

## The Blood of Christ

*From the Epistle: Hebrews ix. 11.*

The Book of Common Prayer, p. 132-133

*11 But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; 12 Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. 13 For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: 14 How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? 15 And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.*

There is something tremendously mystifying about blood. It is not often the topic of polite conversation, although it is absolutely universal to the life of a whole array of this world's creatures. Its mention even evokes a vague sense of embarrassment. We are quite satisfied and even emotionally moved when it is hidden and its effects are controlled: that warm, rosy glow on the cheeks of a child; or a blush of modesty gracing the face of a bride; or the thrilling pulse that runs through one's veins during a time of excitement or exertion. But when blood is exposed, in all of its brilliant redness, whether through injury or some other violent rending of a living body, or during a medical procedure, its effect can be one of shock, revulsion, and disorientation. "Can life be reduced to *this*?" we cry, gazing upon that pool of sticky, wet, warmth which seems to scream at us almost accusingly in its strange vividness. "Is this stuff really what makes me *tick*?!" We will do almost anything, sometimes, to avoid the sight of it. In this blood-fearing world where massive precautionary measures are taken against any contact with it, blood has become almost an object of loathing. We carefully disguise and objectify it for modern sensibilities under such comfortably euphemistic labels as another "bodily substance".

But blood reminds us perhaps more than anything of our mortality, our weakness and vulnerability, and how near any one of us stands to easy destruction. Perhaps this is why it is such a universal symbol throughout the entire course of Scripture. I remember being amazed with this discovery, as a new believer. It seemed utterly incongruous to me that man, in all his sophistication and accomplishment and glory, should be brought back again and again by divine command to such a basic place of humiliation: gazing upon blood through the eyes of his heart, whether it be that of the sacrificial offerings of the Old Covenant, or in the exalted, worshipful references to the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the Cross that is so utterly central to our salvation. We cannot escape blood. Yes, through Holy Communion, we are enjoined even to actually partake of it. All of this is a wonder beyond words, and seems to touch us in the very deepest recesses of our beings.

Today's Epistle dwells on this topic, and it is one that looms large throughout the Book of Hebrews, a letter written apparently for first century Jewish believers who were intimately familiar with the particulars of the Old Covenant. Go with me for a minute to the great temple of worship which was the very heartbeat of the community of Israel. There, through the ministrations of the priests, the nation received assurance regularly of the forgiveness of her sins, whether corporate or individual. For any of you who are familiar with the dizzying complexity of the Old Testament passages detailing the many required sacrifices, you know how central is the place of the *blood of bulls and of goats*. It is everywhere, running in rivulets below the great altar on high holy days; sprinkled upon the grand, magnificently new garments of the priests; carefully applied to the bodies of those healed of skin diseases. No worshipping Israelite was ever far from its reality.

There is a great paradox associated with all of this, for in blood man is confronted with something he is far more inclined to associate with death, becoming in fact the chief symbol of life. We find the roots of this enigma in the very earliest chapters of Genesis. Before the Fall of Man, it can be safely inferred that blood would never have seen the light of day. It is not until Genesis 3 that it is first revealed, and under the gravest circumstances, for God slaughters an innocent animal to provide Adam and Eve with coverings. It is sin that forces blood to occupy this fearful place of prominence before the gaze of men ever since. Sin is the agency of its exposure. Sacrifice to God for sin, with the accompanying shedding of blood, will from that time forward never cease to be a burden for man to bear.

*And thou shalt offer thy burnt offerings, the flesh and the blood, upon the altar of the LORD thy God: and the blood of thy sacrifices shall be poured out upon the altar of the LORD thy God... (Deut. 12:27)*

were among Moses' last words to Israel, after the inauguration of the great sacrificial system which would distinguish that nation for the next over 1000 years. Blood is a graphic reminder to sinful man of his culpability. It can never be procured on his behalf before God without the destructive act of slaughter, which must be performed by man's own hands. Something innocent, lovely, and beautiful, which must be torn open, broken apart, and ruined in order to secure redemption. A heavy price which can only remind us of the enormity of the human rebellion requiring it.

The paradox continues, however. God had earlier instructed Israel through Moses:

*Lev. 17:10 And whatsoever man there be of the house of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn among you, that eateth any manner of blood; I will even set my face against that soul that eateth blood, and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul... For it is the life of all flesh; the blood of it is for the life thereof: therefore I said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall eat the blood of no manner of flesh: for the life of all flesh is the blood thereof: whosoever eateth it shall be cut off.*

The sacrificial blood is sacred. It is never to be eaten. It is to be treated with utmost reverence, for when God beholds it, He remits sin.

But temple worship will remain a precarious thing, for God will simply not brook hypocrisy in it. Sacrifice without a heart of faith is valueless. Covenantal disobedience will finally result in the permanent removal of that place of atonement, and the displacement of a people who will wander the world in search of it, and wail before the few stones that remain of its foundation.

*But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons (Gal. 4:4, 5).*

*Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world (John 1:29). The Lamb of God! ..he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth (Is. 53:7b).*

*Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot: who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you...(1 Pe. 1:18-20).*

*But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water. And he that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe. (John 19:34, 35)*

*And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. (Mt. 26:27, 28)*

Here is a blood that is under, over, around, and through everything that we claim and know as children of God. Without it, Heaven is barred, and we are still in our sins. With it, we are clean, made new, and granted eternal life. It provides an ever-present altar of forgiveness to which we can always resort.

But its procurement for us wasn't easy. No sacrifice ever has been, and this was the chiefest. It meant a journey from heaven to earth and the setting aside of untold privilege and power for anonymity and isolation. And charity and love that was met with sarcasm, jealousy, and maniacal hatred. And the treachery and abandonment of trusted friends. And finally, a parody of justice resulting in a brutal execution so graphic that no description could suffice.

*And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission (Heb. 9:22).*

*And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. (Rev. 5:11, 12)*

*Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.*

Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Amen.

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*