

## Passiontide

*“Through His own Blood [He] entered in once for all into the holy place” Heb. 9:12*

The Epistle to the Hebrews is not so often used in the traditional Latin and Prayer Book lectionaries, but it appears at critical moments (so to speak). On Passion Sunday it announces the meaning of what we will be entering into over the next two weeks – the Lord’s Sacrifice. Nevertheless, we cannot escape that this Epistle is a long way, geographically and historically, from the scene of the Upper Room and the Empty Tomb. The context of the Lord’s Passion was the Spring sacrifice of Pesach. That sacrifice – originally – was apotropaic (averting). The sacrificial blood averted the vengeance meted out to the first born Egyptians. This immediately raises any number of questions, of course, such as could God not tell which houses were those of the Egyptians and which sheltered the Hebrews? We cannot get behind the story. Pesach, as celebrated in our Lord’s time, therefore, was a sacrifice of rejoicing and thanksgiving – celebrating how the *Hebrews* were spared, and escaped Egypt. All this fits very well with much of the meaning of the Lord’s Sacrifice, but it does not answer to sin. In varying degrees, almost all of the New Testament books insist that the Lord offered the Sacrifice of Himself for the remission, the cleansing of sin. This does not answer to the Paschal season. The seasonal Hebrew sacrifice for sin’s removal was Yom Kippur, but even that was a ‘weak’ removal. It was considered to be effective for covering inadvertent sins, not those committed with a “high hand.” Nevertheless, as a liturgical event, Yom Kippur is closer to what the writer of *Hebrews* (and most of the other New Testament writers) want to say about the Lord’s Passion than the Springtide commemoration of Pesach signified.

We see, therefore, that there is an element of loss and gain in relying on *Hebrews*, because it is Pesach that determines the chronology. No one can seriously suppose that the Crucifixion took place in the Autumn, not least because of the fierce, and extremely early, controversies as to what day the Resurrection should be celebrated. This really fixes Paschaltide as the season of ultimate importance. It is for this reason that it is unwise to take readings from *Hebrews* for Good Friday itself (as both Cranmer and the *Novus Ordo* did!). We should be thinking of Moses at that point (obscure as the Moses stories may be).

Now, the temptation here is to try to give a condensed account of *Hebrews*, but this is over-ambitious. Surprisingly, despite its allegorical tendencies, *Hebrews* makes no attempt to account for the various sacrifices of Judaism. One would have supposed that it would allegorise the principle forms of sacrifice to answer to different episodes or aspects of the Lord’s work, but this never occurs. The writer seems to lump all the sacrifices together as being the faintest outlines of what the Lord would achieve. Their effectiveness in themselves is dismissed, but they might just have accomplished some sort of physical purification? The absolute purification of conscience (of total personality – as we might be tempted to say) of the human person in God’s sight... that could only be accomplished by the one unique Priest of God. Again. Although there are many references to the act of sacrifice, the emphasis falls on Christ’s Priesthood. It may be insisted that the sacrifice and the priest are inseparable, but nevertheless, the interest of our Epistle is in the ‘going in and out’ that characterizes the Jewish High-Priest’s function.

We, however, are probably more interested in the Lord’s offering of Himself. We struggle to understand why He had to die, why He was convinced that obedience to His Eternal Father meant obedience ‘unto death.’ We are not the first nor the last people to ask about this. What does the Epistle mean when it contrasts the blood of dumb animals with Christ’s own? We can account for this historically – up to a point – because of the words of a non-canonical book 4 Maccabees: “Make my blood their purification and take my life in exchange for theirs.” [4 Mac. 6:27-29] The merest allusion to these martyrs comes in St. Matthew’s Passion (for those churches that will be reciting that Passion in a week’s time). That proclamation of self-offering is thought to benefit the faithful Jews who were then resisting the syncretism and adulteration of the Jewish faith. Again, it is not immediately clear why a heroic death should avail for their strengthening, but it was undeniably an impressive conviction.

In approaching this holiest season, we cannot expect to unravel all these historical and theological knots. We have to take quite a large amount on trust. We can break things down to their component parts to an extent. Firstly, we have to understand that a priest (none other than the Priest) had to make an absolute prayer and offering because we cannot make anything like this ourselves. In submitting to death, Christ undid our death and transformed it. As it was well said: “Christ does not commit sin, and we do not make atonement.” [James Denny, *The Death of Christ*] Christ is the perfect representative Priest because He shares our nature but is separate from sin. In both His likeness to us and in His unlikeness, He is able to bring us into His kingdom. As the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom says, so shockingly, of Christ: Thou didst leave nothing undone until Thou has led us up to heaven to bestow upon us thy kingdom that shall come.” It is not just a matter of blood, nor of obedience to an arbitrary will but the whole Christ giving Himself to the uttermost (in blood, death, obedience and faithfulness) that is our exodus out of our blind and self-serving existence that saves us and gives glory to the Godhead of Father, Son and Holy Ghost – then, now and forever.