

## The Blood of the Covenant – Lent 2

*Exodus 24:1-12; Psalm 105:1-15; Hebrews 9:11-15; Matt 26:26-30*

*“For this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins”*

These are not easy words to understand, especially when we are 2,000 years removed from the culture and concepts that are contained in them.

Today’s topic is on the Blood of Christ and in particular The Blood of the Covenant.

*Let us pray.*

### **SERMON**

To increase our understanding of Why Jesus’ Blood needed to be shed it might be helpful to look at the background concepts of Sacrifice and Covenant and their Biblical history.

#### **Firstly sacrifice.**

The whole notion of sacrifice in relationship to a deity is about humans trying to make sacred their relationship with the deity they worshipped. The reasons for it were about hoping to please the deity, or exchanging the offered sacrifice for favours or conciliation.

The word sacrifice is translated from the Latin word *sacrificium*. The word is composed of two words *sacer* ‘sacred’ and *facere*, ‘make’. So a sacrifice is an offering to a deity in propitiation or homage. The notion behind it is to make what is offered sacred. The word propitiate is to appease, render favourable, to conciliate. The dictionary also tells us that it is the surrender of something highly prized for the sake of claiming something of a higher value.

Primitive religions sacrificed humans, sometimes the first-born son. Many religions, such as Mayan or Incan, sacrificed those seen to be perfect humans, such as virgins, babies or children. The idea was that what was offered to the deity was costly and precious to that community. Some civilisations offered animals instead of humans to their deity and this was the usual practice of the Israelites – but the animals had to be without blemish!

#### **Secondly Covenant**

A covenant is a bond entered into voluntarily by two or more parties who pledge to do something for each other. A covenant is a solemn agreement that is binding on the parties. The promises from each party may be different, or the same as in a modern marriage covenant. A covenant is stronger than a contract as it contains a moral purpose.

It was totally an unexpected thing for a deity to form a covenant with humans. In the OT God initiated a number of covenants: eg with Noah not to flood the whole earth again and the rainbow was given as a sign for this. A covenant with Abraham promising he would have as many descendants as the stars.

However, the Covenant – known as the Old Covenant – between God and the people of Israel given at Mt Sinai was an extraordinary event. It was the whole theological basis for the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. The Ten Commandments were given so that the people knew what their part of the Covenant was. This included that they were not to worship any other gods.

Those two concepts, sacrifice and covenant are behind our restored relationship with God. Remember a sacrifice had to be something precious and costly to please or appease, and a covenant was about two parties pledging something to each other.

Now another important aspect of sacrifice in the Biblical story is the part blood plays in a sacrifice to God, in a sacred sacrifice. One of the earliest sacrifices mentioned in the OT is that of Abel who offered to God one of the firstborn of his flock and we are told in Genesis 4:4 that the Lord looked with favour on Abel and his offering but not on the offering of Cain (v5). Cain had offered some of the fruits of the soil.

**NB it is an important concept to offer to God our first fruits.**

[Notice that when I say NB it offers words on how this applies to our lives.]

As we go through the Bible we can see that God's good pleasure is closely connected to sacrificial blood. In Hebrews 11:4 we are told that this offering of Abel's was by faith and that it was an acceptable sacrifice. Accompanying Abel's sacrifice was his lifestyle and his attempt to please God in how he lived.

NB our lifestyle and the attitude of our heart is part of what we offer.

In looking at the Bible as a whole we can see from Abel's sacrifice and subsequent ones that a sacrifice to God seems to be sacred & acceptable by the use of blood. There seems to be no approach to God apart from blood. I hope the Biblical examples that follow will explain this.

There are lots of examples. Noah after disembarking from the ark builds in Gen 8: 20-21 an "*altar to the Lord, and taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma*". The new cleansed earth was baptised with the blood of that sacrifice as Noah prepared the animals for sacrifice.

Remember in the testing of Abraham – he was asked to sacrifice his son Isaac on the altar? This was no arbitrary command of God's. it was the revelation of divine truth, that it is only through death, that a life truly consecrated to God is possible. It

is only through death, that a life truly consecrated to God is possible. As Isaac could not rise from the dead, his life was spared and a ram offered in his place – as a substitute. But in that sacrifice blood flowed.

When the Israelites were to leave Egypt the whole nation had to experience the saving power of blood shed. The sprinkling of the blood of the Paschal lamb on the doorframes saved the lives of the Israelites – remember the words ‘*when I see the blood I will pass over you*’? The Israelites learnt through this national experience that the death of a substitute enabled them to have life. They gained life because blood was sprinkled.

In each case it involved obedience and sacrifice – and the sacrifice involved blood being shed.

**NB obedience and sacrifice are part of being God's people.**

50 days later, after the angel of death passed over the Israelites because they covered their doorframes with the blood of the lambs, the lesson was reinforced at Mt Sinai. Here the Covenant was established – and as Hebrews Chapter 9 reminds us it was established with blood. God gave His Law, the 10 Commandments as the foundation of the Covenant. Remember it is extraordinary for God to form a covenant with humans. It is by blood alone that God and humans can be brought into covenant relationship, covenant fellowship. It had been foreshadowed at the gate of Eden by Abel's sacrifice, on Mt Ararat by Noah's, on Mt Moriah with the sacrifice of Isaac, in Egypt with the passing over of the blood and now at the foot of Mt Sinai in a solemn manner it become clear that there could be no access by sinful humans to a Holy God without blood.

As soon as Moses is given the 10 Commandments he is told to tell the people to make an altar to God and sacrifice on it burnt offerings – naming sheep, goats and cattle (Ex 20:24). Again when the Covenant was confirmed in Chapter 24 of Exodus it is with the shedding of blood. In v 5ff it says: *‘Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and other half he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people ... then Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said “This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.”’*

Notice the words used here and by Jesus in the Gospel. Jesus used his words deliberately: “***This is My Blood of the Covenant ...***” only this time He is referring to His own Blood and not that of bulls and goats.

“***This is My Blood of the Covenant ...***” the words are laden with more than history, more than remembrance. They are about obedience, they are about sacrifice and they are about a Holy God's offering of a New Covenant to His

people through the substitutionary sacrifice of His own Son. This is a Covenant of complete forgiveness! Forgiveness of sins.

The Scripture verses we have been looking at today reveal to us that the highest act of worship involves the shedding of blood, the offering of blood, and the sprinkling of blood. The Israelites continued to worship in the way established at Sinai and once a year on the Day of Atonement the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies with blood to signify the substitution of that blood for the sins of the people.

### **Why blood?**

Blood is essential for life. It represents life. Its flow is essential for life to continue in us – when the blood stops we stop. It carries more than a genetic message about who we are alive or dead. When Cain killed Abel God said Abel's blood called out to Him from the ground. Blood is more valuable than silver or gold because without blood we cannot live. We can live without gold or silver. So to seal a covenant with blood is to seal it with the most valuable thing – to declare that life itself rests on fulfilling it.

The value of a blood gift is immeasurable. The value of a full blood-exchange means certain death for the one offering it.

This is what Jesus did – in obedience he sacrificed Himself allowing His blood to be poured out as an offering for our sins. He gave the most valuable thing He could – His very life. And he took the offering of His blood to the Most Holy Place and offered it to God the Father as an exchange for all of our sins. He substituted Himself for the punishment we deserved. He was the divine exchange.

John the Baptist when he first saw Jesus said *Look the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.* (Jn 1:29). The sacrificial Lamb.

### **What do we do with this knowledge?**

- The knowledge that Jesus came to offer the only acceptable sacrifice to save us.
- The knowledge that His life Blood had to be sacrificed and sprinkled on us to cleanse and redeem us.
- The knowledge that God prepared His people from the beginning to see that obedience, sacrifice and blood were the way of a sacred propitiation.
- The knowledge that we were reconciled to God through the Blood.
- What do we do with the knowledge that sin brings death, eternal death but that eternal life was bought for us with the Blood of Jesus.

There is no area of life that the Blood of Jesus doesn't touch for us. In the well known words: the Blood of Jesus avails for us.

It benefits us abundantly!

If any think they are unworthy or what they have done is too bad for God to forgive, don't forget to look at the words of Jesus in today's Gospel and that we have every time we have Holy Communion: "*For this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*". (Mt 26:28)

It has already been poured out – once was enough – it was so precious. How blessed we are! You are forgiven! I am forgiven! Jesus did a full exchange – not just a partial exchange – for you and me – this is indeed Good News.

*Let us pray:*

Lord, this concept of sacrifice and substitution or exchange is not easily understood in our culture. We tend to avoid gory things. Please help us to know what to do with this knowledge of what Jesus has done for us and of the cost to Him in shedding His Blood. Help us to seek to know more deeply how the precious Blood of Jesus avails for us, and how to honour the sacrifice of it and to also honour and treasure it as Jesus' amazing love gift.

References:

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