



The Tenth Sunday After Trinity
24 August 2014

A Living Sacrifice

A sermon by Revd Colin Midlane

Readings: Isaiah 51.1-6; Romans 12.1-8; Matthew 16.13-20

Most Sundays, after receiving Holy Communion, we make the bold prayer “we offer you our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice”. You may notice how that echoes words from the Epistle this morning “offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, holy and acceptable to Him” (Romans 12.1). For me, in the past month, those words have taken on a chilling meaning as the lives of Christians and others in Iraq have been threatened, resulting in 100,000 fleeing their homes, the subsequent killings by Islamic State and now further communities are threatened by massacre. The killing of James Foley last week shocks and appals us; his mother describes how his life was given to reporting the truth.

If we offer ourselves as a “living sacrifice”, what does that mean? Charles Wesley wrote “till death thy endless mercies seal, and make my sacrifice complete”. Beyond the poetry and beauty of that word sacrifice - that’s what I want to think about this morning.

Sacrifice is very often bound up with a religious motive. Offerings are made to appease the gods or God, and to gain favourable responses to prayers. In the Old Testament we read details of animal sacrifices and grain and oil offerings. Much of the New Testament was written against a background of persecution of killings of those first Christians.

Today is St Bartholomew’s day. Legend has it that he was flayed alive. We might think of him as an archetypal martyr or witness to the faith. In a different time and place think of the wonders of the Aztec civilisation in the fourteenth century in Mexico, their artistic achievements and scientific discoveries, but all this alongside mass human sacrifices to a host of gods and sheer butchery.

Going back to the Old Testament, my stomach churns every time I hear the well known story of Abraham preparing to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22). In effect “Dad, where’s the sacrifice?” “My son, it’s you”. In the end, the Lord provides the sacrifice but my guts tell me there could have been another way. Could not Abraham have argued with God as Job did?

These somewhat random examples of sacrifice made me think that sacrifice is costly, it is meant to be for a good or a noble cause; that the human victims of sacrifice may be willing or unwilling. When we are describing wars, past or present, we need to be careful in our use of the word ‘sacrifice’. Instead of bloodshed offered or demanded, we must always look for another way. These very difficult questions about the ethics of war and of sacrifice, suggest that our Autumn Education series here is right to focus on ‘Christian Responses to War and Violence’.

I said earlier that sacrifice is often bound up with religious motives. So it finds expression within our Christian faith. At the heart of our Christian worship, the Eucharistic Prayer tells the story of the sacrifice of Christ, how He “gave up his life for us all” or the Book of Common Prayer “a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world”.

The Jesus story is not the Abraham-Isaac story. I believe that Jesus lived and died sacrificially from his own choosing, seeking to follow his Father’s will, and after prayer, sweat and anguish, taking the way that led to the cross. When we look at the cross, again we see the cost and horror of sacrifice.

“We offer you our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice.” What does that mean to you and me, here and now? Let me tell you about one situation that happened recently which made me stop and think. Some of you know that I’m ‘into’ monks and nuns! A few weeks ago a friend (in fact my first cousin once removed – I had to look that up!) became a monk, making his life profession. A decision reached by him and his community after some years of prayer and discernment. So Ian is now a Brother within an Anglican Benedictine community (unusual as he is also a Methodist minister). One of the questions put to him was “are you willing, by the grace of God, to renounce all that might narrow or impede your love of Christ and your neighbour, and to live out the Gospel day by day in a truly converted life?”. Ian’s “Yes” to that question and to God’s call means that he is offering himself to be a living sacrifice. Then, as the Eucharistic Prayer was said, in a symbolic gesture, Ian lay prostrate before the altar, as if he was offered along with the bread and the wine. Here was one person’s response to the love of God made known in Christ. Ian’s life has been offered, and blessed, and will be broken and shared with others, within and beyond his community. That, of course, is a very specific calling within a specific community and its structured life (which, by the way, I don’t see as escapist).

But it might make us ask, what is my response to the love of God made known in Christ, to Christ’s life given and broken for us? We don’t live within a monastic structure and order, the response we make will be in what I call “the day to day mess of life” and its demands.

As we receive Holy Communion this morning, may we be aware of God’s blessings given to us; as we receive in our hands that fragile wafer or piece of bread, may we remember God made vulnerable in Jesus, His life broken and given to us. May we respond with our Amen or Thank you and have that desire not just to receive but also to give back in our own specific ways in the mess of our lives. We don’t need to prostrate ourselves before the altar, but simply to come with that openness that allows us to receive and to give and whatever we may be feeling, some of our emptiness will be filled with the love and grace of God, enabling us to leave here and encounter life, Christ being with us.

In the words of the hymn:

*We bring our lives as a daily offering
Of worship to the Servant King*

And we can be bold to say “we offer you our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice”.

Amen.