

Come to Calvary's Holy Mountain

John 19:34

A Sermon for the Season of Lent

This hymn, "Come to Calvary's Holy Mountain," presents us with an unusual picture.

Calvary's holy mountain is obviously Golgotha, the place of the cross. It starts: "Come to Calvary's holy mountain, Sinners, ruined by the fall." Then it says: "Here a pure and healing fountain Flows to you, to me, to all, In a full perpetual tide, Opened when our savior died."

The hymn presents a scene from the crucifixion, described in John 19:31-37. Jesus had spoken his last words: "It is finished," and he died. But the two other felons crucified that day were not yet dead. The Jews didn't want the bodies up on the crosses over the Sabbath, so they asked Pilate to break their legs to hasten death so they could take the bodies away. The soldiers did that but when they came to Jesus, they saw that he was already dead. One of the soldiers, however, pierced Jesus' side with a spear and water and blood flowed out. This is an image with layers of meaning. It is an echo of Zechariah 12:10: ". . . when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child" He is the one. That's one layer of meaning.

But there's more to it.

The second verse of the hymn says: "Here the guilty find free remission, here the troubled peace may find, Health this fountain will restore; Those who drink shall thirst no more."

You know that story from John 4 about the Samaritan woman who came to draw water from the well. Jesus asks her for a drink and says: "If you knew who was saying to you, please give me a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." And then (paraphrase): "The water I give will to you will become a spring of living water welling up to eternal life."

We are reminded also of Psalm 51 which says: "Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. . . Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities."

And Rev 21:6: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, to the thirsty I will give from the fountain of the water of life without payment."

In this hymn, "Come to Calvary's Holy Mountain," we have these images all coming together, and we realize that here is a combination that is unusual. We have the crucifixion, the piercing of his side, the water of life, the fountain that restores. We are washed in the blood cleanses us from sin and makes us whiter than snow.

What is it that is going on? It's the matter of sacraments and what they are.

Every so often there's a news report, often in southern Florida, of animal sacrifice. People report finding small dead birds or chickens on their lawns, animals that have obviously been burnt. What's this about? Some Caribbean immigrants have been practicing their native Afro-Cuban religion, Santería, based on animal sacrifice.

We regard ourselves as more civilized than that. To be sure, we don't have that practice of sacrifice as a religious act.

But how do we understand Christian sacraments?

We know about the ancient Hebrew practice of sacrificing sheep and other animals. We know in reality this practice is awful. We recoil from it.

What do we do about sacrifice and shedding of blood? This practice and this imagery is found often in the Bible, see especially John 6:53-55: "Unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

What can we say about this?

There are three ways in the Bible that this is looked at.

The first of these is the covenant. And if you go back to the Hebrew idiom, the expression is "to cut the covenant." That means the when a covenant is declared, you have a sacrifice which is made between two armies or two nations or between two people, not only between God and us. There is some kind of sacrifice to seal the deal.

It's like the ritual of being "blood brothers," which involves two or more people, usually males, making small cuts on their bodies and symbolically mixing their blood, signifying a strong bond of loyalty and brotherhood.

The second way is expiation or propitiation. 1 John 2:2 says: We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; he is the expiation for our sins." That's a big word, expiation. What does it mean? This is the way of atoning for, of paying for sin. It is said in Hebrews 9:2: "Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sin." Or in 1 John 1:7: ". . . the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin." And John 1:29: "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." It's the beautiful little lamb that is sacrificed. And then the sin of the world is taken away.

Of course, this can all be misunderstood as buying God off. But that's not what is meant. In the proper understanding it is that God wills that he will do something, not that we do something if he forgives. It's not tit for tat, but rather, this is the way he has arranged it to take away sin.

The third way is substitution. It is important for us to realize as Westerners is that what it is about is that the blood is the life. The ancient Hebrews understood that the blood is the life. It's one life substituted for another. The life of Jesus Christ comes in place of our life.

We might ask ourselves: Does it have to be a bloody sacrifice? Couldn't it be a drowning, or something thrown over a cliff? Or another biblical image: The scapegoat from Leviticus 16 which talks about the way two goats are sacrificed. One would be sacrificed in the usual sense on the altar and the other goat would come out and the priest would put his hands on the head of the goat, transferring the peoples' sins to the goat, who is then chased out into the wilderness, and sin was then removed in that way.

In any case, it's a life for a life.

We, rather than speculate about this, face the importance that regardless of what we think or understand, this is how God did it. God solved the problem of sin and death by what he did by dying on the cross for us.

What can we say about this so that we have some sense of what it means?

What it means is stated very well by Paul in **2 Cor 5:21**: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness (the holiness) of God." He took our place and in exchange gives us his. He takes our death and gives us his life.

What is it that is so astounding? It's not that there is a sacrifice, but that God who is holy took on our sin. Holiness and sin. These are beyond our us, beyond our understanding. And yet, that's what this is really about. The Lord has washed us with the blood of the lamb. All our sins are washed away, we are redeemed. Because of the cross, we have this life which he gives us. Amen