

October 18, 2009

**The 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year B**

Job 38:1-7; Hebrews 5:1-10

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

*The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St. J. Hoare, rector (preacher)*

I expect that by now some of you have read Dan Brown's latest novel, *The Lost Symbol*. He uses the tested and true formula that has worked so well for him in the past, this time setting the arcane and esoteric among high ranking freemasons in Washington DC. The main baddie of the book, among other less than charming traits has a fascination with the idea of sacrifice and its connection with blood. Along with many across the world and down the ages, he believes that blood sacrifice brings about effects in some mysteriously mechanical way. In this particular instance, he believes that the sacrifice of animals large and small brings strength to the one making the sacrifice.

For those who love this kind of mystery, the *Epistle to the Hebrews* is right up your alley. What we have here is a partial description of a ritual act, but one which we really don't know a whole lot about. The high priest is chosen and prepared to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. It seems that the priest prepared himself by making some kind of significant offering before entering the Holy of Holies, perhaps killing a bull. This served both to purify him in some way and place him in solidarity with the people. He would don a white robe before parting the veil which covered the Holy of Holies. This only happened once each year and the high priest took the role and served as a messenger of God, coming forth from behind the veil and sprinkling the people with blood from the sacrifice. He marked and embodied God's action to bring about atonement or right relationship with the people of Israel.

Many Christians have wanted to connect the shedding of blood with the will of God in some mechanical way in the way that the bad guy of Dan Brown's novel does. They have connected the shedding of blood with some mechanical outcome: forgiveness, strength, the warding off of enemies or evil, even salvation. But what if the key thing about sacrifice or *facere*, to make and *sacra*, holy -- what if the key thing is not blood itself but the offering of the stuff of life? If that is so, then whatever any person making a sacrifice for any reason thought they were doing, what made the act holy was the offering of *self*.

The author of *Hebrews* sees Jesus as a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek, the order of the righteous king, the order of priests that is higher than the Levites and so on. What Jesus offers is nothing less than himself, the action of God to the people to enter anew into righteousness or right relation. Those who are fascinated by the secrets of the Masons, the codes of da Vinci, the idea of secret wisdom passed down the ages, conspiracies of the church and so on, might do well to ponder this mystery: That the way of life is the way of self-giving love; that in giving we receive, in service we find freedom and in dying to self we live.

Grasping this truth calls for a most profound conversion of life. It is the kind of conversion that Job was to experience at the end of his ordeals. Job, you remember, had

everything he held dear taken away from him: wife, children, cattle riches, land, health and so on, --all the while insisting that he was a righteous man. At the end of the story, when Job is railing against the injustice of it all, the LORD answers Job out of the whirlwind, and reminds him of the might and majesty of the One who creates the world. In order to really and truly grasp the nature of self offering as the way of life, we must grasp something of the might and majesty, even the perspective of God.

John Claypool known to many of you as he joined with us in his last years confronted this reality many times, but none more so than when he faced the death of his ten year old daughter. He found himself reading the story of Abraham and Isaac in anew light and wondered whether it was not about Abraham being reminded that even the life that he might have considered most precious to him was a gift. In John's words: "Did Abraham remember that he had never deserved this long awaited child at all, but received him from a generous God?...Or had he become possessive of what had always belonged to Another and was given to him out of sheer and bottomless grace?...It dawned on me that Laura Lue had come into my life exactly as Isaac had come into Abraham's. I had never deserved her for a single day. She was not a possession to which I was entitled, but a gift by which I had been utterly blessed. And as that sense of her glowed in the darkness, I realized at that moment a choice stood before me. I could spend the rest of my life in anger and resentment because she had lived so short a time and so much of her promise had been cut short, or I could spend the rest of my life in gratitude that she had ever lived at all and that I had the wonder of those ten grace filled years."<sup>1</sup>

Sooner or later that question, that choice comes to all of us although God forbid that it comes in such a profoundly painful way as it did for John. The recognition that all that we are and all that we have, --even life itself--is a gracious gift is the foundation of understanding the reality of sacrifice is not about ultimately about our own sense of loss but rather about the offering of the stuff of life. We engage the spiritual practices of remembering what is of ultimate worth when we gather around this table and tell the story of our Faith. We engage the spiritual practice of generosity when we give thanks at meals or when we plan to renew this block for witness and ministry in ways that honor the earth. We practice generosity when we think of our tithes and offerings as sacrifice, --the offering of something that seems so essential to our life as the placing of trust in God and our seeking of deeper conversion to the way of life.

I invite you to use our usual time of silence for prayer to begin anew the work of giving thanks to God for life. Carry that prayer through the service, particularly at the offertory in which we offer our gifts in a way that makes them holy in preparation for our great sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray...

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<sup>1</sup> John Claypool, *Mending the Heart* (Cowley, 1999) p. 62f.