

Bloody Sacrifices

A sermon on Micah 6:1-8; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 & Matthew 5:1-12 by Nathan Nettleton, 29 January 2017

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Message

Jesus did not come to be the ultimate sacrifice that would appease God, but to show us, once and for all, that God does not want sacrifices at all, but lives of love, mercy and compassion.

Sermon

Two weeks ago, John Fowler preached for us on the story of John the Baptist identifying Jesus as the sacrificial lamb of God. He did an excellent job of surveying the range of ways that Christians have understood what it means to talk of Jesus as a sacrifice and, correctly I think, ended by saying that what you believe about that probably doesn't matter nearly as much as the way you live out the life of love and mercy that Jesus lived.

Tonight we heard the prophet Micah saying something very similar, but I think Micah pushes it a bit further and actually rejects certain beliefs about sacrifice outright in favour of living a life of justice, mercy and humility. So tonight I want to build on the foundation John laid for us two weeks ago, and see where the prophet Micah might take us from here.

First though, by way of introducing the topic, I want to look at a couple of big events that have been traumatising our city in recent weeks, and see how they help us to understand what sacrifice was about in the first place. Ten days ago, an angry, disturbed, amphetamine-fuelled young man who couldn't cope with his brother's homosexuality deliberately drove his car down the footpath in Bourke Street, leaving dozens of pedestrians killed or injured. We are used to hearing about random mass-murders in other countries, but we are not used to them happening in our city. It's been thirty years since the last ones, the Hoddle Street and Queen Street massacres.

Naturally it leaves us shaken and feeling vulnerable and scared. Some of you here were in the vicinity at the time, and those feelings are even stronger for you.

One of the natural instincts of a community faced with an outbreak of chaos and violence is to look for someone to blame, someone whose failures left us all in danger. We want to know who failed to keep the perpetrator off the streets, and who failed to stop him earlier in his rampage, before it reached its murderous climax. So people have been pointing the finger at mental health professionals, at bail justices, and at those who changed the police pursuit policies.

The daily news has also been carrying reports of the breakdown of our youth justice system, with riots at the Parkville youth prison, just round the corner from my place, and the major break-out at Malmsbury this week. Again a frightened community understandably looks for someone to blame. There are calls for the minister to resign. There are criticisms of the prison officers, and of those who seek to prioritise rehabilitation over tough justice.

In both situations, we see government joining in with the finger pointing and promising tougher laws. But what they don't promise is to properly resource the systems that are breaking down. It is much easier and more politically expedient to give the public what they are chanting for, a culprit who can be the focus of all our anger and fear.

What does this have to do with religious sacrifice? Well, as John reminded us, the word “scapegoat” comes straight out of the Israelite sacrificial system. The scapegoat is the one onto whom we project all our failings, and all our anger and fear, and then sacrificially expel them from the community to purge the evil from our midst. The religious version is simply an official ritual version of the same instinct that we all feel in the face of such crises.

When you combine that with a particularly common way of thinking about God – that God is the ultimate definer and enforcer of law and order – a whole religious sacrificial system is born. God is seen as an angry tough-on-sin eternal judge, offended and outraged by every human failing, demanding that a penalty be paid before there can be any pardon. There you have the birth of a doctrine of penal atonement – a penalty must be paid before things can be put right. And then when that distorts a bit further – not that differently from the way we distort ourselves – we end up with a law-and-order God who is so fixated on the penalties rather than the rehabilitation of the offenders, that God doesn’t even care anymore whether it is the offender who pays. Someone has to pay, and you can substitute in someone else, perhaps even a lamb or a goat or your firstborn child, and God will still be satisfied because this bloodthirsty God just needs to be paid. There you have the birth of a doctrine of substitutionary penal atonement. And the ‘Christian’ version of that says that Jesus died to save us precisely because God wouldn’t show mercy unless someone was made to pay and punished big time. It’s an ugly picture of God, but it is, and long has been, very very common.

Criticism of this view of God and of the resulting sacrificial system did not start with Jesus. It is already present in a number of the prophets. It is surprising how often biblical commentators play it down and argue that the prophets were all focussed on opposing idolatry and trying to centralise worship at Jerusalem. But portraying God in our own distorted image is idolatry, and you will find strong condemnation of the sacrificial system in the preaching of Isaiah (1:11-16), Jeremiah (6:20), Hosea (5:6; 6:6; 9:11-13), and Amos (5:21-25), as well as in the passage we heard from Micah tonight.

Micah certainly depicts God as being distressed by human sin:

“O my people, what have I done to you?
In what have I wearied you? Answer me!”

If you think that sounds familiar, it is because the “reproaches from the cross” that we hear in the Good Friday liturgy each year are based on it.

But Micah’s response both acknowledges and rejects the sacrificial response – the idea that if we just offer a big enough sacrifice, God’s favour can be bought.

“With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

Do you hear how Micah parodies the way sacrificial ideas keep escalating? Shall I give a calf? A thousand rams? Ten thousands of rivers of oil? My firstborn child? What will it take? Still more? It is grotesque, Micah is saying, and it is not what God is looking for.

And remember, this is before the time of Jesus, so no one can say that this is only the case because the sacrifice of Jesus was the biggest sacrifice of all and therefore now God doesn't need sacrifices anymore. This is before the time of Jesus, and Micah ridicules the hunger for more and more sacrifices and then says:

“God has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?”

Jesus clearly seems to agree. He twice quotes the prophet Hosea's critique of ritual sacrifice (Hosea 6:6) saying God desires love and mercy, not sacrifice (Matthew 9:13 & 12:7). Jesus surely does not think that a God who has no desire for sacrifice is going to turn around and insist on his firstborn only begotten Son being sacrificed to appease his own divine anger. The prophets and Jesus are rejecting the idea of a God who is hungry for sacrifices and asserting that what God wants is lives of love and kindness and mercy.

Jesus does not come proclaiming, “The kingdom of God is at hand, so put your trust in a really really big sacrifice to persuade God to accept you.” No. He proclaims, “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent. Turn your lives around. Be loving and merciful as God is loving and merciful.” And when asked what the most important commandment is, he doesn't point to the commandments about offering a perfect sacrifice so that God will forgive your sin. He points to the commandments to love God and love your neighbour, and then he adds some commentary about loving enemies, to close the loophole.

In our gospel reading tonight, we heard the blessings from the beginning of the sermon on the mount. This too includes a special blessing on the merciful, but never says blessed are those who trust in the right sacrifice. But I want you to notice something else about this passage too, and how closely it agrees with Micah's description of what God wants. In Matthew's gospel, this passage, commonly known as the beatitudes, and Jesus's sermon about the judgement of the nations who have or haven't shown love and mercy and kindness to the least of these, my brothers and sisters (Matthew 25:31-46); these two passages bracket the whole ministry of Jesus. The first opens his teaching ministry. The second closes it. And neither of them contain even a hint of a suggestion that God's love and forgiveness can be bought for a price with a big enough sacrifice, perhaps even the perfect lamb of God. Both of them say essentially what Micah says:

“God has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
(to be merciful,
to make peace,
to hunger and thirst for righteousness,
to care for the least of these,
and to walk humbly with your God?”

And please don't hear that as just another way to beat yourself up and think that God hates you because you haven't managed to be all those things. What Jesus and the prophets are saying is not that God just has a different and even more difficult set of requirements that you are now failing to live up to. It is not just a different version of "Look how much Jesus has done for you! Now behave!"

What they are saying is that God is all about love and mercy. They are saying that God loves you like crazy and that God is infinitely ready and eager to forgive anything you have done wrong and welcome you home. And they are saying that you have been created in the image of God and are therefore capable of being similarly consumed by love and mercy. And they are saying that if you stop cowering and trying to appease some angry tough-on-crime god who doesn't even exist, and instead find yourselves infinitely beloved and accepted by the God of mercy who really does exist, then you will be set free, truly free, to live and love.

Now, one final comment before I finish, because I am sure that some of you know your Bibles well enough to be sitting there thinking, "BUT, the Bible does talk of Jesus as a sacrifice."

Yes it does. You are right. But the problem is that we have been so conditioned by the old sacrificial system and the ugly doctrine of substitutionary penal atonement, that every time we hear the word "sacrifice" in the Bible, we think it always means the same thing. But we use the word "sacrifice" in other ways in other contexts, and so does the Bible. When a father sacrifices himself by throwing himself in front of a deranged gunman to save his children, that is a sacrifice, a self-sacrifice, to save someone, but it has nothing to do with buying off an angry god. It can even be substitutionary. Maximilian Kolbe offered himself as a substitute to be shot by a Nazi guard in place of a stranger who was otherwise about to be shot.

Jesus saves us by sacrificing himself, by throwing himself between us and the angry, hungry, finger pointing, sacrificial monster that is human society out of control and constantly devouring more and more victims. Micah wasn't kidding about the way its need for more victims escalates, and our newspapers are full of further evidence. The Apostle Paul said that the message of the cross is foolishness to the world. If we could buy forgiveness, that wouldn't seem foolish, but that's not the message of the cross. In a world increasingly divided into winners and losers, voluntarily being a loser seems foolish, and sacrificing yourself for love rather than power seems utterly foolish. But that's what God values: not sacrifice of life, but a life of sacrifice.

Jesus loves you so much, and wants you to know yourself loved by God deep in your bones so badly, that he will lay down his life rather than compromise with a system that would press you back into guilt and self-hatred and anxiously trying to comply with whatever offerings and behaviours they tell you will buy you God's blessing. You are already blessed. You are already forgiven. You are already set free to live in the wide open spaces of God's love.