

Sunday 11 August 2024

Liverpool Parish Church

Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

OT: 1 Kings 19.4-8

NT: Ephesians 4.25 - 5.2

Gp: John 6.35,41-51

I wonder what you think of the language of *sacrifice*. We still hear it quite a bit, even in a secular age. Think of the Olympics: many athletes will talk about the sacrifices they have had to make for the sake of elite success. But it doesn't have to be something that extraordinary. All the time, people make sacrifices for their career, for their children, to care for relatives, to pursue their art, to work for justice.

On one level, sacrifice has a simple meaning. We give one thing up for the sake of something else – something more worthwhile, more urgent, or simply the right thing to do.

But sacrifice has a deeper religious meaning. Offering things to the gods or to God seems to be a feature of very many ancient cultures. Often, people have sacrificed living things, as we find in the Jewish temple. The logic of this sacrifice is not always clear. It is not usually thought that the gods literally need what we are giving them, as if it were food. So why do people do it?

This kind of sacrifice taps into a deep, almost unconscious idea that we need to offer things to higher powers. Perhaps they are a sign of gratitude and honour. We give back part of what we have been given in a symbolic exchange. Our life is given to us; we cannot determine its conditions or, often, its end. That sense of dependency is expressed symbolically, in sacrifice. By voluntarily offering something important to back God, we establish a right relationship with the powers beyond us.

Because sacrifice expresses such deep and unconscious forces, it can become a questionable practice. Doing sacrifices in the 'correct' way can become a substitute for ethics and justice.

Or we might see sacrifice as something demanded by a God who will be angry with us if we do not give it – less a free offering than a kind of protection payment in a divine extortion racket. There are plenty of passages in the Old Testament prophets and psalms which challenge such crude ideas of sacrifice, especially when used as an excuse to evade living justly.

In a secular age, such negative connotations of sacrifice persist. It is surprising how much people think we have to hurt, punish and deny ourselves in order to feel we deserve anything from life. Or we might make others into our ‘sacrifices’, loading our sense of vulnerability and guilt onto them. In a way, this is what we saw in the recent riots: a scapegoating, which is also a kind of sacrifice. The term scapegoating of course derives from the Old Testament, in which a goat is driven into the wilderness, bearing the sins of the people, so they do not have to bear them themselves.

Sacrifice is problematic: it might turn into a transaction, into appeasing an angry God, into self-punishment or scapegoating. But I do not think we can simply ignore it. Sometimes it is right to restrict our desires, to give up what our ego wants for the sake of something more important. And sacrifice does express a deep aspect of our psyche and spiritual life. The question is how to make it a healthy one, and how to make sure we don’t use it to turn God into a vengeful monster.

I suggest that true sacrifice is that which ultimately gives life, rather than taking it away; which serves justice rather than shirking it; which honours creation rather than abusing it. Unhealthy sacrifice keeps us trapped in guilt, self-dislike and fear. True sacrifice is a way to life giving communion.

When Jesus in our gospel talks about himself as the bread of life, I think we are given a clue to what true sacrifice means. There are three things Jesus says that are crucial here. They reflect the three parts of his saying, ‘I am the bread of life.’

Firstly, he says / am the bread of life. He is not sacrificing anything or anyone else; not expecting people or animals to die for him or for us. This is a free offering of *his* life, his

being. It is not in some abstract rule that we find lifegiving truth, but in a personal truth and relationship. Jesus offers to us the human face of God. In his light, we learn what it means for us to be truly human.

Secondly, Jesus says, I am the *bread* of life. Bread is, obviously, food. In linking it to the legendary story of manna in the wilderness, Jesus is saying: this bread is food for the journey. It is the grace we need to carry on. It is nourishment and empowerment. It strengthens us in communion, so that we can make sure others around us have bread too. Bread is symbolic: in breaking bread we establish community. It recalls the bread offered to God in the Temple, which was then shared by the priests. In other words, here is a sacrifice which is life-giving, healing, communal. A sacrifice which creates, rather than destroys, because it feeds and invites all. It cannot be separated from the real needs of all who are hungry and the scandals of famines and foodbanks.

But it also answers our deeper spiritual needs. For, finally, Jesus says I am the bread of *life*. Those who eat manna – and any other bread – will die. This is about more than physical death. Last week I referred to the hatred that drove the riots as a kind of famine or emptiness. It is a craving that can never be satisfied, because it does not know what true food, true satisfaction, true life is. In contrast, the bread Jesus offers gives the life that truly satisfies, because it meets our most fundamental desires. Not the passing wants of the ego, but the needs of the deepest self for connection, forgiveness and love.

Jesus as the bread of life is an offering and sacrifice. But this is a sacrifice *for life*. It is one which is wholly personal, which brings people into communion with one another and God, which gives a life that truly satisfies.

We might ask what a life that truly satisfies looks like. Our wonderful reading from Ephesians gives us a kind of charter for it. It means putting lies aside, speaking the truth in love. It means acknowledging that we do not live in isolation and competition but as members of one another. It means letting go of anger and theft, and working honestly so that all can share the proceeds. It means speaking in ways that build people up rather than

tearing them down. (Perhaps Elon Musk should read this passage). Recall those verses: 'Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.'

And the foundation of all of this comes in the final part of our reading: 'be imitators of Christ . . . live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.' That is true sacrifice: a shared communion which liberates us for true life. One in which we imitate Christ and live for ourselves that pattern of life-giving love.

We do not worship an angry God demanding sacrifices in order to please him, or even demanding the blood of his Son as some kind of literal payment of a debt. All this language is metaphor and imagery which we should not take literally, because God has no ego. God needs nothing from us but gives us everything.

That brings us to this eucharist. I take seriously the Catholic teaching: that the Eucharist is rightly called a sacrifice. It never takes the place of Jesus's self-offering. It means we *share* in that self-offering here and now, not in a memory of a long distant past. And this sacrifice is a lifegiving 'Act of Communion with God in Love' (to use Richard Benson's words). Jesus's offering is made *to us*, in bread and wine, in grace poured out, in deepest hungers met. It is also made *to God*, showing us how to live a human life that is wholly an offering to Love. All we do – offering incense and music as the fragrance and harmony of prayer, bringing the gospel into the midst of the people, and the gifts from the people to the table – all of it expresses this exchange of gifts, this exchange of lives.

We are called to be imitators of God in Christ. With all creation, we are called to share the lifegiving song of joy offered in response to God's grace. And we do it in the strength of the one who says to us all: 'I am the bread of life.'

Fr Steven Shakespeare