

The Final Sacrifice.

Two weeks ago, when Andrew our vicar opened this sermon series on the Cross of Christ, he gave us a most helpful look at the 52nd and 53rd chapters of the book of the prophet Isaiah in the first part of the Bible, the Old Testament, that wonderful prophecy about the death of the suffering servant, given about 700 years before it was fulfilled in the death of the Messiah, the Christ, Jesus, on the Cross.

It contains in chapter 53 verse 6 “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him (the suffering servant) the iniquity of us all”. And in verse 12 some other words about the servant “He bore the sin of many”. In other words the Lord Jesus showed his love for us by sacrificing himself to die in your place and in mine, bearing the punishment our wrongdoings deserve. (SP)

There are many aspects of meaning of the cross. Today we are going to study it as the final sacrifice. The final sacrifice through which our sins can be forgiven, and through which the Old Testament system of sacrifices was superseded.

We are going to include a look into a book of the Bible on which you may never have heard a sermon. What is more you may never have expected to hear a sermon from it. Today is the day you might have never thought would come. We are going to look into the third book of the Bible – Leviticus.

The principle of sacrificial substitution was very well known to the Jewish people. In the early books of the Old Testament, particularly in Leviticus, Moses had written down quite an elaborate system of sacrifices, as God had revealed them to him, and as Moses then taught them to the Israelites.

Some of the sacrifices were Thanksgivings. But others were sacrifices to be made when people had done wrong, when they had sinned. Bulls, heifers, goats, rams, lambs or pigeons - according to the sin and according to the ability of the sinner to provide. They were to be brought to the Tabernacle, the special large tent for meeting God, or later to the stone-built Temple. The owner would lay his hands on the animal as a sign of transferring his sins to it, and he would then kill it in the presence of a priest. Its blood would be poured out. Its fat would be burned. In some cases the priests were allowed to keep the flesh to cook and eat, as they were not allowed to keep animals themselves.

The key factor however was the shedding of blood. In Leviticus chapter 17 verse 11, (page 120) God says “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.” The altar was a pile of rough stones, on which the sacrifices were placed and burned. Making atonement means making amends for what one has done wrong.

This is why the writer to the Hebrews, later in the chapter from which our Bible reading today came, wrote “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness”. That was the basis of the sacrificial system. “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness”.

There are two particular Old Testament sacrifices which call for special mention.

One was the annual Passover, the yearly festival kept by the Jewish people in remembrance of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. When the Egyptian king, the pharaoh, in around 1400 BC, would not let the Israelites leave Egypt, Moses was told by the Lord to tell the Israelites to kill a lamb for each family.

Then they were to mark their doorposts with its blood, and to eat it with special ceremony. In all the houses in Egypt not marked with blood, the firstborn men and livestock would be slain that night by the Lord, but he would pass over the houses marked with blood. This God did, and the pharaoh at last relented and let the Israelites go. All that is described in the book of Exodus, the second book of the Bible.

The killing of the Passover lambs was to be a yearly event thereafter, to remind the Jewish people each year of that great deliverance from Egypt.

Many centuries later Jesus was crucified at the time of the annual Passover celebration, involving the killing of the lambs.

There are several places in the New Testament when the writers make a connection between Jesus' death and the Passover.

Even before his crucifixion John the Baptist had called Jesus "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." (As we heard in our gospel reading). (John 1. 29, 36)

The Apostle Paul writes of Jesus, in his first letter to the Corinthians in the New Testament, "Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us" (1 Corinthians 5.7).

The Apostle Peter writes in his first letter that we have been redeemed "with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect"

And the Apostle John, in his book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, refers to Jesus as the lamb no less than 36 times.

Jesus died on the Cross, as the Passover lamb, so that God can spare the lives of all those who turn in repentance and faith to him. The blood of Jesus enables God to pass over repentant sinners.

The other Old Testament sacrifice which calls for special mention involved a different animal. This animal was painted by the 19th-century artist Holman Hunt, who is best known for his picture of Jesus with the lamp, knocking at the door of our lives – the Light of the world. It portrays the words of Jesus "Be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in ..." (Rev. 3.19b-20)



Holman Hunt also painted this picture.



The original is in a gallery near Liverpool.

He did a similar one, which is at Manchester. It is a goat.

But it is no ordinary goat. It is a scapegoat. If you wish to have a look at it in more detail I will leave this copy at the Communion Rail.

In the book of Leviticus chapter 16, in verses 1 to 5 it was laid down for the Jewish people that, on their special annual Day of Atonement, an annual day for making amends with God, the high priest was to sacrifice a bull and two goats. I read on from verse six -(page 118 last line) "Aaron (the high priest) is to offer the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household. Then he is to take the two goats and present them before the Lord at the entrance to the tent of meeting. He is to cast lots for the two goats – one lot for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat. Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the

Lord and sacrifice it for a sin offering. But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the Lord to be used for making atonement by sending it into the desert as a scapegoat.” Hence our term ‘scapegoat’ today, meaning someone who is made to bear the blame for other people’s wrongdoing.

Then the passage goes on to describe how the high priest was to sacrifice the bull for the sins of himself and his family, and one of the two goats for the sins of the people. He was to take some of the blood of the bull and the first goat into the innermost part of the Tabernacle, the inner room, called the Most Holy Place.

Our Bible reading from the letter to the Hebrews described that too. “But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance.” (Hebrews 9.7).

Now we continue in Leviticus 16, at verse 20 (page 119) “When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat. He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites – all their sins – and put them on the goat’s head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert.”

In Holman Hunt’s painting of the scapegoat in the desert, it has something red on its head symbolising the sins of Israel.

It has been well said that the two goats together represented one the means and the other the results of the atonement.

The first goat was sacrificed – blood was shed for the people’s sins, the means by which people were forgiven. The second goat carried their sins far away for ever, the results of the atonement, sins out of sight for ever. (Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p.144, quoting Crawford).

Now just as John the Baptist, Paul, Peter and John the apostle tell us that Jesus was, in his crucifixion, the Passover lamb, so the writer of the letter to the Hebrews shows us that Jesus was the final and complete sacrifice for sins, when he shed his blood on the Cross for us.

In our Bible reading today from Hebrews 9, in verses 1 to 10 the writer describes what used to happen on the annual Day of Atonement, which we have already heard from Leviticus. Then in verses 11 to 14 he describes how Christ entered the very presence of God in heaven. (Page 1207) “He did not enter by means the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.

The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them (meaning cleanse them) so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!”

Yes, we can be forgiven, cleansed through the blood of Christ. Now see verse 28 (the last verse of chapter 9) “So Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people ...”

So Christ himself brought about what was symbolised in both the goats – because of his great love for us, he both paid the penalty for our sins and took them away. Alleluia!
Alleluia!

The old sacrificial system was imperfect. Look at what the writer to the Hebrews goes on to say in chapter 10 “The law (meaning the Old Testament law) is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshippers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sin, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”

But look back, in contrast at Hebrews chapter 9 verse 24 -

“For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place (in the temple) every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.” Alleluia! Alleluia!

So there is no need for any more sacrificial blood to be shed for sin. As the Apostle John, in his first letter, wrote to believing Christians “The blood of Jesus Christ God’s son cleanses us from all sin”. (1 John 1.7).

And the Holy Communion is not a fresh sacrifice of Christ, as Roman Catholics and Anglo-Catholics have mistakenly said. It is a memorial service, a reminder of Christ’s once for all sacrifice for sin, for us. He said “Do this in remembrance of me”. (1 Cor. 11.24)

We benefit in Holy Communion by remembering what Jesus has done for us, and what his death means.

So there we have it. Jesus Christ was the final substitutionary sacrifice. Let’s hear Hebrews 9. 28 again, the whole of it this time. “Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”

Christ’s death on the cross has done all that is necessary for sin to be forgiven. When he instituted the Holy Communion he said “This is my blood which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins”. (Mt. 26.28). Men and women have only to turn to the Lord in repentance and in faith to receive forgiveness, cleansing and new birth.

This is the gospel we proclaim, and this is the hope - the certain expectation - we have - “He will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him”. Alleluia! Alleluia!

So if you have yet to ask Jesus to be your Saviour and your Lord do please invite him into your life to bring forgiveness to you, to save you from the punishment you deserve. He shed his blood for you. He did it because he loves you. He stands at the door of your life knocking, waiting for admittance. Do not wait any longer. You never know how short or long your life will be.