

Washed in His Blood

23 3 14

Almighty God,
whose most dear Son went not up to joy
but first he suffered pain,
and entered not into glory before he was crucified:
mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross,
may find it none other than the way of life and peace.

Our text today may be found in Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 5 and verse 9:

‘ . . . justified by his blood . . . ’

One of the most beautiful ideas in our faith as Christians is simply expressed in English by the word, ‘atonement’ – the process by and through which we are reconciled with God, made one with him by him who had created us. Our text from Romans is the phrase ‘justified by his blood’ but this morning, let us consider a parallel phrase that John uses in the seventh chapter of the Book of Revelation ‘washed . . . in the blood of the lamb’ (v14).

One of the things I learnt from my mum was the satisfaction of washing and ironing. To take the clean clothes that I had worn the previous week and got dirty, soiling them with the sweat and carelessness of a working day and then getting them clean again – Persil-white, newly ironed smelling of vanilla.

So imagine the shock of the image in Revelation chapter seven in which John has a vision of heaven where 144,000 folk, 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel and an uncountable multitude from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne of God and the Lamb robed in white. And when asked who they are, we hear that they are the ones who have come out of the 'great tribulation' (AV) and surprisingly, counter-intuitively, that 'they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb' (NRSV)

Blood stains. With the awareness of AIDS, our contemporary horror of blood has been reinforced. Our roots in Judaism tell us that the presence of blood renders something or someone unclean. For food to be kosher, the meat needs to be, as far as possible, free of blood. In ritual sacrifice, the blood of animals made the sacrifice effective because the blood represented the life of the being: no blood, no life – how very true for living creatures, not least for all us as humans.

But here, far from polluting, blood purifies. How can this be ? Well the image of purification through blood 'renatus in aeternum' (reborn to all eternity) has a curious parallel in the worship of Mithras, then a popular, contemporary, Roman deity, in which the fully clothed initiate was literally washed in the blood of a sacrificed bull some of which was actually drunk as it dripped onto his face !

But the blood that washes us as Christians is the blood of Christ, the blood that he shed for us in the cross. And it is the blood of Christ, literally or figuratively, that we drink at the altar-rail each Sunday !

How does it work ? It works because of the virtue and acceptability to God of what is sacrificed. And the only acceptable, efficacious sacrifice is one without spot, one without sin, and that one can only be, by definition, God himself. So God sacrifices himself on the cross in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, for us his children. Just as the Passover lamb's blood, daubed on the doorpost of the house, allowed the angel of death to pass over so ultimately, the death of sin will pass us by because we are justified, as Paul puts it, by the blood of Christ. It is by giving up his life for us that we can have life. The gap between a good God and sinful humanity is bridged by the cross and we can be at one with a God who loves us as a father loves his son because we have been reconciled with Him by the blood of the lamb.

So do we have to do anything in return ? The answer is no and yes. No in that our reconciliation, justification, atonement is a free gift of God, independent of us. Yes in that we need to show by what we do that we have taken up God's offer. We need to accept what's on offer or we can reject God. Damnation is not God rejecting us but us rejecting him. We can all go to hell in our own way. But let's choose what's freely offered us: life and the paradox that we can be made clean by washing in the blood of the lamb. Sounds odd but it is true !

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

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G: Sermons 29 : Washed

