

24 April 2016

Reconciled by Death
Hebrews 9:6-14

We read today Hebrews 9:6-14:

Such preparations having been made, the priests go continually into the first tent to carry out their ritual duties; but only the high priest goes into the second, and he but once a year, and not without taking the blood that he offers for himself and for the sins committed unintentionally by the people. By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary has not yet been disclosed as long as the first tent is still standing. This is a symbol of the present time, during which gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper, but deal only with food and drink and various baptisms, regulations for the body imposed until the time comes to set things right. But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!

I want to start in an odd way today – not by examining our scripture but with a couple of word studies. Not Greek words: English.

Let's start with the word "sinister." You probably know what it means. It refers to something that implies evil or danger. A sinister omen is a portent of evil to come. A sinister smile indicates malicious intentions. But where does this word come from? From the Latin for "left-handed." That's right. It comes from a time when left-handedness was seen as a mark of an evil, twisted personality. (My daughter Grace discovered this recently, and she texted me all excited about the revelation. To her way of thinking it was perfectly accurate, inasmuch as the only left-handed person she knew was her older brother Ethan. I said, "Your grandad's left-handed." Oh. Regretfully, she abandoned the theory.) Some of you aren't surprised at this word, though; you still remember when children in school were punished for using their left hands. But those days are gone; we don't believe lefties are evil now, though we still use the word "sinister."

A brief excursus here, separate from the sermon itself. This is how language works. Words change, so what matters is not their origin, but how they are used *now*. Sometimes their original meanings might be interesting, but mostly they're completely irrelevant. So when you hear preachers, like me, talking about what a Greek or Hebrew word's original meaning was, as if that proved something, just ignore us. The chances are that we are, as an English presenter at the conference I attended last week put it, "talking out of our bottoms."

Another example: the word "chivalrous." If we use it today, we're describing men who treat others – particularly women – with old-fashioned respect and courtesy. But where does the

word come from? From the French word for “horse.” The connection actually makes sense: in the Middle Ages, the only people allowed to ride horses in battle were the nobility – knights. And knights were the ones who figured in stories about rescuing damsels in distress. We’ve lost this connection, though. When we see a man rush out in the rain to open a taxi door for a woman, we might say “How chivalrous!” but we don’t mean, “What a horseman!”

In both cases, though, we can go deeper. It isn’t just that we’ve lost the original meaning of the words; we’ve lost the mindset that lies behind them. The reason that left-handedness was seen at one time as evil was because people held the worldview that there was one standard for normality, and everything that deviated from that was of the devil. Right-handedness was deemed normal, so lefties were diabolical. Maleness was deemed normal, so other options – like, I don’t know, femaleness – were considered weak, fallible, and defective. That was how people thought when the word was coined. In the same way, the reason chivalry in the Middle Ages was associated with horses and horsemen was because society then was divided into a rigid caste system. Only knights, who could ride horses, were considered capable of finer virtues, like courage, courtesy, and honor. Peasants were simply beneath such stuff, fit only for serving their betters. Well, most of us at least don’t think like that any more. We still use the words “sinister” and “chivalrous,” because they’re still useful, but we absolutely do not mean all that was meant by the people who invented them. We just hold a very different worldview than they held.

Now, let’s look at Hebrews 9. There’s some perplexing stuff in here, stuff about Christ going into an eternal sanctuary, about shedding blood in order to cleanse sin, about priests who do things on behalf of whole nations. We sense that there’s something important going on here, explaining how Christ’s death somehow purifies us from our sinfulness, but the language and the concepts here all just feel sort of foreign to us. That’s because they are. Like “sinister” and “chivalrous,” this passage comes from a different time and, more importantly, a different worldview than ours.

Let me try briefly to explain the world in which all this made sense. In Deuteronomy 21, there’s a curious law that says that if a man is found murdered in a field, then the people who find him are to measure to see which city is nearest to the body, and then the elders of that city are to bring priests out to sacrifice a heifer and in this way purify the city from the guilt of the man’s death. You see, in ancient Israel, all life was seen to be connected. So the death of a man, even a stranger on the outskirts of town, was felt to be a loss and a stain on the lives of everyone in the city. An unjust death in the fields outside town laid guilt on every other life. But, because every life is connected, that guilt could be lifted by the willing offering of another life – in this case, a heifer. The sacrifice of the heifer’s blood cleansed the blood-guilt of the murdered man. And that sacrifice was carried out by a priest, a man designated as the representative before God of all the people.

Now none of that makes sense to us. To us, a murdered man found in a field is the first chapter of a detective story, which will be all about finding the one person responsible for the murder, and not about somehow removing the guilt of the death from everyone. But understanding this ancient worldview of the unity of life and of people who represent others before God is the only way to make sense of the Old Testament’s sacrificial system of worship. The priest represents the whole nation, offering on an altar the lives of sacrificial animals as an

acceptable purification for the lives of the people – not just for individual sins but also for the guilt that stains everyone because of every injustice. And to people who think like that, the author of Hebrews is saying this: Christ has changed all this forever. He has become both the priest who represents everyone and the sacrifice itself – an unblemished sacrifice who didn't just represent us, as an animal might, but actually was one of us. Best of all, having been sacrificed, he rose from the dead and is still alive, still representing us, still cleansing us. We never need another sacrifice now. Our lives have been purified before God forever by his life.

Once again, I know that a lot of this simply doesn't register to our minds. We don't see guilt in the same way that the original readers of Hebrews did, and so it is harder for us to see how Christ's death can fix our sinfulness. All the stuff in Hebrews 9 about how Jesus is a superior priest who enters an eternal sanctuary as a sacrifice that is better than that of goats and bulls – all that was really helpful to an audience of 1st century Jews, but it means zero to us. So let it go. We don't need it. But just as “sinister” and “chivalrous” can still have useful meanings today even though we have rejected the worldviews that they came from, there is still something essential for us to understand in Hebrews. What Christ did was represent us. All of us. He became one of us down to the last feature, last skin cell, so that he could represent us entirely. In his life, all our lives – what we feel, what we suffer, what we long for, how we grow – was embodied. And he not only represented us in our lives, but right through life to death. And then through death to life again. When Christ climbed out of the tomb, alive once more, he dragged our lives out with him. Behind all the confusing temple language, that's what Hebrews is saying.

By the way, here's one thing that Hebrews does *not* say. It doesn't say that God the Father was really, really angry at us for all our sinfulness and wanted to punish us *so* much, but then Jesus the Son said, “Why don't you punish me instead?” and God the Father replied, “That'd be all right, so long as I get to punish *somebody*.” You've probably heard that explanation of Christ's death, and when you did it probably struck you both as being really unjust and also as presenting an incredibly ugly picture of God. If so, you were right. That's dark ages theology – I mean, *literally* Dark Ages, as in 11th century Anselm of Canterbury – but *it's not in the Bible*.

Putting aside that horrible picture, though, we can describe what Christ did in any way that works. The notion of a high priest offering a temple sacrifice doesn't work for us, but other stories might work better. I have a friend who wrote her doctoral dissertation on how contemporary young adult fantasy novels, like Harry Potter, continue to tell the story of salvation for all through the willing sacrifice of one. We will continue to reimagine new ways to tell this story as long as we exist as the people of Christ – new ways to tell how the stain of guilt that we all share has been cleansed by one who came to share our life and our death and to represent all of us in himself – yesterday, today, and forever.

Final word: I have no desire to go back to a system in which we worship through the blood of sacrificial animals. But there are parts of that old worldview that I wish we'd kept. It would be good to return to a time in which every person's death – especially an unjust death, like a murder or a child who dies of hunger in a world filled with food – was perceived as a stain of guilt on all of us. Christ represented us to God. It would be good if we could also represent each other. Even the stranger outside our gates.