Holy Communion – Week Two
Eucharist: Thanksgiving and Sacrifice

The word "Eucharist" means "Thanksgiving". In the context of Christian worship it is specifically linked to our prayer of thanksgiving for what Jesus did for us on the Cross, namely his self-sacrifice. But what sort of sacrifice is it that Jesus made on the Cross? And, what is the connection between Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross and our celebration of the sacrament of Holy Communion? This evening we will take a look at the Eucharist as Thanksgiving and Sacrifice.

What is a Sacrifice?
Maybe this sounds like a silly question but the truth is that modern Western civilization is very unfamiliar with the practice of ritual sacrifice. These are things relegated to other cultures and our ancient history. So lets begin by looking at how and why sacrifices were practiced in the past, particularly within the Old Testament tradition.

The first thing you notice about sacrifices in the Old Testament is their sheer variety – when they are offered, what is offered, how they are offered and why they are offered. And it doesn't help that there is a great deal of overlap and multiple meaning within a single sacrificial act. Noah's offering after the flood (Gen 8: 20-17) is a thank-offering for God's deliverance, an atonement for the sin that caused the flood and a sacrifice that seals the covenant of future care with God. When the Hebrews eat the Passover sacrifice in Egypt (Ex 13), it is both to ward off the evil that will befall Egypt's first-born and a communion meal for the house of Israel. Later it would also be the meal that commemorated the covenant and celebrated deliverance.

Though often interchangeable and complementary, there are at least five different types of sacrifice or offering that can be distinguished in the Old Testament.

- **Burnt offerings**. These are most clearly gifts to God alone. Since they are burnt up, they are given entirely to God. No part is retained by the worshipper. The gift can be given in homage or thanksgiving or to atone for sin.
- **Cereal offering**. These gifts are to pay tribute to the one to whom they are offered and to gain favour with them. Such offering were not eaten by the worshippers but given to the priests (Lev 2:1-3).
- **Peace offering**. These were sacrificial meals where an animal was ritually slaughtered and a meal shared by the worshippers. This could be offered to God (Lev 7:11ff) or could be shared as a feast of reconciliation between formerly estranged parties (as for example when Jacob is reconciled to his father-in-law Laban in Gen 31:51-54).

- **Sin offering**. Usually offerings made to God in order to gain forgiveness for sinning against God or to reestablish ritual purity after being ritually defiled.
- **Guilt offerings**. Usually offerings made to God to atone for wrongs committed against others. Often there was a payment of restitution included to the injured or offended party.

The effect of or reason for making the sacrifice could also vary (you don't need to remember some of these technical terms).

- **Apotropaic** – to avoid bad luck or evil (eg by painting blood on the door-posts at the Passover Ex 12:7).
- **Thanksgiving** – To celebrate and give thanks for favour received or, as in the case of offering first fruits, to acknowledge dependence on and trust in God to ensure favour in the future.
- **Covenantal** – to seal a covenant or make reconciliation
- **Expiatory** – to make atonement for a wrong committed and receive forgiveness.
- **Propitiatory** – to appease or reconcile / to make amends

Discussion Questions

Animal rights aside, what benefits would there be to having some form of sacrificial system today?

What would be the potential pitfalls or dangers of a sacrificial system? (apart from the obvious health and safety and animal cruelty violations 😊).

Are there any vestiges of sacrificial practices remaining today?

Jesus' Death Understood as a Sacrifice

There is strong Biblical and historical evidence to suggest that, in the first instance, Jesus' followers understood the events of the Easter weekend as a cohesive whole and only later parsed out the separate stages. We can see this for example in the point we made last week that the fellowship commemorating him was celebrated on Sunday mornings and not Friday afternoons or Thursday nights. As a whole, Jesus' death and resurrection was seen firstly as a vindication of his claims that God accepted sinners and that he had God's power to declare their forgiveness (these were the claims that ultimately precipitated his arrest and condemnation by the Jewish authorities). Secondly, his death and subsequent resurrection was seen as his victory over death and it's correlatives, evil and sin.

Nevertheless, the proximity of his death in time to the Jewish Passover and the institution of a fellowship meal along with his use of covenantal language at its institution created an obvious link with the idea of sacrifice. As the Passover was the meal sealing Israel's old covenant with God in the wake of their rescue from Pharaoh, so the Communion

came to be seen as the meal sealing the new covenant in the wake of Jesus' death and resurrection.

In the New Testament we already see the idea of Jesus' sacrifice being extended beyond sealing a covenant to also effecting atonement. He is not just the Passover lamb, but the lamb "who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29; 1 Peter 1:18-19, 1 Cor 5:6-8). Elsewhere he is even seen as a sin-offering (Rom 8:3) and the fulfilment of the covenant sacrifices including that of the Day of Atonement (Heb 9:21-24).

The book of Hebrews works out the doctrine of Christ's sacrifice most fully. Jesus is both the priest who offers the sacrifice and the victim of the sacrifice itself. He thus offers himself once and for all for the sins of the people (Heb 7:26-28; Heb 9 – 10). Christ's sacrifice puts an end to the sacrificial system. Since a new covenant is established, no further sacrifices are required in terms of the old covenant. And since the sins of the world are atoned for once and for all, no further atoning sacrifice can or should be made as it can have no further effect – the job is finished!

Discussion

When were you saved?

The Eucharistic Sacrifice

As the theological understanding of Christ's passion and death as the atoning sacrifice for the life of the world became clearer, so the remembrance of that death in the sharing of bread and wine began to be understood in terms of that sacrifice. By the third century the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist was universally accepted. For Cyprian (Bishop of Carthage 249-258) Christ's passion is the central content of our offering, but since the Church is united to Christ in the Eucharistic act, the Eucharistic offering is also an offering of the people themselves to God. Augustine (Bishop of Hippo 395-430) went even further. For him the Eucharistic sacrifice was more than a memorial of Calvary, it involved a real, though sacramental, offering in which Christ was both the priest and the oblation.

The identification of the Eucharistic sacrifice with Christ's own sacrifice went hand in hand with the identification of the elements of bread and wine with Christ's body and blood. Later a more materialistic theory began to gain popularity according to which the identity between Christ's body and the elements began to be explained by the theory that the elements were actually converted during the act of consecration. One of the effects of the theory of the conversion of the elements on liturgy was a growing interest in the process of consecration. In the Western (later, Catholic) Church the theory emerged that the repetition of Jesus' words of institution effected the

transformation of the elements, leading to a greater emphasis on the Anamnesis in the Eucharistic Prayer. In the Eastern (later, Orthodox) Church it was the invocation of the Holy Spirit that converted them, leading to a greater emphasis on the Epiclesis in the prayer.

The Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Reformation

The main objection that the Reformers had against the Roman Mass was its claim to be a sacrifice of propitiation. Although the Roman theologians did not teach that the Eucharist was a new sacrifice, the popular understanding in the late Middle Ages was that the Mass had sacrificial value independent of Christ's sacrifice. This understanding was supported by the fact that the Mass was celebrated at an altar rather than a table, and that priests made healthy stipends from offering private, votive masses for particular needs, setting themselves up as the mediators of the benefits sought from God.

Against this practice, the Reformers sought to emphasise that Christ is the only mediator between us and God, and that the propitiatory value of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross was effected once and for all. No further sacrifice was necessary and no further sacrifice of ours could add anything to its value or effectiveness.

Taking the extreme opposite position to Rome, Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich taught that sacraments in general do not convey grace and faith in any realistic way but simply function as tokens of inner spiritual realities. In the case of the Eucharist, he understood the rite as a service of thanksgiving celebrated in commemoration of Christ's work of salvation on the cross. Through this the worshippers have a real and effective spiritual realisation of Christ's presence and the power of his atonement.

Calvin's position was a middle road between Rome and Zwingli. For Calvin the sacraments were true signs through which God really gives grace to those who receive them in faith, but the sacraments do not contain grace and they are not causes of grace in their own right. The emphasis in the sacrament is on what God does rather than on what the Church does. Therefore, it is God's Spirit acting in the sacrament that gives it its efficacy. In the case of the Eucharist, what we receive (in opposition to Zwingli) is Christ himself, along with all the benefits of his atoning sacrifice. How we receive these gifts (in opposition to Rome) is not through the signs of bread and wine or our offering of them however, but through the power of the Holy Spirit alone.

Calvin goes on to distinguish between two types of sacrifice: Firstly, there is the sacrifice of Christ, which is a sacrifice of propitiation or expiation that makes atonement for the sins of the world. This sacrifice is the unique and unrepeatable. Then, secondly, there is what Calvin

calls a sacrifice of "worship", "piety" or "thanksgiving". It is in this second sense that the Eucharist can be understood as our offering, or sacrifice, to God.

Conclusion

In thinking through our own position on the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist, it might be helpful to consider the following points:

- There are, Biblically and historically speaking, several types of sacrifice. We don't have to think about either Jesus sacrifice or the Eucharistic meal exclusively in terms of atonement. There are rich veins of meaning also to be found in understanding sacrifice as the sealing of a covenant, or the achieving of reconciliation, or the offering of thanksgiving.
- As a propitiatory sacrifice, Jesus' death on the cross is final and adequate. No further sacrifice is needed or possible to add anything to its power to achieve the salvation of the world. This is a point with which even Catholic theologians would agree.
- What we can think about is whether we believe anything actually happens for us here and now when we celebrate the Eucharist. Do we actually add our own sacrifice to that of Christ (the Catholic position)? Or do we simply remember what Jesus did to save us and get inwardly energized by that realization (Zwingli's position)? Or do we, like Calvin and Knox, believe that the Holy Spirit actually causes us to receive the benefits of Jesus' act of salvation when we celebrate the Eucharist?
- We might also give some thought to what other sacrifice might take place at the Eucharist. The wording of our liturgy states that, in response to the gift of himself offered to us by Christ, we offer ourselves in thanksgiving and praise to his service. What would this mean for you next time you take Communion?
- And finally, we might consider with what emotion we come to make our self-offering at the Eucharist. When making an offering of atonement for my sin, I would probably come forward penitent and solemnly. When making an offering of thanksgiving for forgiveness and new life received, I would probably approach with joy and celebration. What emotion does dominate at the Eucharist? What emotion should dominate at the Eucharist?