

Reflections on 'the Blood of Christ'

1 Peter 1:17-21

Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.

The reading from the First Letter of Peter has fascinated me. For one thing, it contains an image that many faithful Christians and would-be Christians find increasingly troublesome—Jesus as a sacrificial lamb whose life, by God's plan, was taken for our benefit. The writer puts it this way: *You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.*

I grew up hearing and singing those 19th and early 20th century hymns that were full of blood images. *Are You Washed in the Blood of the Lamb? There is a Fountain Filled with Blood. That Blood Will Never Lose Its Power.* And others. Though I find it difficult to sing those bloody images now, they communicated a meaning that I absorbed into my spirituality. There was a zeal, an intensity to the hymns and the singing of them that was straining to express a mystery beyond the words and music—that something happened in Jesus Christ that has made it possible for us to live as faith-filled people, freeing us to be who God made us to be.

The images of Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice simply no longer work for a great many sincere and faithful people who yet find Christian faith compelling. The notion that God sacrificed Jesus—God's son—for our sakes simply doesn't carry the spiritual weight it once did. What do we do with a God who demands the death of his child, even out of love for the world? That is not spiritually edifying in these days when we have finally become aware of the abuse of children. It is not helpful to people or the Gospel itself for the church simply to repeat more forcefully images that no longer work for people.

However, I don't believe this is a great problem. We need to recognize that the writers of Christian scripture used a variety of images to express the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Atonement. Reconciliation. New creation. Pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Incarnated Word of God. Prophet. Teacher. The images of Christ's blood, though important, are only part of what the scriptures say about Jesus.

Yet, we need not dismiss such images completely simply because we find them problematic. They may not "work" for us the way they used to, but still can enrich our understanding of the significance of Jesus. For instance, in Hebrew scriptures, our blood is our very life, and it belongs first and only to God, the giver of life. When Cain kills his brother, Abel's blood "cries out to God from the earth". [Gen. 4:10] Cain took the place of God by killing another human being. God even puts a protective mark on Cain the killer so that no one will repeat the same crime. Blood is life, our life, and it belongs to God. Whenever we read of Jesus' blood being shed for us, it can mean that he lived his life as an offering to God and for us. Not only his death, but his whole life was such an offering.

The writer uses images from the Exodus of Israel from slavery in Egypt. In Exodus 12, God gives instructions that on the night of their escape, the Israelites are to offer an unblemished lamb as a sacrifice and eat it together as their final meal in exile. Its blood is to mark the doorposts of their houses so that the plagues God is sending on Egypt will "pass over" their houses. The blood is a sign that will protect them during God's liberation activity. God's liberating power brings freedom to those who are oppressed but is experienced as destruction by the oppressors. The point for 1 Peter is that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus comprise another Passover event, liberating us from "futile ways" of living that do not bring meaning or fulfillment. The writer uses still another image to express the meaning of Jesus death--a ransom paid to purchase a slave's freedom.

None of these images can be pushed too far, nor any one of them taken as the most important or the only one. They all point to something beyond themselves. At the heart of this and other similar passages in Christian scriptures is the deeper sense of God's liberating love decisively present in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. That is where the emphasis should remain: Jesus' life of faith, including his faithfulness unto death, opened up the way for us to be faithful in our lives, to live our lives as offerings. In Jesus we know that there is an alternative to ways of living that are futile, that lead only to dead ends.

Now the writer speaks without images. This part of the reading I found especially compelling. *Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.*

The importance of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection for us is that we have been enabled and empowered to trust God, to live our lives from the center, from our relationship with God.

This verse said two things to me. First, because Jesus lived fully the life of a human being trusting in God, we are able to do the same. He shows us the way of faith, which means trustful living out of our relationship with God. The life of faith is not an impossible ideal. It is not something only for especially gifted spiritual persons. It is the essence of what it means to be a human being. Here is our identity with Jesus as our brother, as one who was fully human just as we are. As the writer puts it a little later in the letter: *For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.* (1 Pet. 2:21)

Second, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus can be understood as God's activity in his life on our behalf. They do not point to the specialness of Jesus so much as to the power of God. Here is how God's loving power, or powerful love, works in the lives of those who live out of trust in God. We are able to experience God's sustaining and renewing presence even in and through the most trying and painful experiences of life. The life of faith and trust is not confirmed by the absence of suffering or struggle, but by the receiving of new life precisely within and through those experiences. That is God's power of resurrection, of new life. And the whole point, in the writer's view, is that our faith and hope can be set on God. We might expect the writer to say that our faith and hope are set on Jesus. But Jesus is not the ultimate focus of our lives of faith. God is. Jesus is the one who embodies and makes available to us the life of setting faith and hope in God. One day someone came up to Jesus and addressed him as "Good Teacher." Jesus snapped back: Why do you call me good? No one is good except God. (Mark 10:17-22; Luke 18:18-25) Jesus was always pointing away from himself to God, calling us to live the same kind of life he was living—a life of trust and hope in God alone.

As I was driving down to North Carolina two weeks ago, I listened to the NPR program "Speaking of Faith." It was a replay of interviews with Jaroslav Pelikan, who taught at Yale University for more than 30 years in the area of Christian thought, particularly the history and development of creeds. Pelikan was making a case for how we contemporary Christians still need creeds. I wasn't persuaded to give as much importance to creeds as Pelikan did. The great creeds of the church have boiled down to a few words what the scriptures express in a variety of ways and images. Of course, that's the point of creeds. Also, the great creeds have arisen largely out of battles to define the nature of Jesus Christ as fully God and fully human. This is something that, to my mind, the scriptures themselves do not try to do. It seems to me, also, that spiritually serious people these days all over the world are weary of Christians fighting among themselves over words and concepts.

Yet the program prompted me to consider what I believe about Jesus Christ and how I would express it in the circumstances of my own life. I was deeply touched by Pelikan's reading of a creed written by the Masai people of East Africa in 1960. The African Christian community there felt the need to put it in their own words and experience. I will read only the portion about Jesus:

We believe in the one High God, who out of love created the beautiful world and everything good in it. He created Man and wanted Man to be happy in the world. God loves the world and every nation and tribe on the Earth. We have known this High God in darkness, and now we know Him in the light. God promised in the book of His word, the Bible, that He would save the world and all the nations and tribes.

We believe that God made good His promise by sending His Son, Jesus Christ, a man in the flesh, a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left His home and was always on safari doing good, curing people by the power of God, teaching about God and man, showing the meaning of religion is love. He was rejected by his people, tortured and nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died. He lay buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him, and on the third day, He rose from the grave. He ascended to the skies. He is the Lord.

We believe that all our sins are forgiven through Him. All who have faith in Him must be sorry for their sins, be baptized in the Holy Spirit of God, live the rules of love and share the bread together in love, to announce the Good News to others until Jesus comes again. We are waiting for Him. He is alive. He lives. This we believe. Amen.

Because Jesus lived as a human being fully trusting his life to God and living his life for others, he experienced, even through his suffering and death, the healing, liberating, and renewing power of God. Because Jesus lived this kind of life, I am able to do the same in my own life. Jesus has thus become for us the one through whom we have learned to believe in God, that is, to put our trust and hope in God. Believing is not just a matter of what we think. It is not holding onto images and word pictures that constrict the meaning of what is ultimately a mystery. Those are the shakiest foundations for a life of faith. Faith, or believing, means how we live, giving our lives to something meaningful and right and good. Jesus lived his life in such fullness of faith, that is, trust and hope in God, that he has become our inspiration, literally the one whose life fills us with the spirit we need to do the same in our own lives.

All of this is not a matter of our heads, of having intellectual convictions. It is about living life in a certain way. It is about our always being on safari, like Jesus, always on the journey inward of trust and hope in God, and the journey outward of loving service to others and to God's creation. Maybe we have been "washed in the blood of the Lamb," cleansed, liberated, and inspired by Jesus' life so that we can live as we were truly created to live.