

### A Living Sacrifice

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson, pastor, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Maundy Thursday, March 27, 1986: Scripture Lessons: Exodus 24:3-8; Psalm 116:12-19; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; Mark 14:12-26

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The imagery is bizarre to 20th century eyes. It's difficult for us to understand that OT ceremony in which Moses splashed the people with blood and poured the rest out on the altar. Perhaps the simplest way to understand it is to say that by that ceremony Israel and God became blood brothers and sisters. That ceremony points forward to Christ when he raises his cup, shares it with his disciples, and says, "This is my blood of the New Covenant". St. Paul, writing years later explains what that means. "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?" What does it mean to participate in the blood of Christ?

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First, it means that we share in his life. For the ancient Jews, life was symbolized by blood. Repeatedly in the OT we read the statement, "The life is in the blood". So when we participate in the service of Holy Communion we say to God, "I want to share in the life of Jesus. I want his life to be in me. I want his life to fill me." There's an old hymn that expresses that desire.

"May the mind of Christ, my Savior,  
Live in me from day to day,  
By His love and power controlling  
All I do and say."

Years ago I read an article in Time magazine about Karl Barth when he visited America back in the early sixties. Barth was the most influential Reformed theologian of the twentieth century. But he wasn't merely an academic Christian. He was filled with the spirit of Christ. The writer of the Article described Karl Barth as a "Christ intoxicated man". I've never forgotten that expression and think of it especially when I take the wine

in Holy Communion. When we take that cup we're participating in the blood of Christ. We're taking his intoxicating life into us. May each one of us pray as we receive the cup, "O Lord, make me a Christ intoxicated person."

Second, participation in the blood of Christ means that we share in his suffering. Paul writes, "that I might know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings." In Christ we see how God suffers for the world. God loves the world so much he bleeds for it. God is like a Father who has a terribly sick child and he says, "I'd do anything to make my child well." And that's exactly what God does in Christ. The cross shows us that God will do anything to make his children well.

Because we've come to share in the sufferings of Christ we also want to share in making the world well. Our hearts also bleed for the world and its violence, its hunger and poverty. Our hearts bleed for men and women who don't know Christ or who ignore him and go down the ways of death. So when we take that cup we're saying to God, "Lord, I share your suffering for the world."

Third, participation in the blood of Christ means that we take our place in the work and worship of the Church, the Body of Christ. Protestant Christianity suffers from an excessive individualism. There's a lot of "Me and Jesus" religion around; this feeling that we really don't need the church. All we need is Jesus. Someone asks, "Can I be a Christian and not go to church? Can I be a Christian and not be baptized or participate in the Lord's Supper?" That's like saying, "Can I really be married and not live with my family and eat with them?" I suppose it's possible but it certainly doesn't sound like much fun and it certainly wouldn't be healthy for a marriage.

The Church is the Body of Christ. Christians are members of that Body. We can't belong to Christ without belonging to his body. Can a leg be a leg unless it belongs to the body? Cut off from the body a leg or an arm dies. When the blood is cut off from any part of the body that part of the body dies. We need the blood of Christ to flow through all the body and to have that happen we need to be connected to the Body.

And that Body of Christ includes not only us on earth but ~~all~~ the saints who from their labors rest.

O blest communion, fellowship divine!  
We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;  
Yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine:  
Alleluia! Alleluia!

What a tremendous thought. As we take the cup and break the bread this evening we're participating with all the saints; your godly mother or father; the builders of this 250 year old church; the Dickeys', the Watts', the Ramseys' and not only with them but also with the prophets and apostles. "For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread." So when we participate in the Lord's Supper we reaffirm our commitment to the whole Church, the Body of Christ.

Finally, when we participate in the blood of Christ it means that Christ shares himself with us. My mother's favorite hymn is, "What a Friend we have in Jesus". One of the stanzas goes,

Have we trials and temptations?  
Is there trouble anywhere?  
We should never be discouraged--  
Take it to the Lord in prayer!  
Can we find a friend so faithful,  
Who will all our sorrows share?  
Jesus knows our every weakness--  
Take it to the Lord in prayer!

At the heart of the Gospel is the faith that God participates in our

sorrows. God has come to us in Jesus Christ, in the body and the blood. When we're tempted, when we're suffering, God doesn't simply send us his Word from on high telling us to cheer up and be comforted. He comes to us visibly in Christ, in the body and the blood. And he comes to us this evening, not just in Word but in Sacrament, in what we can see and feel as well as hear. Common bread and wine become for us the vehicles of His real presence with us.

G. A. Studdert Kennedy said it this way in a poem,

How through this Sacrament of simple things  
The great God burns His way,  
I know not-- He is there.  
The silent air  
Is pulsing with the presence of His grace,  
Almost I feel a face  
Bend o'er me as I kneel.

Friends, tonight we renew our covenant with God. The cup that we bless is a participation in the blood of Christ. The bread that we break is a participation in the body of Christ. Let us, then, present ourselves to God as a living sacrifice. Take the cup with the intention to share in the life of Christ; to share in his suffering for the world; to take your rightful place in the church, the Body of Christ; Take the cup as one who wants to let Christ share your griefs and sorrow.

"Behold the blood of the covenant."

Let us pray: Almighty Father, whose dear Son, on the night before he suffered, instituted the Sacrament of his Body and Blood: Mercifully grant that we may receive it thankfully in remembrance of Jesus Christ our Lord, who in these holy mysteries gives us a pledge of eternal life; and who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.