

Vanhoye chapter 11

The Sacrifice of Christ (Heb.9:11-12)

The verb 'to sacrifice' as generally used today means to deprive oneself of something for the benefit of another. But the verb 'to sacrifice' also means to make something/somebody sacred just as the verb to sanctify means to make something holy or the verb to simplify means to make something complicated, simple. In religious terms, to sacrifice means to give a sacred value to some thing or person by God's power.

Chapters 8& 9 of Hebrews give us the core teaching/preaching of the sacrifice of Christ. The sacrifice of Jesus, called the Paschal Mystery includes his death and his glorification. Without his glorification the sacrifice of Jesus would be incomplete as it would leave us unsure as to whether his death had met with God's approval and acceptance. So we could not claim Jesus had become the High Priest of the New Covenant. But his resurrection and glorification has given us certainty that he has passed from the earthly into the heavenly Sanctuary; he has reached God and linked us in our humanity with God's holiness. Christ has acquired the capacity to introduce us into full communion with the Father and into fraternal communion with our brothers and sisters.

To help, the first converts from Judaism, to understand and appreciate the religious value of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus the author of Hebrews expresses them in the cultural language of the time and relates them to the priestly worship of Judaism showing their similarities and great difference between them.

When the prophet, Jeremiah, announced the New Covenant, he did not explain how it would be established. The author to the Hebrews does this. The author of Hebrews, knew that the Mosaic Covenant was sealed by sacrificing an animal. So he understood that something similar obtained in establishing the New Covenant. It had likewise to be founded on an act of Sacrifice. This would be an act of mediation that would remove the obstacles to our communion with God and re-establish that communion. This act of mediation was is the sacrificial offering of his life by Jesus.

The author of Hebrews deepens this theme in chapters 8 & 9. As said above he compares the priestly worship of the Mosaic Covenant and that of the Risen Christ.

The author introduces the topic of worship at the start of chapter 8. *'Now the main point of what we are saying is this; we have such a high priest, one who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tabernacle that the Lord, not man set up'.* (Heb.8:1-2)

In the culture of the day a minister was somebody who did a good deed for the good of everyone at a cost to himself/herself. This is a nice description of Jesus.

Next the author connects the theme of Covenant with worship. *'The place where they serve is a sketch/model and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary, just as Moses was warned by God as he was about to complete the tabernacle. For he says, **'See that you make everything according to the design shown to you on the mountain.** But now that Jesus has obtained a superior ministry, since the covenant that he mediates is also better and is enacted on better promises'.* (Heb.8:5-6)

This tells us that the temple and all that went with the worship offered there by the ministers of the Mosaic Covenant was only a pale shadow of the true temple and worship in heaven where the Risen Christ ministers.

Next the author quotes the promise of the New Covenant in Jeremiah in verses 8 to 12, and comments briefly on it. *'But showing its faults, God says to them; Look the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will complete 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 fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not continue in my covenant and I had no regard for them, says the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will establish with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will put their laws in their minds and I will inscribe them on their hearts. An I will be their God and they will be my people. A there will be no need for at all for each one to teach his countryman or each to teach is brother saying, 'know the Lord', since they will all know me, from the least to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their evil deeds, and their sins I will remember no longer'. (Heb. 8:8-12)*

In Hebrews chapters 8 & 9 the author is continually alternating between worship and covenant emphasising that the two are intimately united. This is in line with the idea that the priest is a man of mediation. The offering is made to establish a covenant and it is not possible to establish a covenant without an offering.

The old Covenant was incomplete because it was based on an inadequate worship. In chapter 9 the author analyses this worship and shows it was incomplete and did not achieve its aim. Heb.9:1 says: *'Now even the first Covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary'*. This sanctuary was made by humans and an earthly sanctuary is not a suitable instrument for achieving communion with God.

From here on the author refers to the Tent of the book of Exodus rather than the Temple in Jerusalem because he wants to base his argument on the Law of Moses which does not mention the temple. The tent of Moses consisted of an outer tent and an inner tent; the outer tent was the only way of entering the inner one, which was considered the dwelling place of God. Since both tents were made by humans, God could not really be dwelling there.

Then the author describes the order of the ceremonies; the simple priests would carry out ceremonial worship in the outer tent from time to time but the High Priest would enter the Inner Tent once a year carrying the blood he would offer for sins. (Heb.9:6-7)

The structure of both this tent and, the Temple which succeeded it, was based on a system of successive separations in order to have a prudent approach to the God of holiness. However true contact with God was not established in this way.

Heb. 9:8 says: *'The Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary is not yet opened as long as the outer Tent is still standing'*. They had no way of passing through to the true sanctuary of God's presence because the gifts they were offering could not perfect the conscience of the person offering them. {Note; The way is still not opened because we usually refer to a way as being opened or closed. But the author did not say opened but the way was not yet revealed or manifested; in other words the true way into the true Sanctuary was unknown. }.

The first or outer tent was not the way into the true Sanctuary; what this way would be had not yet been revealed.

They had no way of passing through the true way, because the "gifts and sacrifices" they were offering could not perfect the conscience of the worshipper. (Heb.9:9) The people and priests were motivated by a good and positive religious aspiration. But this was not enough to purify the conscience of a sinner.

Sacrifices were understood to be gifts offered to God in order to obtain his favour; this was based on what obtains in human relationships. The idea was to change God's mind about us and his attitude towards us. For example God's

attitude was changed by the sacrifice of Noah in Gen.8:21. The author of Hebrews makes a strong critique of this understanding of sacrifice. He says the main aim of offering a sacrifice to God is to change the attitude of the worshipper not God's. Its aim is *"to make perfect the conscience of the worshipper"* that is to purify the heart of the worshipper and make him docile to God. And sacrificing animals did not have the capacity to do that. So the system of sacrificial offering in the Old Testament was inadequate; they dealt only with gifts, ablutions and rules that were prescriptions of ritual purity and could do nothing to change a person's heart.

There were some very praiseworthy things in the Old Testament worship; one example among many is that the people expressed their religious aspirations with very generous offerings. But these praiseworthy efforts were not enough to change the conscience of a sinner. And as long as one's heart remains unchanged it is impossible to have an authentic relationship with God. To bring about a change of heart, sinners need to be helped by a mediator who is not himself a sinner and who will open the way to communion with God.

The author proclaims: *'But now Christ has come, as high priest of all the blessings which were to come. He has passed through the greater, the more perfect tent, not made by human hands, that is, not of this created order and not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, entered once for all into the Sanctuary, having obtained an eternal redemption.'* (Heb. 9:11-12)

In the language of worship these two verses present the whole Paschal Mystery of Christ; his passion, death and resurrection. Through his passion death and resurrection Christ entered not a material sanctuary but the true Sanctuary in heaven. His entry into the true sanctuary opened for us the way to God and re-established communication between us and God establishing communion and a new intimacy between us, humans, and God. In fact; he has become the way: *'I am the way'*. (John 14:6)

As the Son of God he had no personal need of sacrifice, but he did have this need in his human nature. By his generous offering of himself he obtained transformation of his own human nature that it might, in this way, be introduced into heavenly intimacy with God.

How did God Re-establish Communication?

God re-established communication by two parallel means – Christ has entered into the true Sanctuary “by means **of the greatest tent** ... and by means **of his blood**”. **The blood of Christ** means the offering of his own life, suffering a violent death in perfect obedience to the will of the Father and out of generous love for us. It was an act of filial obedience to the Father and of solidarity with us humans.

What Does the phrase ‘Greater & More Perfect Tent’ Mean?

St John Chrysostom has proposed an interpretation that **the greater and more perfect tent that does not belong to this creation** is the “glorified body of Christ”. Christ became human and remained human up to his death and glorification which means the human body of Christ belonged to this creation, for it was a body like ours; by his glorification it has become a new creation. According to Hebrews, the new way to enter into intimacy with God is the human nature of Christ which is transformed and glorified in his sacrifice. **Christ has entered into divine intimacy by means of his glorified body and by means of shedding his blood.**

The parallel between the body and the blood corresponds to the two aspects of his offering; He has generously offered his own life (his blood) and with this offering he has obtained the transformation of his human nature(the body); he has renewed it so that it is worthy of entering into intimacy with God. His human nature has now become the way that leads into glorious intimacy with God as has the shedding of his blood; the teaching is perfectly coherent.

This way was not revealed in the Old Testament. It was completely unknown and was only revealed in the Paschal Mystery of Christ. This teaching corresponds to the teaching found in John 2:19 where Jesus had cleansed the Temple and was asked for a sign that would show he had authority for what he had done. *‘Jesus replied: ‘Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up’.* (John 2:19) John commented; *‘He spoke of the Temple of his body’.*

The mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus is presented by John as the mystery of an earthly Sanctuary that is changed in three days and becomes the heavenly Sanctuary by means of the death and resurrection of Christ. The

glorified body of Christ is the true Tent and the way He built for us to enter into intimacy with God. Through that Tent, Christ has presented himself before the Father in heaven on our behalf.

The letter to the Hebrews made a profound contribution by making a distinction between the dwelling place of God and the way to it. God's dwelling place is in heaven; but there was need for a suitable way into this heavenly dwelling place for us humans, a way not made by human hands.

The Tent is "greater" than the ancient Sanctuary because by his Paschal Mystery, Christ has made it possible for all believers to become members of his glorified body. As St. Paul says in 1Corinthians: *'Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it'*. (1Cor. 12:27) Through our baptism into the glorified body of Christ we share in the Paschal Mystery and became a new creation as his human body did at his resurrection.

This also applies to us. As St. Paul affirms; *'So for anyone who is in Christ there is a new creation; the old order is gone and new being is there to see'*.(2 Cor. 5: 17). When we receive the Eucharist, the body and blood of Christ, we enter into intimacy with God, as we are now part of the glorified body of Christ.

This interpretation in the letter to the Hebrews gives us the priestly and sacrificial way of understanding the paschal mystery of Christ. Paul hinted at it when he wrote: *'Christ our paschal lamb has been sacrificed'*. (1 Cor.5:7). The letter to the Ephesians is more explicit: *'Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God'* (Eph. 5:2).

'As God's dear children, then, take him as your pattern, and follow Christ, by loving as he loved you, giving himself up for us as an offering and a sweet smelling sacrifice to God'. We can always profit from this mystery. (Ephesians 5:1-2)

The teaching shows the divine relationship of love that energises us with new life and unites us and our misery to the intimacy and love of God for us.