

# The Great High Priest

Preached on Passion Sunday  
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ  
March 21, 2021  
Text: Heb. 9: 11-14

We come now to the moment in our liturgical Lenten journey with the Lord Jesus when we turn with him towards Jerusalem, towards all that awaits him there in his great work of securing eternal redemption. Our gospel reading shows him there, in an earlier visit, already in dispute in the Temple with those who will kill him, already threatening his life. From now all of our focus is in that direction.

This is also the point in our Lenten journey where answers to our penitent pleas are heard, where true hope appears for a restoring of our right relationship with God, spoiled by our sin and rebellion. The Lenten collects have appealed for deliverance, and for cleansing. Our fasting, our self-examination, and our confessions have brought to greater consciousness our need, our sin, and reminded us of the broken disorder of the world we now live in. And now we begin to hear of the remedy, the promised gift awaiting us of forgiveness, redemption, cleansing and healing.

And the answer, the remedy, is found in the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. “Passion” in the language of scripture and the church, as we use it in our liturgy, does not mean an exuberant or romantic emotional outburst. Nor does it mean some deeply felt commitment to a hobby, pastime, or vocation, as in “Golf is my passion.”

Rather, passion has for Christians the older meaning of suffering. And it is not only psychological or internal agony; but suffering the pain and abuse inflicted by others even to the point of shedding blood and death. It is true that all of the earthly life of Christ can be understood as his Passion: he “emptied himself”, denied himself the privileges of heaven, in order to enter the sin-broken world to be with us to serve, to teach, to heal and bring us to himself. The epistle points us to all of that—and graphically—by way of the blood of Christ, which is at the center of his entire Passion. We remember, re-engage, the Passion and blood of Christ in every Holy Communion.

Today’s epistle reading foreshadows what is to come in the narrative of the next two weeks, in Passiontide and Holy Week; but it gives us the eternal perspective, presenting the reality of which we are beneficiaries. The curtain of heaven is pulled back, and we see him after all is accomplished, standing before the great high altar and throne of God, in his Resurrected and Ascended body. By means of his own blood he has secured entrance into the holiest place, where God dwells, thus securing for us an *eternal* redemption. This image invites us to visualize and meditate on our Lord *fulfilling*, in his person, as the Great High Priest, once and for all, the atoning sacrifice that was offered in the Holy of Holies by the high priest under the old covenant, annually on the Day of Atonement, for the sins of Israel. Atonement simply means that what once was separated, is now brought together; those who once were enemies, are now blood relatives. A new covenant, a new relationship, a true Atonement has been inaugurated by

the Great High Priest himself, the Lord Jesus Christ. His Blood has secured our redemption. His Blood is the perfect offering.

But why all this talk about blood? Why do we still uphold such a “primitive” approach to faith with talk of sacrifices and altars and priests? Here we are as modern people, worshipping in clean surroundings, far removed from those temples of ancient times, their altars drenched in blood. Our faith is allegedly so much more cerebral and polite. Yet, we say “blood” out loud dozens of times during our services. Shouldn’t our worship be more “humane” than this? It sounds offensive to modern ears, a scandal for the sophisticated. Many would like to think we have “matured” or developed beyond needing these kinds of props for true faith. Cannot we safely leave these ancient metaphors behind?

But blood is what we get in the Bible, in the sacrament, at the core of our faith. It also must be received if we are to have faith in an incarnate God, who became human, with flesh and blood, and everything else that is included in a truly human existence. This epistle also tells us earlier, in chapter 2, that

*“he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all are one. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers... “Since therefore [they] share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. .... Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.”*  
(Heb. 2: 11, 14-15, 17-18)

He really was a man of flesh and blood, being like us in every way except for sin, but still tempted, and in pain, trial and agonizing suffering. Though our churches are nice and clean, the human need for blood, for sacrifice, for recompense, must find an outlet. It is provided by popular culture, in film, TV, and video games. We seem to know somehow how important blood is, and need to see it flowing. It is strange to want to remove it from our faith and have it everywhere else. Maybe the plethora of horror and bloodletting films, populated with vampires, zombies, or other beasts hints at some need or thirst in our makeup, something not satisfied by modern comfort and security. Even in our “civilized” world we cannot deny the importance, the power, of blood. It is hard to forget how after the 9-11 attacks, millions of people turned out to donate blood, yielding far more than could be used. It just seemed that we all needed to participate in a sacrifice of blood somehow. And there are indeed many sacrifices made in blood every day, in our seemingly endless wars, in the streets, in places of business and in schools.

We know how important blood is, to our bodies, and in all it represents. But the cleaned-up world we like to pretend we inhabit rejects the blood sacrifice of Jesus, and ends up believing that life and salvation are not precious enough to demand the giving of life. Religion should be about peace, social justice, and community. “Let’s just follow some of Jesus’s more acceptable teachings and join in making the world a better place,

shall we?“. But such high-minded religion, though having some noble goals, cannot reconcile us to God. No matter how much you care about the oppressed or embrace diversity, you are still, at the end of the day, a sinner. Helping those who are in need—often desperately so—is something commanded by God. But we, if we have taken this Lenten season to heart, know that we cannot save ourselves, we cannot, on our own, cure that great disease of sin alienating us from God. We need to be cleansed, but are not qualified to do the cleansing.

The epistle teaching requires us to face this, that what is required for our redemption is more than our sincere remorse. What is required is radical: it is our re-creation. And this can only be accomplished by the suffering and blood of Christ. If sin were simply wrong thinking, or misbehavior, perhaps better instruction or simple correction would be the solution. But sin is *separation*, a disorder of our natures, leading to death. So the epistle offers the blood of Christ. His is that precious blood, the blood already made like pure gold, which can make us pure, because it is real human blood united to the divine nature. That human blood he offers has in it the life of God, the purity of holiness, and is more precious than anything else.

For with his entry into the perfect tabernacle, the heavenly Jerusalem, not made with hands, our Lord and Christ carried his own blood, offered in his life of Passion, and yet still flowing in his veins. In this reading the image is not one of shedding blood for paying a penalty or taking on deserved punishment. Nor is it offering something to quench the thirst of a blood-thirsty god, as in pagan sacrifices. It is the presentation of the perfect Blood, the precious blood of the Perfect Person, he who is God and Man, offered willingly on our behalf to the Father. It is the ultimate act of beseeching, appealing for reconciliation to God of those for whom Jesus Christ lived and died, with a pure gift of sacrifice. It is an appeal for the forgiveness of his brothers, his flesh and blood, who are united to him. It is also offered as the blood that covers us with healing and protection, as the blood of animals sprinkled on the Israelites. It is offered to be the blood that washes our souls, that cleanses and purifies our consciences from dead works. It is given to become the blood that truly nourishes us in our sanctification, as we receive it by faith in Holy Communion. It is the incarnate, sacrificial, purifying and sacramental blood, offered for us and to us.

So, whether you are one who thinks all this talk of blood borders on bad taste; or if you are one who enjoys maybe too much the blood and gore of our current culture, we should all give thanks to God that this sacrifice of our Lord was made for us. It cannot be any other way. This is the gospel. For the epistle also says, “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.” Another way of translating that statement is, “there is no atonement, except in blood.” It can’t be achieved any other way. This is still true and always will be; yesterday, today and forever. If we remove the sacrifice, if we deny the shedding of blood, we remove the possibility of redemption. There is no removal of sin without the offering of blood.

Neither the fervency of my fasting, nor the rigor of repentance, nor the intensity of my intentions to do good, nor the perfect execution of my pious practices will bring about

eternal redemption. These are good things that we should do, ways in which we participate in the completion of our salvation. But like the ancient sacrifices, they are temporary, incomplete. They cannot alone restore our sinful natures, nor can all our technological advances or good ideas correct a broken and disordered creation. They certainly cannot conquer death. These show us our need, and in their incompleteness, just like the sacrifices of the old covenant, they cause us to look for a perfect answer, to anticipate being made whole, made anew, have our sins not just forgiven, but taken away.

So on our behalf, not only to forgive us, but also cleanse us, the blood of Christ is offered by the great High Priest himself, to a holy God for our redemption, in his complete passion and suffering. It could not be any other way. This is the gospel, the good news that we proclaim and believe. Only a holy life, and only one that is fully divine as well as perfectly human, could offer the precious blood that can cover and redeem and cleanse the broken image of God that we are, and to overcome the power of death.

*In the Name...*