopped Anglo Catholics in their tracks, and churches such as this one enthusiastically encouraged the marriage of Protestant prayer book and Catholic ritual which many of you grew up with. For example, the traditional wording of the Eucharistic prayer, which talks of Christ making a "full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world" is intended as an explicit rejection of a catholic doctrine of Eucharistic sacrifice, but we were still using those words at our High Mass every Sunday until quite recently. Until I took over, in fact.

We shouldn't be too hard on ourselves about all this. Christian theology has, from the beginning, involved the difficult task of taking inherited scripture and tradition and applying it to the new and the unknown. That is what the writers of the New Testament are

doing when they call the death of Christ a sacrifice. They are not making any literal claim about the temple cult, they are using the best imagery available to communicate that which is ultimately mysterious. Language is part of that communication, but only part – liturgy and ritual are also part of it and part of our response to the task of interpreting scripture.

Our reading from I John talks of Christ being an expiation for our sin. The Book of Common Prayer uses the word “propitiation”. Some modern translations just have atoning sacrifice or means of reconciliation. The word here is “hilasmos”, a word whose cognate Paul uses in Romans 3, calling Christ one whom God put forth as a hilasterion by his blood. Theologians argue about what the emphasis of this word really is: is the idea that the sacrifice involves propitiates God, appeases his wrath in some way; or does it expiate, does it cover our sins so that they are not a barrier between God and the world. The word hilasterion is used of the mercy seat, the space above the ark of the covenant,

between the winged cherubim, which was made by the lid of the ark itself and where, in ancient Judaism, the Lord himself was enthroned. That mercy seat made a covering for the ark, for the divine presence itself, as if to shield us from the awful purity of divine love, the light that shines so brightly that it burns with righteous fire. The high priestly offering of Christ covers our sins even as it draws us into the presence of God himself.

It is that offering into which we are invited as we celebrate the sacrament of the eucharist. And as we share in the offering of Christ, we do well to remember that for the very first Christians, the most obvious way in which they shared that identity was to share Christ's actual fate – to give their lives for the faith and become what we call martyrs. In these alarming times, Christian martyrdom is a frightening reality for many, one from which we are very lucky to be separated by distance, a distance which relates not simply to geography but also to day to day experience. We know little of that reality, but in recent days the inhumanity

which human beings continue to practise on one another has again been at the forefront of our minds. It is salutary, then, to remember that the Easter gospel is a gospel of sacrifice, that the triumph which we celebrate in the resurrection of Christ is a triumph because God has embraced the reality, the totality of human evil and suffering, in the perfect offering of life which we call the perfect sacrifice. The call to give one's life is the call of every Christian and for us that self-giving begins in offering ourselves at the altar.