

The Thirty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Daniel 12:1-3
<i>Response</i>	Preserve me, O God, for in thee I take refuge.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 16:5, 8, 9-10, 11
<i>Second Reading</i>	Hebrews 10:11-14, 18
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	But watch at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of man.”
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 13:24-32

The thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time sadly brings our journey through the letter to the Hebrews to an end. I wish we could keep going. This is such a rich and wonderful epistle. But Ordinary Time is coming to an end, so in Hebrews chapter 10, verse 11-14, we have our last passage for the year. And this is what it says. It says:

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, then to wait until his enemies should be made a stool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.

And then it skips down to verse 18:

Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.¹

In this passage, we see some of the same themes that we've encountered elsewhere in the letter to the Hebrews but with a slightly different emphasis. So for example, it begins with yet again another reference to the Levitical priesthood. Although in

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

this case, instead of focusing on the sacrifice of Yom Kippur, the annual Day of Atonement sacrifice offered by the high priest in the temple, it actually focuses on a different one known as the Tamid. Tamid in Hebrew refers to the perpetual sacrifice or the continual sacrifice that was actually offered every single day in the Temple.

You can read about this in Exodus chapter 29 or Numbers chapter 28. The Tamid is extremely important, but for whatever reason, very unfamiliar to many, many Christians and many readers of the New Testament. So a lot of times, Christian readers of the New Testament will be familiar with the Passover sacrifice in the Old Testament in the book of Exodus chapter 12, or even with the Day of Atonement — like the lamb, the scapegoat, that kind of thing — from Leviticus chapter 16.

But both of these were only annual events. A foundational and absolutely crucial sacrifice that any Jew in the Second Temple period would have been familiar with was the daily sacrifice of the Tamid. The fact that the priest did not only offer sacrifice occasionally or even weekly, much less just annually, but that their principle duty was to go in every day, day in and day out, and offer two sacrifices — one in the morning and one in the evening. According to Josephus, the morning sacrifice of the Tamid would be offered at 9am, the third hour after sunrise — so about 9am, starting from 6am counting up to 9 — and then at the ninth hour, which would be 3:00 in the afternoon.

So every day at 9am and then at 3pm, morning and evening, morning and evening, over and over, over and over, day after day until the end of time, the priest were to offer a lamb in sacrifice, as well as an unbloody sacrifice of bread, and in some passages we see it appears to have been bread and wine. So... fascinating. You have a bloody sacrifice of a lamb, unbloody sacrifice of a grain offering along with a liquid sacrifice of wine, every morning, every evening, every morning, every evening — 9am, 3pm, 9am, 3pm. And this was known as the sacrifice of the Tamid, the daily or perpetual sacrifice.

So in Hebrews chapter 10, the author here is referring to the Levitical priesthood's offering of the Tamid. So it says:

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. (Hebrews 10:11)

Very interesting.

But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God... (Hebrews 10:12)

Alright, pause there. Notice once again, you have in Hebrews — something we've seen over and over again — the emphasis on the unicity (the singleness) of the sacrifice of Jesus *and* on the eternity or on the eternal character of His sacrifice. It is once, but it's also for *all time*. We see it once again here.

And then third, notice that for Hebrews, what is the context of that sacrifice? It's not just Calvary — although Calvary is obviously principal. But it's also the ascension. What Jesus does on Good Friday comes to its fulfillment, its consummation, so to speak, when He brings the offering of Himself into the heavenly sanctuary. So you can see here, look at verse 12:

But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins...

He did what?

... he sat down at the right hand of God...

When does Jesus sit down at the right hand of God? It's when He ascends into the heavenly sanctuary. It's when He ascends into Heaven. And in fact, even that language there of sitting down at the right hand of God, we might think of it from the Creed, but it's actually an allusion to Psalm 110. Psalm 110, verse 1:

The Lord says to my lord:
“Sit at my right hand,
till I make your enemies your footstool.”

And then verse 4:

“You are a priest for ever
after the order of Melchiz’edek.”

So even in the psalms (to which Hebrews is alluding), there’s this connection between Jesus’ Melchizedekian priesthood and the ascension into the heavenly sanctuary where Jesus sits at the right hand of God.

So in the passage for today, when it says:

But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, then to wait until his enemies should be made a stool for his feet.

So the imagery here — this is important — Christ ascends into Heaven, He sits at the right hand of God, and He now waits until His enemies are made a footstool. That’s a reference to the second coming, to the final overcoming of sin and death through His victorious return. And then in verse 14, it says:

For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.

Now... this is so crucial, but something we tend to forget — sacrifices weren’t only meant or weren’t only offered to atone for sins. They were also offered in order to make the people of Israel holy, to make them sanctified ... or in Hebrew, *qadosh*, to make them set apart.

So when God calls Israel — in Exodus 19, for example — when He says:

... and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exodus 19:6a)

What He means by calling them to holiness is not just that they’re supposed to live upright lives ... that they’re supposed to be really, really good. That’s what we

often mean when we use the expression “holiness”. We focus on the moral component of holiness, and that is crucial. *Qadosh* in Hebrew — separate means to be separated from sin. It has a negative component.

But it also has a positive component. Holiness — *qadosh*, to be separated — is not just to be separated from sin. It’s also to be separated for God. So there’s a moral component, but there’s also a liturgical component. How do we separate ourselves for God? How do we offer ourselves *to* God?

Well, we do that through sacrifice and through, in particular, sacrificial worship. The offering of the animal up to God is a way of symbolically representing self-offering to God. This is very, very crucial. In order to understand animal sacrifice in the Old Testament, you have to grasp the fact that the animal, in a sense, represented the offerer. So when the animal was killed, when its blood was poured out for sin, it was a representative sacrifice of the person. It stood in the place of the person who deserved death because of sin, but that blood had atoning power for that sin.

However, the animal also represented the self-offering of the person making the sacrifice. Because once the animal was killed, it would be laid on the altar — think here of a burnt offering, a whole burnt offering — and then it would be consumed. And where does the animal go? In the smoke of the fire of the sacrifice, it goes up into Heaven. The holocaust offering — we call it holocaust because of the Latin, but in the Hebrew its *olah*, which doesn’t mean “hello”. It means to go up.

So the *olah* sacrifice is literally the ascension offering. It goes up into Heaven by being consumed in the fire of the smoke to represent the desire of the person offering it to enter into God’s heavenly presence, to be lifted up and enter into the heavenly temple, into the heavenly sanctuary.

So it’s a profound, symbolic meaning to animal sacrifice in the Old Testament that we tend to either miss entirely or even to be repulsed by, to think, “Oh, this is some kind of primitive ritual. It’s bloody; it’s disgusting.” No, no... there are deep, deep meanings and deep reasons for the way God instructs His people to offer sacrifice in the Old Testament. It’s both typological in the sense that it points forward to

what Jesus is going to do. But it's also symbolic of the self-offering of each individual person.

So... I can go into that a lot more again. If you want more on that, check out ... I have this series called *The Bible and the Mass: The Jewish Roots of Christian Liturgy*, where I go through this in a lot of depth. But for now, the idea of this perpetual offering — you actually see in the Old Testament, it'll talk about “my prayer goes up to you, O Lord, like the incense at the evening sacrifice”... the smoke of the evening sacrifice. So smoke and incense was another way of representing the desire to enter into God's presence, ascending into Heaven.

That's what Jesus is doing in His Paschal Mystery:

For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. (Hebrews 10:14)

This is the reason for Christ's sacrifice. He doesn't offer sacrifice because He needs it, because He needs to be sanctified. He offers a sacrifice because human beings need it, because sinners need not just to be reconciled to God but also to draw near to God, to enter into His presence, to be sanctified. It's the universal call to holiness — to be set apart from sin and to be set apart for God.

This is why it's not enough to just “be a good person”. This is a kind of common error of modern times. People say, “Well, I'm a good person. I should go to Heaven.” Well, being a good person in the sense of separating yourself from sin is one aspect of holiness, but it doesn't make you a saint. A saint isn't just separated from sin. A saint is also consecrated to God. A saint wants to give themselves to God. A saint wants to offer him or herself and his entire life — all that he is, like a whole burnt offering — to be consumed in the fire of the Holy Spirit and to ascend into God's presence.

And Jesus, of course, who is the supreme sacrifice — He doesn't just fulfill the Passover. He doesn't just fulfill the Day of Atonement. He fulfills the burnt offering too, because He's consumed in the fire of the Holy Spirit, the divine charity. And like a whole burnt offering in the Old Testament, He doesn't stay on

Earth. He ascends into the heavenly sanctuary to enter into the presence of God the Father and then to intercede on our behalf, so that we might be sanctified as well... so that we might be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, the people of God.

Okay, so the final verse of the reading for today is — and the upshot, you might say, of the author of the Hebrews for his original audience is:

Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.
(Hebrews 10:18)

What does this mean, “there is no longer any offering for sin”? Well, here the author to the Hebrews is trying to explain another difficulty that would have been a problem in the first century — namely, the question, “Should animal sacrifice continue?”

God commanded animal sacrifice in the Old Testament. This is in Scripture; it’s the Word of God. Now that Christ has died on the cross, been raised and ascended into Heaven, what is the status of the animal sacrifices that are continuing to happen in the temple? Are they necessary for salvation? Should we continue to participate in them? These would have been live questions for Jewish Christians, especially Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem in the first century AD. Say 40 AD or 50 AD... the temple is still standing. What do you do if you’re a Jewish believer in Jesus as Messiah? Are you going to the Eucharist on Sunday and then going to the Tamid on Wednesday? What is the nature of these sacrifices?

And so — although the text wasn’t given to us today for the lectionary — I’ll just have to turn to the last chapter of Hebrews. It’s really telling. It gives us just a little bit of a glimpse, so we can’t be sure... but if we read Hebrews carefully, it looks like the people to whom it’s written are being tempted to turn away from the sacrifice of the Eucharist and go back to frequenting the animal sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem. And listen to how Hebrews brings the letter to conclusion; it says this — I’ll start in verse 7:

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same

yesterday and today and for ever. Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings; for it is well that the heart be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited their adherents.

Here's a key line:

We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. (Hebrews 13:7-12)

Man, that's a great verse. This is so important. So it's the first century AD. You get a letter from whoever — maybe it's St. Paul, maybe it's somebody else. You're a Hebrew, and the letter really only makes sense if you're likely living in the land of Jerusalem. And in that letter, the apostle says to you:

We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat.

Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings...

Go back to the faith that you heard preached to you as the Word of God. What could that possibly mean? What is the altar from which the earthly priest serving in Jerusalem have no right to eat? The only reasonable answer is the altar of the Eucharist.

So Hebrews 13:10 is a key passage showing that already in the first century AD, the Eucharist is being described as a sacrifice. It's not just a meal; it's a sacrifice. And not only is it a sacrifice, but it's a sacrifice that surpasses the sacrificial animals and the sacrificial feasts of the old covenant ... so that there's no need to go back and partake of the flesh of the Passover lambs or the other animal sacrifices that are offered in the temple day after day, year after year. Because Christ, the perfect sacrifice, has been offered outside the sanctuary, outside the city, in order to sanctify the people of God, the Church, the *ecclesia* of God.

So, I just ... I don't think it's inconsequential. I don't think it's an accident that Hebrews ends with this apparent reference to the Eucharist, because — although I can't prove it, it's just speculation — if I had to guess, it seems to me that the most likely explanation for this situation that the letter to the Hebrews is addressing, is that it is written to Hebrews, to Jewish believers in Christ who may be tempted to go back to the animal sacrifices of the temple and to treat them as if they were necessary for salvation, and that Christ's sacrifice on the cross was not enough, that it wasn't enough ... or that Christ's offering of His Body and Blood (the sacrificial banquet of the Eucharist) isn't enough.

And the author to the Hebrews gives us this elaborate letter, this beautiful, powerful letter, to show not only how Jesus is the true high priest, not only that He is a Melchizedekian high priest, but also (I would suggest) why it is that animal sacrifice has come to an end and been replaced by an altar from which the priests in the temple on Earth have no right to eat.

So in conclusion here, a little final quote from living tradition from St. Thomas Aquinas. If you want to dig in more, if you've enjoyed this series on the letter to the Hebrews, you can look at Thomas Aquinas' *Commentary on the Letter to the Hebrews*. It is an absolute gold mine. And in it, he says about this passage, and I'll end with this (and he thinks this is Paul that wrote it. That's the Latin tradition by the time of Aquinas):

When he says "and every priest indeed," he compares the priests of the New and Old Testaments... [I]n the former, "every priest indeed standeth daily ministering and often offering the same sacrifices," because they always offered a lamb: "which" daily sacrifices "can never take away sins," because they were repeated...

In other words, if they were truly efficacious, they wouldn't have to keep doing them over and over and over again. But, Thomas continues:

But that continual sacrifice prefigured by Christ and the eternity of him who is the lamb without blemish... [T]he old law offered many sacrifices without expiating for sins. "This man," Christ, "offering one sacrifice," because he

offered himself once for our sins, “for ever sits at the right hand of God,” not as a minister, always standing, as the priests of the old law, but as the Lord...

And then he quotes Psalm 110:

... “the Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand” (Ps 110:1)...²

That’s Aquinas’ *Commentary on Hebrews* number 494-495 and 497. In other words, what Thomas is saying here is that animal sacrifices in the Old Testament were many because they were not effective. They didn’t deal with sin in a definitive way. But the reason Christ only has to offer one sacrifice is He’s going to take away sin once and for all. He’s going to take away sin permanently *and* — you can actually see this, this is great — He says you can see it was efficacious and permanent why? Because Christ sits at the right hand of the Father.

So he actually recognizes that the priests in the temple... the reason they’re all standing, is because they’re constantly offering sacrifice. But Jesus has accomplished it. He’s completed it, and so He is able to sit and reign victorious as not just our heavenly king, but as our heavenly high priest.

² Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Hebrews* no. 494-495, 497