

Sacrifice

15 4 12

Almighty Father,
you have given your only Son to die for our sins
and to rise again for our justification:
grant us so to put aside the leaven of malice and wickedness
that we may always serve you
in pureness of living and truth.

My text is from the First Letter of St John, chapter 2 and verse 2:

Jesus Christ **'is the atoning sacrifice for our sins'**.

Today is the first Sunday after Easter Day and in the Church of England, it is sometimes referred to as Low Sunday. 'Low' is not a reference to churchmanship but rather to the common sense notion that the Sunday after a high point in the Church Year will understandably be something of an anticlimax.

Last Sunday from up here in the pulpit, our church looked full with over a hundred folk receiving communion. For many reasons, it was a special, wonderful, service but on that very same evening in church, we had an extraordinarily thrilling concert organised by Claude François and given by two talented, young pianists, Bastien Crocq and Anne-Lise Dodelier from Montpellier. The programme, drawn up around the theme of dance, consisted of transcriptions for four hands of works

by Bach, Schubert, Ravel and Stravinsky with the concert coming full circle with an encore, again a piece by Bach.

I sat here enraptured by the quality of the music and the playing of these two gifted, young people who brought to life the notes on the page. But it was the piece after the interval which seriously caught and challenged my imagination. Stravinsky wrote 'The Rite of Spring' in 1912, a hundred years ago, and it is essentially ballet music. The music is sophisticatedly primitive, raw and rhythmic, mysterious, full of energy and power, a masterpiece of the creative imagination. The story, set in pagan, pre-Christian Russia, centres on a rural community from which a young virgin is selected to be sacrificed in order that the land might be blessed and the harvest be sufficient to sustain the life of the people. It is the notion that one life be given to preserve and sustain the lives of many.

What struck me forcefully was that sacrifice is at the very heart of our Easter message. For Christians, the sacrifice is not of a virgin girl but of the Son of God. The sacrifice is not an annual event but a single, one-off occasion which we remember annually. The victim is not someone chosen on the spot but someone predestined by God to die, someone who is born to die for us. The purpose is not that a specific community in a specific place at a specific time should prosper through shedding the blood of an innocent girl but that all people at all times and in all places should benefit through shedding the blood of an innocent man. The death of the child is the cost of having a fertile land. The death of Jesus is the cost of our atonement, our at-one-ment with God.

That is the clear message of John's First Epistle. John witnessed first hand what Jesus did and what he achieved. He saw with his own eyes and he was touched by his time with Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. For John, Jesus is an answer to our sinfulness, to our many imperfections in the eyes of a perfect God. The blood of Christ, his broken body on the cross, restores our relationship with God and our communion with him. By Jesus' willing sacrifice on the cross, we are cleansed of our sin and justified in the sight of God.

I have no doubt that music is one of several doors which open onto the divine, an effective way in which we can have a real encounter with otherness, with the numinous, with God our Father. Stravinsky's 'Rite of Spring' may well be a celebration of what is pagan but it reminded me of what is important, what is essential about our faith as Christians.

And at the end Bastian and Anne-Lise played Bach's 'Jesu joy of man's desiring' and I was transported back to a Christian world view where I love God in the person of his Son Jesus Christ because he first loved me and gave his life as an atoning sacrifice for my, for our sins.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist
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H: Sermon 25: Sacrifice

