

Easter 4
22/4/2018

Mark the Evangelist

1 John 1:5-2:2
Psalm 23
John 10:11-18

No anaemic God

Next week, of course, we mark once more the ANZAC landing at Gallipoli and, by extension, the war service of hundreds of thousands of Australians and New Zealanders, and others. Familiar stories are retold and new ones are uncovered, expounding the courage and feats of people in extreme circumstances.

Not far from the heart of these accounts is the language of sacrifice as a way of characterising what soldiers and others do in giving up their lives or wellbeing for comrades or for the community on whose behalf they fought – for *us*. Such extraordinary self-sacrifice is rightly marked with gratitude by those who have benefitted from it – even us today, after so long, whatever we make of the wars which have gone before, however much we agree or not with the fact that they were fought.

Now, the reason for raising all of this is not quite that ANZAC Day is coming, but that the theme of sacrifice appears twice in the passage we have heard (again) today:

‘...he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins’ (2.2); ‘the blood of Jesus [the] Son cleanses us from all sin’ (1.7)

This is uncomfortable language for many in our modern and enlightened times, not least in the church. This discomfort arises because Scriptural sacrifice is *foreign* to us, despite its familiarity after so long and despite our willingness to borrow the language for something like war service. *John* – whether he was a Jew or a Gentile (allowing that he may not have been the apostle John, as many scholars hold) – would have imbibed with mother’s milk an understanding of ritual sacrifice which held great sense and conviction for him. He wrote of such sacrifice because he knew about it, saw it, had participated in it. *We*, however, really only speak of such sacrifice because the likes of John wrote about it. We no longer do or see done what they did and saw. We echo what they say when we speak of sacrifice and, because it is only an echo, it can sound hollow or simply come out wrong. Sacrifice is, simply, not how we understand the world to work and so we struggle to use such language with conviction.

But we cannot leave the matter there. At dawn services around the country on Wednesday the words of Jesus will be quoted: ‘No greater love has anyone than to lay down his life for his friends’ (John 15.13). I suspect that it appeals to us that Jesus gives up his life for his friends, even us. Or, at least it *makes sense* to us that Jesus might do this, as we imagine our soldiers do.

Yet, if Jesus’ self-sacrifice is for his friends, from what does he save them? The intention of the self-sacrifice of the soldier is clear; her death saves the comrade-in-arms, or weakens the enemy. In the case of Jesus, however, what is the *threat* from which his friends are to be saved? The horrifying thing – especially for the likes of us – is that the threat can only be *God*; Jesus dies to protect the disciples from God.

And here we strike the fundamental objection to sacrificial language: that God is said to have stipulated sacrifice for such protection – the blood of lambs, bulls and doves, and ultimately the blood of Jesus himself. The problem is whether God might just be a *bloody* God. This does not sell well.

Our hesitation here ought not to surprise us, because it is not only a *theological* hesitation; it is not a problem for only the church with its cross. We – society and church together – hesitate in the same way when it comes to speaking of the sacrifice of those wounded or killed in war. It seems obvious that we could borrow the words of Jesus to characterise the casualties of war, yet we are mistaken if we do so. Scriptural notions of sacrifice have nothing to do with *self*-sacrifice. The sacrificial victim is a third party in an exchange between the principle actors – the priest who sacrifices and the God who is appeased. If we were to speak properly (and honestly) of sacrifice in relation to war we would have to say that it is not the soldiers who make the sacrifice but the community or nation which offers them up. This is surely the meaning of conscription, on the one hand, and white feathers on the other. Nations and kings go to war, not their soldiers. The lives of combatants are the sacrifice we are prepared to make – we, who cannot qualify as the sacrifice by virtue of being too young, too old, too rich or too important.

But we do not speak this way when we commemorate war service. It is very hard to admit that it is better for us that one die for the people than that the whole nation should be lost. And so we generally can't admit it. And because we can't, it is difficult to admit that God's purported stipulation of sacrifice might be just. Surely God is not like us, only open where we are covert?

In fact, even if *we* are bloody, *God* is not. Sacrificial blood does not buy forgiveness; God cannot be bought. But if God is not bloody – does not *demand* blood – neither is God anaemic. John's insistence on the cross goes with his insistence that Jesus is the Son, is at the heart of God (cf. John 1.18). This death – this blood – is squarely in the middle of the God-humankind relationship.

But, unlike all other human sacrifice – whether the soldier on the field, the neglected spouse, the molested child or the ignored refugee – *this* death is not finally mere tragedy. God is light (1.5), we considered last week, and the cross of the Risen One is that light. This is the truly difficult thing at the heart of Christian confession: that a tragic failure might become a healing word, that the justice of God (1.9) might meet this failure with forgiveness.

John, with most of the New Testament, *borrow*s the language and logic of sacrifice but it is only passingly useful if we insist on being biblical literalists, speaking Scriptural language with too thick an accent. If God is free – unbound by anything *outside* of God – then God is not bound by a sacrificial economy of exchange, such that Jesus 'had' to die on the cross. Ritual sacrifice in the Old Testament only ever served as a kind of cloak covering the truly important thing, a Tabernacle housing the incomprehensible glory which cannot be gazed upon directly. That glory is God's freedom to love and heal those who imagine that death is the way to life, even God's own death.

The miracle of Easter is not that a blood debt is paid. It is that the blood we spill does not stain but washes clean.

And we are those who are washed.
