

SACRIFICE

One of the most distasteful ideas in the Bible and in Christian theology over the years is the idea of sacrifice.

The worst of all example is when 'sacrifice' is applied to Jesus at Easter.

There are those who say what happened at Easter time was that Jesus died on a cross instead of us, in order that God would forgive us.

Not only is that often presented as Christian doctrine it is often seen as the MOST important thing of all about Christian doctrine!

This belief is the core one – this is the heart of everything – some would say the most important fact of all about Christianity!

It is based on the horrible idea that rather than loving us, God actually hates us. God hates human beings and refuses to accept them. In fact, according to the theory God is out to punish us forever in a place called Hell, and the only way we can avoid this is if we claim a connection to Jesus who has paid the penalty of a violent (and undeserved) death on our behalf.

According to this view, God will not forgive us unless someone (in this case Jesus) pays our penalty in blood.

According to this view, God's opinion will be changed for those of us who are Christians but God still hates everyone else.

Now what Jesus did at Easter **is** the most important thing about our faith.

It is the heart of Christianity.

But the way its often described is totally wrong.

The message of Easter is not that Jesus had to undeservedly sacrifice his own life to calm down some angry monster God.

The message of Easter is something wonderful. It's about love.

Easter shows us that Gods love for us will not be stopped. That God goes on loving us even when we don't deserve it.

And it's the message that Gods love is the most powerful thing of all.

Evil, Death and Darkness cannot defeat this love.

Easter is the security that God loves us always and we can rely on that love forever.

But, of course, there are plenty more examples of sacrifice in the Bible.

Two particularly nasty stories are the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham. Of course it didn't happen at the last minute, but God told Abraham to kill his own son as an offering to prove his faith, and when Abraham goes through with it and is about to strike, God calls the whole deal off.

Abraham has passed the test with flying colours. But what does the story say about God?

Or there's the story of the warrior Jephthah, described as 'a mighty man of valour' (in the book of Judges 11) who made a deal with God.

To show his thankfulness to God for helping him get through a battle and victory over the Ammonites, he says he will kill as an offering the first thing that comes out of the door of his house when he gets home.

In those days family animals lived in the same house as their humans.

He's imagining that it's going to be a chicken or some kind of livestock.

But when he gets home, first out of the door is his little daughter who comes running out to greet him.

It's terrible news, but he has made a promise to God and so he reckons he has to go through with it. He sacrifices his own wee girl as a thank you to God.

Stories like those remind us that sometimes the Bible doesn't describe for us what we **should** do – sometimes the Bible gives us some stories so we can see what **not** to do.

God is not impressed by people who are ready to kill their children to show how much they love God.

There's another kind of sacrifice in Bible times which involves not killing but being shunned or ignored.

Throughout scripture there is the idea of God's people being called to be different – called to be a good example to other nations – called to stick close to God.

There's nothing wrong with that idea, although some of the laws and rules and customs in the Bible are pretty excessive, and relate to the life of desert tribes in the time before Christ, rather than to us city dwellers of the 21st century.

But part of these ancient rules involved the idea of making sacrifices. Often animals or birds would be given to God as offerings for protection or blessing or acceptance.

They might be killed or just turned loose into the wilderness.

They were sacrifices. But *people* were too.

Not necessarily by being killed – but by being rejected..

Particular groups of people were regarded as being unclean and dragging the rest of the community down – polluting everyone else. So the best thing to do was to be rid of them – either casting them out altogether or refusing them a proper role.

Listen to these words from Leviticus.

"None of your descendants who has any physical defects may present the food offering to me. This applies for all time to come. No man with any physical defects may make the offering: no one who is blind, lame, disfigured, or deformed; no one with a crippled hand or foot; no one who is a hunchback or a dwarf; no one with

any eye or skin disease; and no eunuch. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has any physical defects may present the food offering to me. Because he has a physical defect, he shall not come near the sacred curtain or approach the altar. He must not profane these holy things, because I am the Lord and I make them holy.”

(Leviticus 21:17-23)

It's a very human thing to do – to find someone else to blame and just to get rid of them. Of course that doesn't make it right!!!

And this practice has continued down through the years in human society and sad to say, even the church.

Here's my friend Nathan Nettleton from Australia...

'It sounds shocking when it is written down and relates to physical disabilities, but in variant forms it still goes on in many many churches of today. It is not common for it to be a written code, but it is culturally imposed and concepts of purity are still in play.

People with alcohol or drug addictions are often shunned and pushed out.

People with mental illnesses are often given up on and lost.

Divorcees are not cut off as often as they used to be, but it wasn't long ago.

And the current vogue is to sacrifice homosexual people....churches that include homosexual people are described as impure and compromised and displeasing to a holy God.

Either the individuals must sacrifice their own sexuality, or the church must sacrifice the individuals.'

(Nathan Nettleton, Laughing Bird, Sacrifices that please God, 29 August 2010)

One of the attractions of scapegoating other people is that it gets **you** off the hook and allows you to feel superior.

They are the outcasts – **you** are one of the 'good' people.

Sure you may have your faults like everyone else, but at least you aren't black or disabled or gay or divorced or dirt poor or whoever....

So I don't know if you gathered this yet, but what I am saying today is that there are all sorts of examples of sacrifice in the Bible and in churches over the years and in Christian theology that I am not happy with.

And I don't think for one minute God is happy with them either.

But there is another side.

The whole idea of sacrifice is not necessarily wrong.

There are times when sacrifice can be needed.

There are times when sacrifices are important.

There are times when sacrifice is good.

To sacrifice means to give something up, and there are times when we may need to give something up for the greater good.

If you ever have children you will have to sacrifice to care for them.

You can't do everything you want when there are kids. It will affect your social life. It will affect your wallet – kids are expensive. It will curtail your movements. It will mean a whole lot of compromising.

Time, effort, money, skill, so much sacrifice is involved in rearing children.

If you decide to refuse to make any sacrifice, you will be a terrible parent.

If you have a partner in life the same thing is true.

You can't always insist on your own way if you are in a relationship with someone else. There has to be give and take.

If you want to learn to do something like run a 10k

or play an instrument

or learn a language - you need to sacrifice to do so.

Without sacrifice you will not succeed.

But there's a whole world of difference between you choosing to sacrifice something for a greater good and making someone else be the sacrifice!

There **is** a way that God asks us to sacrifice.

If we want to be God's people we need to be prepared to sacrifice ourselves.

In what way? What for?

Our reading today from the complicated book of Hebrews gives us the answer.

"Let us, then, always offer praise to God as our sacrifice through Jesus, which is the offering presented by lips that confess him as Lord. Do not forget to do good and to help one another, because these are the sacrifices that please God."

(Hebrews 13:15-16)

Turns out there are two ways in which we are invited to sacrifice.

One is by *'doing good and helping one another'*.

It's to do with the way we treat other people.

God challenges us to be willing to care – to take time and effort to help make a difference in the lives of others.

A true follower of Jesus can't just be self-obsessed.

In a world of need we have to care for other people and involve ourselves in helping them and entering into their situation.

Why is *that* sacrifice?

Because it will cost us something in time and effort and skills and money.

It means we have to give up concentrating only on what we want to do and to spend some of our time entering into the struggles of others.

It would be easier in some ways not to bother.

We could just forget all that stuff – forget the pain out there and think only of ourselves but God calls us (and Christ calls us) to a different mentality – to be prepared to put ourselves out and to suffer the inconvenience of caring for more than ourselves and our own wee world.

The second way we sacrifice is through worship.

Why is *that* sacrifice?

Deciding that we will make time for worship and prioritising that time means we are choosing not to do other things. Building that time into our lives as central means blocking off that time in our week.

There are the offerings that we bring. Are we happy to give to God some spare change or are willing to give to the work of Gods kingdom something that actually costs us something?

Of course the purpose of worship is not simply about handing over some money or spending an hour in some building but being in tune with God.

The desire to take time to line ourselves up with God is so important because it helps us stay close to God and gives us the best chance to hear God’s voice in our lives.

Long ago, before the time of Christ, the prophet Micah was asked to sum up the things that matter most.

The words he used (though very different) fit this passage from Hebrews perfectly. Another way of saying the same thing.

***“Seek Justice
Love Mercy
Walk Humbly with God.”***

(Micah 3:6:8)

That last is to do with our worship and our spiritual connection.

This is what God wants from us – that we will seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

As the song says, *I want Jesus to walk with me.*

Once Jesus said *“Go and learn what this scripture means ‘I desire mercy not animal sacrifices.’”*

(Matthew 9:13)

(He’s quoting the words of the prophet Amos in Chapter 6:6)

God is not interested people trying to buy God off with fancy religious services and sacrifices of animals, if they are not going to practice kindness and basic justice.

Instead God is interested in the sacrifice of doing good to our neighbours and the sacrifice of praise.

That phrase 'sacrifice of praise' you'll find in our last hymn today and in the one that is coming next.

This is the sacrifice that God asks of us.

This is the sacrifice that God is hoping for.

This is the sacrifice that pleases God – that we are called to –
that will always take time to worship,
and to care for the people around us.

Hebrews 13:1-7, 15-16

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