

Mass of the Lord's Supper '17
Holy Thursday
April 13, 2017
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By the end of Lent, you may have become reacquainted with a familiar phrase:
“We adore Thee O Christ and we praise Thee, because by Thy holy cross Thou hast redeemed the world.”

The words carry with them the idea, found in the New Testament, that the suffering and death of Jesus paid the price of Adam's sin, was a sacrifice so total that the Father's justice was finally satisfied enough for Him to readmit us to His friendship. The notion of the “wrath of God” kind of hovers in the background.

And yet there's another Biblical theme, running through both Old and New Testaments, about the mercy and compassion of God. “For He knows how we are formed, He remembers that we are dust.” (Ps. 103) He is slow to punish, quick to forgive.

So one might wonder, which is it? Does God's justice exact punishment, or does His mercy let us go? Justice and mercy are both affirmed, in Scripture and Tradition, and so both must be true. Thinking this through draws us into thinking about the meaning of Jesus Christ, and of His Eucharist.

Under the Old Covenant, sacrifices of various kinds were offered on various occasions, but they all shared one underlying purpose – to reconcile God and man. Sacrifice expressed man's repentance, but the repentance had to be sincere. Offering sacrifice without genuine inner change of heart was a fraud that God saw right through, a point driven home by the prophets. Take this from Isaiah:

“What care I for the number of your sacrifices? I have had enough of whole burnt rams and fat of fatlings. When you come in to visit me, who asks these things of you? Trample my courts no more! Bring no more worthless offerings; your incense is loathsome to me. Put away your misdeeds from before my eyes; cease doing evil, learn to do good. Make justice your aim; redress the wronged, hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow.” (Is. 1:12-17)

Clearly, what a sacrifice was supposed to express needed to be really present in the heart and the conduct of the one making the offering. But, assuming sincerity of heart, there is something of actual restitution and reparation in the sacrifice itself. Sin is attempting some kind of worldly advantage from doing wrong, from violating justice. We cannot

truly repent and keep the ill-gotten gain. By offering a sacrifice, the sinner takes a worldly loss, forgoing the gain, as a way of restoring justice.

So far so true, but it didn't go far enough for several reasons. We repeatedly sin, and so repeated sacrifices were necessary, so just how effective were the sacrifices? And in their repetition they could become mechanical and insincere. I commit this sin. I offer that sacrifice. Now I'm good again.

Plus, the sacrifice of any finite worldly thing – wine, grain, incense, an animal-- cannot truly re-balance the scales of justice, because what do we owe God who has given us everything? Everything!

What could satisfy God's infinitely perfect justice? Perfection, of which man is not capable. Whatever it is that could completely reconcile the world to God would have to come from God's side.

This was foreshadowed when Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac, his only son. Father and son were climbing the hill pointed out to Abraham. Isaac carried the wood for the holocaust, Abraham the fire and the knife. Isaac said, “Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the holocaust?” Abraham, evading the question, foretold the future sacrifice that would redeem the world: “God Himself will provide the sheep for the holocaust.” (Gen. 22)

God provided, in the ram caught in the thicket, the sacrifice that redeemed Isaac. When did God provide, from His side of infinite justice and infinite mercy, the lamb for the sacrifice that would redeem mankind? When God Himself became man. “The angel declared unto Mary, and she conceived by the Holy Spirit”, as Luke records it. A passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews carries the point a little further.

“It is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats take away sins. For this reason, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; holocaust and sin offerings you took no delight in. Then I said, “As is written of me in the scroll, behold, I come to do your will, O God.” “(Heb. 10:4-7, quoting Ps. 40)

The Son of God came into the world, entered our humanity, by means of a human body.

Jesus Christ is the restoring link between God and man because he is truly God and truly man. By his sheer existence he is the reconciliation between God and man. When God took a human nature he redeemed human nature. This is why Simeon, waiting in the temple for the redemption of Israel, could take baby Jesus in his arms and say, to God, “Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, for my eyes have seen your saving deed.” (Lk. 2) God's saving deed is the incarnation itself.

Being true God, Jesus' human life could be perfectly given over to love, the Father's will; a perfect sacrifice provided by God and fulfilling His mercy.

Being true man, Jesus' life perfectly given over is truly a human act, meritorious for humankind, fulfilling God's justice. In Adam all died. In Christ, the new Adam because he is truly a human son of Adam, all are redeemed and will come to life again.

But, if the incarnation itself is the saving deed, if Jesus whole human life was the perfect redeeming sacrifice, why do we say “By Thy holy cross Thou hast redeemed the world”? Well, God redeemed us by sharing our humanity, so by accepting even our death he shared our humanity completely, all the way down, right down into the grave. Christ's death on the cross was the ultimate redeeming embrace of our humanity, the consummation of his incarnation, and he offered it the night before, at the Passover he shared with his disciple. Listen to the words by which he consecrated himself for our salvation:

“This is my body which will be given up for you.” “Given up for you”-- this is Jesus offering himself to the Father on behalf of the human race.

“Take and eat” – this is Jesus offering himself to the human race on behalf of the Father.

“Do this in memory of me” – this is Jesus instituting the Eucharist for all future ages. “Do this”-- do what? Offer ourselves, with Jesus, to the Father, and receive back, through Jesus, divine life. This is what happens at every Mass. Jesus does not die at every Mass. He did that once for all on the cross. But he offered himself as the perfect sacrifice at the Last Supper, the First Eucharist; and in the presence of the Father he continually intercedes for us. His self-offering is always present to the Father in heaven, and it is present to us on the altar. When the priest takes the unleavened bread and the wine of the old Passover and repeats over them the consecrating words of Jesus, Jesus makes his incarnate self, our redemption, present; truly present so that we can be drawn into him, who is the reconciliation of God and man, and be lifted up through him into the divine life he shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit... assuming we approach these mysteries with faith, and humble repentant hearts, trusting not in our own merits but in those of him who humbled himself to share our humanity. At the Supper he gave us an example of the right attitude, the attitude that can receive salvation, when he laid aside his outer garment, tied a towel around his waist, and proceeded to wash the feet of his disciples.