

Morning prayer: 9:30 am, Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday in church, Tuesday online. Attended by a dedicated few it is perhaps St Mary Beddington's best kept secret. What a treat you're missing. There's psalms; there's canticles; there's responseries; there's antiphons and intercessions and collects and sometimes a shiba inu trying and failing not to be amazingly excited. Morning prayer is that good if you're a two and a half year old canine. And the humans too! Strap yourself in for a high octane fasten-your-seatbelts rollercoaster riding white knuckle take-your-breath-away adrenaline-soaked endorphin-pumping extra-exhilarating electrifying trip of a liturgical lifetime...

Well possibly not. I might be exaggerating a little.

But if not quite a 14 loop rollercoaster there are I have discovered, occasions on which a strong stomach is required to attend morning prayer: as robust a constitution certainly as that needed to spend a day submitting to the mediaeval tortures of Alton Towers.

In Advent 2022 we decided that we'd junk the readings set by the liturgical commission for Morning Prayer- what do those desk jockeys know after all?- and instead, chapter by chapter, read the bible from beginning to end. It might take us a long time, but at the end of it we would be able to look back with satisfaction and wonder... why did we do that? No, sorry, we would be able to look back *with* wonder at the achievement and the variety and beauty of God's word. That's the plan. So, this highly localised lectionary, recently reached Leviticus, lucky us. Leviticus, a book which despite sitting there Eric Pickles-like taking up a at least three seats in the aisle of the good book enters the standard readings list for services something like twice every three years and then just a verse or two, so effectively Leviticus is pretty much never read in public. Except at St Mary's. So far this obscure niche of the scriptures has proved to be somewhere between interesting and bonkers, long before we reached the bit that our puritan brethren love, about never wearing polycotton, not eating rock badgers and... calling out the priest if your house has caught leprosy. But that's later Leviticus and not, you should be relieved as I am to know, where we're going to day. Back to the beginning and the book opens with basically a city and guilds course in butchery, but taught in a theological college. God calls Moses and Aaron and tells them all about sacrifices: which animals to bring for which sins; and when they're brought how to cut the unfortunate beasts up; which bits to cut up; what to do with particular bits, such as the fat round the liver or the kidneys, and then when your ram or pigeon (or bull if you've been really bad) have been reduced to chops and mincemeat, where and how to burn it. So far, so bank holiday barbecue. There's also lots and lots lot about what to do with the blood which inevitably results from cutting up cattle. Instructions are intricate and lovingly described, varying from sprinkle it on the altar to daub it on the right ear lobe, thumb and big toe of a healed leper.

It's more than a bit icky and easily misunderstood and all told it can be quite a challenge for a 21st century mind, to say the least, to find God among the gore. But, Leviticus is in our Bible—in the Torah the holiest part of the Hebrew Scriptures no less— so we have to assume that God must be there, somewhere. And you know, if we try to get behind the words to the thinking behind them, I think he is.

Surprisingly enough, I think it is the feast we celebrate today, of Corpus Christi that can cast light for us into this murkiest corner of our scriptures, because there is a crimson thread which connects the long-gone sacrifices of idealised Temple worship to our festival this day, which is blood.

It is blood that runs through the vessels of worship, from those earliest days of a tent in the wilderness to the church in the park of today.

To understand the connexion, to see what links Leviticus and now we need to think about what blood *is* in a ritual context, and then what it means. And don't worry, no animal will be harmed in the preaching of this sermon.

Firstly, however, for those who know what I'm going to say before I say it, what this is not going to be about is the idea of the sacrifice of the Cross abolishing the system of Temple sacrifices, that Leviticus is principally useful for Christians to show us what we've gotten rid of. That's a theology that can very quickly become offensive supersessionism, and that's not where we're going to day.

So, why, does blood matter, to the extent that there are extensive special instructions in the Torah just for that product of liturgical butchery? Why does blood matter to the extent that the very first synod of the Christian Church, 50 AD in Jerusalem declared that gentiles who wished to become Christians should not be 'troubled' by Jewish Laws except that they:

*abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood*

Why, does blood matter, so much that at the height of the Christian liturgy— at every eucharist— the priest intones the words:

*Take this all of you and drink from it. This is my blood of the new covenant.*

The answer, is that liturgically, spiritually, blood is life. And it doesn't just symbolise life, it *is* life. Drained of blood, we are emptied of life.

If you are going to offer a sacrifice to God, then by it's very nature, it needs to be something valuable, something that will, if you like, cost. And nothing is more precious than life: only in the depths of despair is it given up, or as an ultimate sacrifice: and that is what is being offered, albeit vicariously with the life of an animal,

in the sacrificial system. Sacrifices were not about getting meat for the priests (though that was a perk of the job), or making the Temple stink (which it certainly must have) but about life, giving back to God the most precious thing he had in his turn, given.

Blood then, is life and life is the essence of a living thing: blood is what makes it a living baaing sheep rather than a slab of meat. Sheep blood is life-essence of sheep, cow blood is life-essence of cow and so on. Hence that prohibition on the consumption of blood— the potential commingling of essences it would have involved, was too much for the ancient religious mind to tolerate. You have your own life: you cannot mix it with the life of a cow or a sheep or a pigeon.

Which brings me, finally, to the eucharist.

*Take this all of you and drink from it. This is my blood.*

This is my blood. This is my essence. This is my life. Not the life of an animal, but the life of God. We don't, as the priest would in the Temple, throw this blood on the altar or on the people. We drink it, take it into us; it becomes part of us: we are breaking the mixed essences taboo. At the eucharist we are partaking of the life and essence of God.

The sacrifice of the Cross is not just an end of the sacrificial Temple system, it is a reversing of it: at Christian worship instead of a life being offered to God, God gives his life to us.

Blood is life; *this is my blood.*

Almost near the end, a couple of little things to be aware of here. We might be tempted to think that wine at the eucharist is symbolic blood whereas that of the animals in the Temple was real blood, but, no. At the eucharist that wine truly becomes the blood of Christ, the life of God. That's what's said when we receive the elements, that's why any left over consecrated wine is consumed, not poured back in the bottle or down the sink. How that is, is another sermon.

Secondly, although at the eucharist both bread and wine are consecrated, and we receive both the body of Christ and the blood of Christ body and blood are not really separable either in biology or theology. Body and blood are equivalent and interchangeable: the blood flows through the body and the body is saturated with the blood. Hence it's fine to take communion in one kind only— most usually the bread but possibly the wine. You still receive full communion.

So, I hope you've been able to stay with me: the theology can become dense and exalted quite quickly, but I'm sure you coped. And what a journey it's been: from Leviticus to Corpus Christi, from the Temple to the Mass, from the gore to the

glory. We started spilling the blood of animals and we've ended in communion with God.