

Blood of the New Covenant

As I considered the words of this passage this week, many images flooded into my mind. I thought of the Passover celebration that brought Jesus and his friends to Jerusalem and of the imagery of blood sacrifice that is so tied to that story, the imagery that Jesus here appropriates in a whole new way. I thought of Jeremiah's prophecy of a new covenant between the Creator and humankind, to which Jesus also alludes. And I thought of the gracious love of Our Saviour, of the One he called Father and of those early followers who denied themselves as Jesus had done to take his message of love out to a world that too often didn't and doesn't recognize the wonder of their gift.

As odd or distasteful as it might seem to us, in order to understand Jesus' words at their deepest level, we must acknowledge the fact that important agreements in early human history and prehistory were sealed with blood. Whether it be the voluntary and mutual shedding of human blood in ancient kinship rituals or the substitution of an animal in sacrifice to represent the full commitment of each party to a covenant, for the ancients blood was a necessary component of a binding pact. Jesus and his disciples would have been well aware of this from the story of God's covenant with Abram, their forefather. They would also have seen the blood offered in sacrifice to God for the forgiveness of sins on a daily basis at the Temple and known of the goat slain for the sins of the nation on the Day of Atonement each year.

And, of course, it being Passover, they would have remembered the blood of the lamb that was slain to mark the doors of the Hebrew homes in Egypt on the night of the first Passover. Since this is one of the rare years when the Western date for Easter, the Eastern date for Easter and the week of Passover actually all coincide, we are privileged to be commemorating Jesus' final Seder meal with Christians around the world even as our Jewish sisters and brothers mark the occasion in ways only a little different from that special night which we remember. It is an opportunity for us to not only thank God for Jesus and his teaching and sacrifice but also to offer praise to God for God's great act of deliverance for the Children of Israel in Egypt. While we are offering thanks for God's liberating love, we should also on this holy night renew our resolve to heal the wounds that two thousand years of misunderstanding, hostility and even hatred between Jews and Christians have left. It is not right, my sisters and brothers, that God's Chosen People and we, who have been grafted into the tree of Israel, should live in enmity or estrangement. We must strive to live so that they may see us as individuals and the Body of Christ as a whole as the Righteous Gentiles who love the God of Abraham even as they do.

Of course, though we love and serve the same God of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah, of Jacob and Rachel and Leah, we do so in a different manner. Jesus proclaimed that the cup after supper represented his blood of the new covenant. We understand him to have spoken of the new covenant foretold by the prophet Jeremiah: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

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It is for this that Jesus died, so that the Holy Spirit could come and dwell within each of us and lead us to a true knowledge of the Creator, insofar as we can understand the ineffable. I confess that the reasons why this wonderful state of the New Covenant required the blood of Jesus are beyond my understanding. I can only say that I have come to believe that Jesus' death has far more to do with the requirements of our broken human understanding than with any demand of our God who is revealed more and more each day as loving and forgiving. But in his insight and wisdom, Jesus knew that he would die and that he must present his death to his disciples in this way so that they and the millions who were to come after them could grasp the importance of that to which he leads us.

What grace that was! To be willing to die for a group of often errant disciples, a collection of slow learners of little faith who seemed bewildered by the simplest spiritual truths Jesus taught or jumped to the wrong conclusions or swayed from conviction to doubt as if they were reeds in the breeze. To die for a group of fractious, self-aggrandizing, fearful nobodies. The Word became Flesh and suffered death for such as these – and weren't they just like you and me? For us as well as for those original disciples of Jesus was his blood shed. For us as well as for them is the promise – the promise that we are now a part of the new covenant with God, that they days are coming and are now here that God will write God's will on our hearts and we are and shall be the people of God. For this amazing grace of Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, thanks be to God!