

PSALM 50: 1-2,4-14

- ¹ The mighty one, God the LORD,
speaks and summons the earth
from the rising of the sun to its setting.
- ² Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,
God shines forth.
- ⁴ The Lord calls to the heavens above
and to the earth, that God may judge the people:
- ⁵ 'Gather to me my faithful ones,
who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!'
- ⁶ The heavens declare God's righteousness,
for the Lord is judge.
- ⁷ 'Hear, O my people, and I will speak,
O Israel, I will testify against you.
I am God, your God.
- ⁸ Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you;
your burnt-offerings are continually before me.
- ⁹ I will not accept a bull from your house,
or goats from your folds.
- ¹⁰ For every wild animal of the forest is mine,
the cattle on a thousand hills.
- ¹¹ I know all the birds of the air,
and all that moves in the field is mine.
- ¹² 'If I were hungry, would I not tell you,
for the world and all that is in it is mine.
- ¹³ Do I eat the flesh of bulls,
or drink the blood of goats?
- ¹⁴ Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,
and pay your vows to the Most High.

If there is any psalm that condemns the sacrifice of animals, it is this one. Not that such sacrifice was bad in itself. Every time we eat a plant or animal, do we pause to offer up a prayer of thanks for what we will eat? Animal sacrifice was always intended to express first thanksgiving before God and then, every part of what was offered would be consumed and used in some way. Nothing was wasted. All was honoured.

Ancient peoples also incorporated sacrifice in all their rituals of worship. Sacrifice expressed not only thanksgiving but contrition and confession of sin as well. As the animal carried the sin of the people so God was absorbing the people's sin and forgiving them.

What God takes issue with, however, is how ritual and sacrifice can be an excuse for not offering more heartfelt worship and more dedicated service to God's love and justice. If you read on the rest of this psalm it becomes clear that God is as concerned about justice and righteousness as God is about thanksgiving. If people are not offering to God their heart and soul expressed in how they treat all life around them and care for it, then all the ritual of sacrifice is useless, and worse: it's fake.

And so, God speaks in this psalm as creator. God is in all things, from the sun that shines forth, the heavens and the earth, the animals and all life. God doesn't need sacrifice of animals for sacrifice' sake. They are God's own as it is. God wants hearts and lives committed, dedicated and transformed by love.

Are there times and ways in your life where you do things out of sheer duty and obligation rather than heart? Are there times and ways you tell yourself you fulfill certain tasks even though your heart is not in it at all? Sometimes we have no choice if we care and must do things for others or for ourselves. Doing something only if our heart is fully alive in it is a luxury some of us don't have. But if we don't find ways to find our heart in the tasks and rituals of our lives, and if we don't find ways to grow in gratitude, love and commitment to justice in how we live, we will lose our souls.

PRAYER: Come to us, O God, come to us as the fire of love... come to us to comfort us... But come to us also to provoke us... Do we practice gratitude enough?... In what ways are we agitated toward your righteousness and justice?... How can we find ways to do what we do in our daily round with heart... It is true that sometimes we need to distance our hearts from our tasks in order to cope and survive, O God... We need comfort and resilience for that... But we are also creations out of your love, O God, made to flourish when we are alive to gratitude and a love of justice... Open up a path for us to become ever more alive in our daily lives this coming week... Amen.