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Sermon

Memorial: Christ's death and its benefits to us

Exodus 12:21-23; 1 Cor 11:23-26; John 1:29-34

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Last week, Helen started the current series on Holy Communion. You will remember she spoke on Jesus describing himself as the Bread of Life. Jesus said that we would not have life unless we ate his body and drank his blood. We saw that he spoke of feeding us spiritually. As the bread and wine are taken into our bodies and made part of us, so he would be united with us. As natural bread and wine satisfy hunger and thirst so he satisfies our spiritual hunger and thirst. That is one aspect of the meaning of Holy Communion.

There are other aspects as well. Today I want to explore another: the memorial. Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me." Is it then a memory jogger so we don't forget he lived - a sort of religious post-it note? Obviously, it is far more than that.

Holy Communion was instituted at the Last Supper. It was eve of Jesus' death. He clearly said he would die the next day. The Synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark & Luke) make it clear that the Last Supper was a Passover meal.

The Passover Festival was a time of remembrance and celebration of the deliverance of the Hebrew people from their captivity in Egypt. The plague of death had been about to sweep over Egypt killing all the firstborn of man and cattle. The blood of the Passover lamb applied to the doorposts and lintels of the Hebrew houses gave protection to their households so their firstborn were untouched – the destroying angel passed over those houses. So the Passover held concepts of deliverance, freedom and protection from destruction. The Hebrews had been slaves in Egypt – they were set free.

When Jews celebrate the Passover, they tell the story again each year. In it they are encouraged to see themselves as present although it was their ancestors who experienced the original events. The story is told in the first person, "I was ..." The Rabbinical instruction is "in every generation a man must so regard himself as he himself came out of Egypt."¹

What are **we** remembering? Jesus took the existing Passover meal and reinterpreted it. He changed the story to include himself. "This is my body; this is my blood." Can you imagine the shock for the disciples? There was an established liturgy for the actions and words of the Passover meal and Jesus had altered it! Suddenly he invested it with new meaning.

Remember: the key to interpreting the Bible is that Jesus is the whole point! He himself explained the Old Testament scriptures to his disciples to show that they applied to him. Luke tells us in the account of the

¹ M. Pesahim 10:5

road to Emmaus that "...beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, Jesus explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."²

In the Last Supper, Jesus explains that his coming death is for their salvation. Just as the Passover Lamb was the means of protecting from the destroyer, so he would protect his followers from spiritual destruction. Just as the Hebrews were freed from slavery, so we are delivered from slavery to the kingdom of darkness. Just as they were given freedom, so we are transferred into the Kingdom of God.³

We find other people testifying to this in the New Testament. John the Baptist announces Jesus with the words, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"⁴ Paul declares, "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed."⁵

I have said that the whole point of Scripture is Christ. As you know the Old Testament had an elaborate sacrificial system. Animals were killed to allow the Jews to approach the Holy God and as part of their worship. The book of Hebrews explains this from a New Testament viewpoint. Those sacrifices were not of themselves effective. "... it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."⁶ So what use were they? They functioned as signposts pointing to the reality of Jesus' sacrifice. They themselves did not deal with sin, but they pointed to the future sacrifice of the Son of God which would deal with sin, once and for all. It was like seeing a shadow – when we see a shadow, even if we can't see the object, we know there is something real and solid there casting the shadow. In the same way, God gave the Hebrews the sacrificial system to point to the sacrifice of Jesus.

Another way of putting it is that comparing the sacrificial system to Christ's sacrifice at Calvary is like comparing a bicycle with a BMW!

The sacrificial system limited in scope because it was addressed to the Hebrew people only rather than all humanity covered by Jesus' sacrifice. It was also limited in that it had to be repeated for each sin. But Jesus' sacrifice was good for all time. It covered all sin. It did not have to be repeated. Hebrews 7 says,

Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.⁷

We may need to claim forgiveness for a new sin we have committed, but that is applying the atonement to our situation, not needing the crucifixion to be repeated.

In the sacrificial system there were five main types of sacrifice:

- **Meal Offerings** of grain, unleavened bread and wine: This celebrated God's bountiful provision of food and drink. It was a signpost pointing to the provision of spiritual food. We have already seen how Jesus called himself the bread of life. Some of us went to the Sons of Korah concert earlier this year. The lead singer spoke of the tension in the Psalms where the psalmist is not afraid to set out plainly the conflict between God's promises on the one hand and his troubles on the other. He said that when we do that and hold onto both then we bring faith into the reality of our situation and God acts. So, if we are hungry and thirsty spiritually, we need to cry out to God for him to satisfy us, to remind him of his good promise and admit our emptiness. There is the tension – you said but my experience doesn't match up - then he will fill us up.
- **Sin offerings** were always the sacrifice of an animal and pouring out of its blood. These are fulfilled by Christ's death on the cross and pouring out of his blood dealing with the problem of sin. (We can be crippled with guilt because of something we did. Jesus' blood washes away the sin. But more than that God justifies us – declares us not guilty – "just as if I'd never sinned." Helen and I used to go on Parish Missions which would involve home visits, house meetings, evening meetings, etc. On

² Luke 24:27

³ Col 1:13

⁴ Jn 1:29

⁵ 1 Corinthians 5:7

⁶ Heb 10:4

⁷ Hebrews 7:27

one of those trips, we visited a home and got talking to a really big muscular Maori man. It came out that he had been a gang member and had murdered a man. He had served his prison sentence and been released. While he was in prison he became a Christian. Some cult members had said murder could not be forgiven and he had lost confidence that God would forgive him for the sin of murder. We were able to assure that God would forgive a murderer and had forgiven Moses, David and Paul who had murdered and then repented. The blood of Jesus Christ washes all sin away. I have known people plagued with guilt for sexual sin and countless other types find the same wonderful peace of knowing their sin is forgiven and no longer held against them.

- **Trespass offerings** atoned not so much for the guilt as the damage done by an action. Again these involved the animal's death and its blood being poured out. These too were fulfilled in Christ's death at Calvary. Even the damage done by our wrongdoing can be forgiven because of Jesus' death. We don't have to live in perpetual guilt for the damage done by our sins.
- **Burnt offerings** represented a total self-giving: These were fulfilled in Christ's willing offering of himself. The animal offerings were a young ox (representing patient endurance⁸), a ram (unresisting abandonment⁹), a goat (a sinner¹⁰); dove (mourning innocence¹¹ and poverty¹²).
- **Peace Offerings** celebrated peace between God and man. ¹³ Jesus gave himself up freely and willingly to death, so that we could be at peace with God.

At the cross, Jesus fulfilled all the Old Covenant sacrifices. We dealt with the first last week. The fulfilment of Burnt and Peace offerings will be covered in future weeks.

It is the Sin and Trespass offerings which relate to the Passover and the shedding of blood. At the cross, Jesus poured out his lifeblood and died. There he paid the price for sin; there his life was given for the death penalty; there he set us free from the dominion of Satan.

At the Last Supper, he spoke of the sin and trespass offerings being fulfilled when he said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."¹⁴

There are a couple of foundational ideas which help us make sense of this. Firstly, we are told in Leviticus that the life is in the blood.¹⁵ Pouring out blood leads to death.

Secondly, sin leads to death. Why because the source of all life is God. Sin separates us from God and so from the source of our life. That is why the Bible says, "The wages of sin is death."¹⁶

The just penalty and consequence of sin is death but God allows that an innocent party can pay the penalty for the guilty. Hence the innocent, animal sacrifice for the guilty human. Hence, ultimately, the only innocent human, Jesus - God incarnate who willingly chose to die in place of a guilty race. "This is my blood ... poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

If we forget that he poured out his life for us, we are likely to slip back into guilt and not realize how great a price he paid for us to be free.

Do you know your sins are washed clean by the blood of Jesus? That is why he died – it is yours for the asking. What God asks is that we believe what he says, that the death of Christ is sufficient to deal with our sin and we turn from it and ask forgiveness. Maybe you need to ask for that forgiveness today for the first time. Maybe you need to restate your dependence on his salvation. This is a prayer you might use to ask for salvation. Take a look at it and if you want to join me in saying it from your heart.

⁸ 1 Cor 9:9-10; Is 52:13-15; Phil 2:5-8

⁹ Is 53:7

¹⁰ Is 53:12

¹¹ Is 38:14; Heb 7:26

¹² Lev 5:7; 2 Cor 8:9; Phil 2:6-8

¹³ Eph 2:14-18; Col 1:20; Eph 2:17 & 14

¹⁴ Matthew 26:28

¹⁵ Lev 17:11

¹⁶ Romans 3:23

Heavenly Father, I am sorry for the things I have done wrong in my life. Please forgive me. I now turn from everything I know is wrong.

Thank you that you sent your son, Jesus, to die on the cross for me so I could be forgiven and set free. From now on I will follow him and obey him as my Lord.

Thank you for the gift you offer me of forgiveness and your Spirit. I now receive that gift.

Please come into my life by your Holy Spirit to be with me for ever.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Jesus established Communion as a means of spiritual sustenance for us.

Jesus established Communion as a repeated lesson and reminder that he had paid the price of sin – his blood was poured out for us. His blood washes away our sin.

Jesus established Communion to keep reminding us that his death provided deliverance, freedom and protection.

Each time we take communion we are reminded of his sacrifice for us and the benefits he has won for us. But it is more than a symbol or a mere reminder and that we shall explore next week.

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