

2025 Lent 2C

What does the word *sacrifice* mean to you? Does your mind go to the troubling image from this morning's first reading: bloody, dead animals set out for the Lord God? Or is it something a little tamer—a parent giving something to their kids instead of keeping it for herself? A baseball player making a sacrifice fly, accepting an out for himself in order to move another base runner ahead? Do you apply it to a financial context, taking a loss in order to settle an account? When I hear the word sacrifice, I often start humming a heartbreaking ballad by Elton John that came out when I was in college...it's a song that conveys more through the music than the puzzling lyrics. Sometimes words aren't adequate to express the meaning of something.

Every Sunday we celebrate the Eucharist, that “sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.” We don't see it as a ritual re-enactment of the crucifixion, as some other denominations do. But there is still something puzzling about the idea. What makes praise and thanksgiving such a *sacrifice*?

The origins of the word are, of course, religious: “to make sacred.” The idea was that something would be set apart to be given to a divine being, usually with the hope of convincing the divine being to give you what you want or prevent something you don't want. In order to

convince this deity to act according to your wishes, you needed to give up something that mattered to you, something of value. And where was people's wealth usually located in those days? Livestock. Animals. So people sacrificed animals as a way of saying, "See, we're willing to pay a price to get what we want."

A lot of blood was shed in humanity's earliest religious expressions. It's disturbing to us now, but let's not forget—it was something of a step up, an improvement from the days of human sacrifice. But it was still pretty gory. It's problematic in our own Judeo-Christian tradition because there is an inherent conflict. Blood was considered both sacred and unclean. I've never found a fully satisfactory response to this contradiction, and usually I just end up giving thanks that animal slaughter is not part of my job description as a priest in the 21st century.

As time progressed, the people of God found other ways to make their offering that didn't involve killing an animal. Inanimate objects of value were given instead. Not just gold and silver but things like fruit, wheat, oil...anything that was useful to a person.

The purpose of sacrifice also shifted. In those early days it was, as I said, sort of transactional, particularly in polytheistic religions. You make a sacrifice to the god of rain if you were worried about your crops withering. You

make a sacrifice to the god of war if you want to push those pesky invaders back across the border. You make a sacrifice to the god of healing if you or someone you love has fallen ill.

But as monotheism took hold, sacrifice took on a different significance. The Jewish word most often used was *korban*, and it meant something like “drawing near.” Sacrifice was made to close the gap between the holiness of God and the sinfulness of humankind. And the onus appeared to be on the people to initiate this sacrifice, to take the first step in bridging the gap.

With the establishment of the Temple in Jerusalem, sacrifice became the work of a certain class of people in that one particular place. You couldn’t just slaughter a sheep on the hillside to appease YHWH; you had to go to the Temple in Jerusalem and ask—pay—the priests to do it for you. It is ironic that this shift in understanding of sacrifice as a way of drawing nearer to God ended up creating far more distance between the average person and the divine.

So here is where I may upset some of you for not being enough of a literalist about the writings of the Hebrew Bible. I don’t believe bloodshed was ever God’s *desire*. I believe all those rules were written by people who were trying, in good faith, to find a way to relieve the sense of guilt that naturally arises when we sin, when we fail to

live up to our ideals or standards. It is part of humanity's imperfection—I might even say “original sin”—that we believe we can make things better through violence.

To defend my position, I point you to the number of times in the prophetic writings God rejects their ritualistic sacrifices and asks, instead, for contrite hearts, for reformed lives, for a commitment to care for the whole community. A creative, life-giving response instead of a destructive, death-dealing one.

In today's first reading, we heard that God told Abram to look at the heavens, and count the stars, and have faith that even that number wouldn't be big enough to describe all his descendants. The text tells us that Abram (who would later be renamed Abraham) “believed”—a better word is trusted—the Lord, and the Lord “reckoned” it to him as righteousness. “Reckoned” here is a word that is usually used in the context of—you guessed it—sacrifice. For something to be ‘reckoned’ was to be declared an acceptable and worthy sacrifice.

Listen to that: Abraham's *trust* was his sacrifice. What happens next—all those poor dead animals—were part of a ritual of covenant-making between God and Abraham. The sacrifice—the drawing closer—had already occurred, in the moment when Abraham set aside his own fear and trusted God to bless him in ways he couldn't imagine. But it was a drawing closer initiated

by *God*. Abraham's faith was in response to God's generosity.

Leap forward now to the reading from the Gospel. Jesus responds to a warning by the Pharisees that Herod was planning to go after him. Whatever their motivations, they are trying to stir up *fear* in him. But he doesn't take the bait. Instead he sends them back to this false leader with a report of what he was doing—healing people and making them whole *without any requirement of blood sacrifice*. Then he uses that beautiful—heart-breaking—image of himself offering them the opportunity to draw near, to come close to God, like a mother hen drawing her chicks close to herself. It breaks your heart because they rejected the offer—they couldn't make the sacrifice to trust in something other than themselves.

One last thought. Notice that Jesus calls Herod a fox, and then uses the image of a hen. Stories of foxes and hens usually have a bloody ending. Jesus could have turned to an image from the prophets of an *eagle* spreading out its wings to protect the nest. But he didn't. Perhaps because the Romans used the eagle as a symbol of their own strength and he didn't want to confuse things. But I think perhaps he chose hen precisely because a hen is not a forceful, violent, predatory animal. It will protect its chicks at the cost of its own life, but it is not an inherently violent bird. It is one that produces—creates—eggs which bring life and health to others.

Jesus doesn't deny the reality of what's coming. Several chapters back he "set his face towards Jerusalem" knowing full well that it was a one-way journey. Knowing that he would end up giving up his life but trusting that it would be a worthwhile sacrifice, one that would make it possible for every person to draw near to God, like a chick to its mother hen. Without fear. Without violence. Without any expectation of reward or punishment. Just drawing close to God in faith that there will be room for us there. We will find life there.

May you be blessed, in these weeks of Lent, with a sense of God calling you closer and the courage to respond in faith. May you come to understand how our praise and thanksgiving is a sacrifice that delights God in ways that all that blood never could. May you discover the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

Amen.