

# Bread of Life: Bishops' teaching series

## 4 - Sacrifice – Bishop Jonathan Goodall

I am very grateful to Bishop Michael for inviting me to join him and the other bishops in the diocese in these short teaching sessions around aspects of the Eucharist entitled 'Bread of Life'. The aspect I have been asked to address is sacrifice – *eucharistic* sacrifice. It's a big subject, on which a lot of ink has been spilt by Christians, but which has been central to the Eucharist from the very beginning. So, what we'll be exploring in the next 30 minutes or so is one of the deepest layers of meaning that the Scriptures and centuries of Christians have taught us about the Eucharist. It may not feel like sacrifice is the key to all our contemporary questions, but it is so *deeply embedded* as the primary meaning of the Eucharist that *we forget it at our peril* as we attempt to answer what feel like more pressing concerns.

### 1 Who is worship for; who offers what?

To start with I want to clear the ground with two key questions:

- First, *who* is the worship of the Church *for*?
- Second, in that worship *who* offers *what* to *whom*? Let's look at each one.

1 *Who* is the worship of the Church *for*? When we gather together our worship must have a purpose, a direction, and indeed a goal. So we have to be clear *what*—or rather *who*—is that purpose, direction, and goal. Is it us? Are the basic concepts of worship *our* creativity, freedom, celebration and community? Is it *our* preferences, opinions, and needs that are at the centre of worship? Is worship concerned with winning people over, keeping them happy, satisfying their demands?

Or is the worship of the Church *for God*? is worship first a matter of adoring, thanking, and glorifying God, thereby drawing us into a presence that transforms and sanctifies us?

In the first possibility – that the direction and goal is indeed us – worship is a *human* activity *centered* on the human believing community finding ways of celebrating its faith. In that case the Eucharist (the Church's *central* act of worship throughout its history) would be a communal meal. In the second possibility – that the direction and goal of worship is *God* – human beings would be engaging in a very *different kind* of activity. St Paul talks about it in Romans 12.1: 'I appeal to you therefore, ... to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your *logike latreia*.' That Greek phrase is sometimes translated 'reasonable service' but it literally means 'which is you worship according to the Word', the *Logos*, bringing *our* minds in line with *God's* mind. It doesn't mean that a 'service of the word' is the centre of worship, but that the Word made flesh, *Christ himself*, is the main *agent* of our worship, especially in the Eucharist, working in us through His presence, words and actions. It is a new definition of worship, which was prepared for in the Old Testament. From very early on the ancient Israelites understood that God did not *need* bulls, rams, lambs and pigeons. Sacrifice is praise of God, and the Old Testament *leads towards a point* in which

all those external symbols and substitutions *disappear* and mankind itself becomes praise of God.

So much for 'who is worship for?' My second question was this: 2 In the Eucharist *who* offers *what* to *whom*? Well, to begin with at least we can say 'we offer'. Christian worship is a corporate and shared action: especially in the Eucharist there are no spectators, only participants. The priest ministers *with* the people, never *instead* of them. We say 'We believe', and 'Our Father'. The liturgical word is *not* 'I' but 'we'. Worship is always about the whole Church.

In the Eucharist what 'we' offer are the gifts of creation, but in a form that is expressive of our human activity. In other words we do *not* offer sheaves of wheat but bread, *not* bunches of grapes but wine. Both are fruits of the earth but *transformed* by the work of human hands. This is a sign that, following Christ's example, we do not just offer raw creation, but we also offer *ourselves*.

All that having been said, it crucial for us to understand that in the Eucharist *the only true 'offeror'* is Christ himself, not us. Our offering of *bread and wine* is taken up by Him into *His* offering. Likewise, our offering of *ourselves* is also taken up by Christ into *His* offering of *Himself* – His *logike latreia*. If we want to understand the nature of the eucharist as a sacrifice, we need to hold fast to this *absolutely* cardinal point.

The Eucharist is not primarily for us but for God, not primarily our action but Christ's. We are only con-celebrants with him. The *true* celebrant is the unique high priest, Jesus Christ, invisible but real and immediate, acting through His appointed ministers. What's more He not only *offers* true worship, He is also the *offering*. Not only the priest but also the victim. If our worship and offering and receiving are not seen in this light we shall simply not understand what the Church has since its origins understood about Jesus, and His worship of His heavenly Father, and we shall be unable to experience and grow in the truth about our own nature that is revealed to us in Scripture and Christian tradition.

## 2 Three interconnected mysteries

As we consider the meaning of the Eucharist as it is portrayed in the gospels and other parts of the New Testament, it rapidly becomes clear that the Last Supper *alone* is insufficient to understand the institution and significance of the Eucharist to Christ or His Church. For the words and actions of Jesus in the upper room are an *anticipation* of His death, and a *transformation* of death into an event of sacrificial love – of something brutal and meaningless unto something that has personal and cosmic significance.

But that also means that Christ's *words and actions* in the Upper Room had weight and creative power *only if* they had not remained mere words, but were given content by the passion and death that followed them within hours.

And more than that, His *death* would remain empty of meaning, and His words remain empty claims, were it not *shown* that His love is *indeed* stronger than His death, stronger than the apparent meaningless of human injustice and violence.

And more even than that, Christ's death, and the words and actions that preceded it, would remain empty if the *resurrection* had not proved Jesus's divine authority, and proved that divine love can without any limitation reach out beyond death.

These three *together* – the words and actions of the eucharistic supper, the death on Calvary, and the resurrection from the tomb – are what the Christian tradition calls the 'paschal mystery'. Only *together*, each prefiguring and echoing one another, do they constitute the mystery of Easter; only together are they the source of the Eucharist.

All this then means that the Eucharist is understood by Scripture itself as *far more than a meal*. It *cost* a death to provide it; and that death *pervades* it and *defines* it. Whenever it is celebrated, it is *that death* – which was signified by Jesus as he shared himself as the One who would be literally split up, torn apart, into body and blood. That death which becomes a *present reality* in our midst, as of course, at the very same time, does the *overcoming* of that death in the resurrection. That is how Jesus's astonishing voluntary death can be celebrated in the Eucharist as a *feast* of life and peace. And yet as a 'feast upon a *sacrifice*' it plumbs the very depths of human existence and of life that *overcomes* death. It is as a *sacrifice* that the Christian tradition has summed up the meaning of the Eucharist, the re-presentation of Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the Cross.

### 3 Sacrifice in ancient Israel

Having tried to draw out the interconnectedness of the events of the paschal mystery, let us look a little more sacrifice in ancient Israel.

The language of sacrifice is very, very deeply rooted in the New Testament, and it is so because of its place in the Old Testament where there is a vast amount of material about sacrifice, and where sacrifice is not just one thing: there's a great deal going on. A blood sacrifice was required (says *Exodus* 34) to redeem or buy back your first-born son, as was required you remember at the time of Jesus's own Presentation in the Temple. Then there are a great many prescriptions in the book of *Leviticus* (which I know isn't exactly the go-to bible-study material of every congregation!) but it's a book full of immensely rich reflection on sacrifice. In chapter 3 we hear about the sacrifice that makes peace. In chapters 4–7 we hear about the sacrifices that are to be offered to do away with guilt. In chapter 16 the great dramatic ritual of the Day of Atonement is explained, in which the sins of the whole people are ceremonially laid on the head of a goat who is driven out into the wilderness – the scapegoat. In *Leviticus* 17 we read that the blood of a sacrificed animal covers over sin or guilt, because blood is life. In *Numbers* chapter 15 we hear once again of sacrifices made for sin. And, well in the background (it's touched on in *Exodus* 29) there is the commandment to offer a lamb morning and evening, day by day, in the Temple Sanctuary. It was believed that the Temple in

Jerusalem stood on the place where Abraham had tried to follow the Lord's direction to sacrifice his son Isaac, and so the morning and evening lamb sacrifice was a re-enactment of that event which lay at the very beginning of Israel's history when seeing Abraham's faith God stepped in to provide a sacrificial lamb in place of Isaac, the ancestor of the Jewish people. This became a very prominent theme in the years between the old and new testaments. There is a beautiful nuance in the translation of this story in our Authorized version of the Bible. Most translators translate Abraham's assurance to his son as 'God himself will provide a lamb for sacrifice, my son' – but the Authorised Version has 'God will provide *himself* a lamb' – pointing beautifully to the fact that He will Himself in Jesus Christ be the truly spotless Lamb for sacrifice.

But in the middle of all this vast and varied landscape of sacrifices there is one great governing idea: that of a life given over into the hands of God, an action symbolized by the shedding of blood, and that life and blood *covering over* the sin or the disorder of an individual or of a whole people. It removes the consequences of sin, and offers the possibility of a relationship with God unclouded by guilt. Sacrifice in other words is a *gift* which stands between God and the failures or disorders of the world. The gift is given – a costly gift because it's about life and blood – so that peace and communion may be re-established between heaven and earth. And this was always symbolized of course, by the fact that a sacrificed animal would be cooked and shared in the meal which expressed not only fellowship with one another, but restored fellowship with God.

#### 4 Sacrifice prefigured

Jesus had been close to this landscape of sacrifices all his life. At the last supper, about which the Lord said to His disciples 'I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer' (Lk 22.15), the Lord mystically *identified himself* as a sacrifice, he *pre-presented* the sacrifice that was to be consummated the following day on the Cross. The Passover ritual meal, which called for the sacrifice of lambs (cf. Ex 12.1-28, 43-51), was a *prophetic* remembrance, the proclamation of a deliverance *yet to come*. The institution of the Eucharist thus *also* appears as an anticipation of a deliverance that required a sacrifice, and an acceptance on Jesus' part of the death that alone would bring deliverance. St Ephrem the Syrian very beautifully says of the connection between the Upper Room and Golgotha, 'during the *supper* Jesus sacrificed *himself*; on the *cross* He was sacrificed by *others*' (cf. *Hymn on the Crucifixion*, 3, 1).

In words and gestures appropriate to the Passover meal, but transcending them in meaning, Jesus *pre-figured* in bread and wine the rending – the tearing apart – of His body and blood. This was a Passover meal that did *not look to the past* (like the Passover of the Old Covenant) for its *meaning*. Jesus, being God, had prepared a meal that anticipated the *future* – both the Crucifixion in the *immediate* future, and also the baptismal character of the Church *after* His Resurrection.

In His *last supper* and in His *passion* Jesus transformed His death into a spiritual act of affirmation – into the supreme act of self-sharing love. The two events are totally inter-dependent. The *words* at the Last Supper *without the death* on Calvary would be like issuing 'unsecured currency'; and the *death without the words* would be a mere execution without any point to it. The *two together* constitute *one reality*, in which the senselessness of death is given meaning, and the death's *destruction* of love becomes in truth the means by which love is *proved and vindicated*.

If, then, we want to know how Jesus himself intended His death to be understood, how He accepted it, what it meant to him to undergo it, then we must reflect on His *words and actions* at the Eucharist; and, looked at in the opposite direction, we must regard His words and actions as being constantly guaranteed by the pledge of the *blood* that was their witness.

## 5 The old covenant gives way to the new

Three particular aspects of Israel's sacrificial system, which had formed the very core of their religious and spiritual practice, converged in the unique death of Jesus.

They are,

- 1) the sacrifices of the first covenant in Genesis which were commemorated in the daily sacrifices in the Temple,
- 2) the sacrifice of the Passover lambs,  
and
- 3) the sacrifice of the scapegoat cast out of the community

These converged in the unique death of Jesus.

They are identified by the New Testament writers with the effects of Christ's sacrifice:

- *the renewal of the covenant* between God and God's people in a new and eternal covenant
- *the definitive liberation of God's people* from slavery to sin
- the complete *atonement* for the sins of God's people, reconciling and making peace with God.

In each case and together as the Church Fathers rightly say, *figura transit in veritatem*: the 'fore-shadowing' has given way to the *truth itself*.

Jesus's unique act of sacrificial human obedience to God was strengthened by its *perfect unity* with the divine life of the Son of God. In Jesus God had mysteriously made it possible for the world to give Him the perfect reconciling gift. In the language of old-style Latin theology the death of Jesus is not only *pro nobis* (something *for us*), it's also *extra nos* (something *not dependent on us*). It's *done*, finished, God's action, completed, outside us, *not dependent on us*: but we are not allowed to remain outside it! In both ways (both *for us* and *not dependent on us*) it is a *gift*, as a result of which we are *drawn to be able to offer His Sacrifice with Him*. And

it's because of *that*, the more Christians have thought about the language of sacrifice, the more they have been moved towards the language of *victory* and *peace* which we find in the New Testament and the Christian tradition.

There's one other New Testament explanation that must not be left out. The author of the letter to the Hebrews explains the effects of Christ's unique death in terms of the annual entry of the high priest to the Holy of Holies. He saw Christ as the new and *unique priest*, who had offered a new and *sufficient sacrifice* (of His *own* body *not another's*) and thereby inaugurated a new and *eternal covenant*. Being greater than any high priest of the Temple Christ had been able to carry own His blood not only to the inner sanctuary, but *beyond* that into what the writer calls the sanctuary made without hands, the inner sanctuary of the heavenly altar and the divine presence itself: 'For Christ has entered ... into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.' (Heb 9.24)

So, to summarize: Just as on the Cross – which one writer calls the 'blood-smeared doorpost of all humanity' – the crucified body and drained blood of God's only Son *takes up and activates* the meaning of all these sacrificial events, so too the broken bread and shared wine of the Eucharist are endowed with all the meaning and power that is alive in the literal flesh, blood and self-offering of Jesus.

## 6 'His one oblation of Himself once offered'

All the history of Israel's relationship with God is realised in Jesus's *one unique act* of 'peace-making', a single *totally sufficient sacrifice*. Everything for love to the limit of sacrifice. But it is also an act that he involves us in, which we can enter into by our sacramental sharing in the material offering, the victim of the sacrifice – the self-surrendered, obedient humanity of Jesus.

It is Jesus's action, his force, virtue, and presence

- 1) that is miraculously conveyed into the bread and wine by His own Word spoken at the table in the Upper Room;
- 2) that is released by the Spirit in the sacrifice itself on Golgotha
- 3) and that is communicated to the apostolic community after the Resurrection.

Thus the sacrifice and death of Jesus is confirmed as God's *own* action, as having God's authority and loving purpose, to give us the effects of this sacrifice, and bring us into the life of His Son.

This is the logic of the New Testament's linkage of the paschal mystery and the Eucharist, and therefore of all subsequent Catholic sacramental faith and practice. On the basis of it, we should – because we can! – discover a *new reverence* for the Eucharist. What happens in it is *incomparably greater* than anything we can do, however much we desire to. But filled with this continual miracle we too in turn can give ourselves and share the life and promise of His Resurrection.

In normal circumstances, if we were able to sing, who could imagine Easter without one of the greatest of all Easter hymns, 'At the Lamb's high feast we sing' which sums up all that I have been trying to say. Thank you for listening. I hope you will take a moment to read it, or listen to the sound file link – or even sing it! – before you go.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkIMKDpm8kk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkIMKDpm8kk)

AT the Lamb's high feast we sing  
Praise to our victorious King,  
Who has washed us in the tide  
Flowing from His pierced side.  
Praise we Him whose love divine  
Gives His sacred blood for wine,  
Gives His body for the feast,  
Christ the victim, Christ the priest.  
Where the paschal blood is poured,  
Death's dark angel sheathes His sword!  
Israel's hosts triumphant go  
Through the wave that drowns the foe.  
Praise we Christ, whose blood was shed,  
Paschal victim, paschal bread;  
With sincerity and love  
Eat we manna from above.  
Mighty victim from on high,  
Hell's fierce powers beneath thee lie;  
Thou hast conquered in the fight,  
Thou hast brought us life and light:  
Now no more can death appall,  
Now no more the grave enthrall;  
Thou hast opened paradise,  
And in Thee thy saints shall rise.  
Easter triumph, Easter joy,  
This alone can sin destroy;  
From sin's power do thou set free  
Souls newborn, O Lord, in Thee.  
Hymns of glory and of praise,  
Father, unto thee we raise;  
Risen Lord, praise to Thee,  
With the Spirit, ever be.