

Reflection

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After reading the Lectionary several times, I found that all three readings deal with one theme: sacrifice or offerings.

What is an offering? Our very first offering appears in Genesis 4:3-4 when Cain offered to God the fruits of his garden, but Able offered the firstlings of his flock ... and God preferred Abel's offering. That ended badly!

The next time we encounter offerings are when Noah and his ark finally come to ground, and it is time to come out from the ark. "Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar" (Genesis 8:20). Noah was giving of what he had to the Lord in thanksgiving for bringing them to earth when all else was destroyed.

What is a sacrifice? Our first sacrifice occurs when God tested Abraham in Genesis chapter 22. God had given success in war to Abraham. Then God tested Abraham: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." That would have been a terrible sacrifice.

I think we see that every sacrifice entails an offering, but the word sacrifice is a stronger word. It may imply something more serious or more difficult to give up.

An offering or sacrifice has three elements: (1) the person who does or gives something, (2) the action, and (3) the outcome.

Starting with the second reading, we read about the person who does this sacrifice. Here, a high priest offers gifts and sacrifices, just like our reading in Genesis where an important person or a high priest offers a sacrifice. Our Savior, Jesus, our high priest, often went to a solitary place to pray and make supplications. His actions were an offering for us.

Now, looking at our first reading, here we have all the actions of this sacrifice: borne, carried, afflicted, wounded, crushed, bruised. All these verbs describe the afflictions of this sacrifice.

Lastly, in today's Gospel, we have the third element of sacrifice: the outcome. James and John wish to become great – more important than the other disciples. The problem is, they do not consider what takes place in a sacrifice. They want the glory but have not

thought of the price they must pay. Jesus assures them they will pay the price but it is God who decides who gets the reward.

You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

When commenting on our first reading in his book *The Prophets*, Robert Alter, a Hebrew Bible scholar, writes:

as a devoted and true prophet of God, yet the Servant has suffered unspeakably – plagued with illness, somehow physically disfigured, reviled, and rejected by society; and finally condemned to an early death. The explanation for all this unwarranted suffering is that the Servant has acted as a surrogate for the people, taken upon himself the burden of the people's crimes ... and the righteousness of the prophet is actually confirmed by his suffering.

This is the central Christian story – the good news.

Every religious offering or sacrifice is an attempt to come into relationship with God. Do you fast during Lent? Have you ever joined a season of fasting in the Episcopal Church? Why do we do it? It is our way – our attempt to come into a relationship with God. We offer to God something we like or enjoy.

In the Rule of Benedict, we read in chapter 49:

On the observance of Lent: ... During these days, therefore, let us increase somewhat the usual burden of our service, as by private prayers and by abstinence in food and drink. Thus everyone of his own will may offer God, "With joy of the Holy Spirit," something above the measure required of him. From his body, that is, he may withhold some food, drink, sleep, talking, and jesting, and with the joy of spiritual desire he may look forward to Easter.

I think the fact that you got up, got ready, drove to church, and shared your Sunday morning with All Saints Church was an offering you made to our God – and that it is a pleasing offering.

Thank you.

Amen.