

4 The Peaceable Kingdom

Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice and yours
may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father.

THIS IS THE introduction to the central prayer of the eucharist, the 'canon', in the Roman Catholic Church. By way of explanation, the editors of *The Weekday Missal* write in their introduction:

At the Last Supper, Christ instituted the paschal sacrifice and meal. In this meal the sacrifice of the cross is continually made present in the Church when the priest, representing Christ, carries out what the Lord did and handed this to his disciples to do in his memory.¹

At the Reformation, the idea of the 'sacrifice of the mass' was repudiated because it seemed to call in question the 'once for allness' of what was done on Calvary. On the other hand, Christ's 'one, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction' remained the very heart of the eucharistic prayer.

In the previous two chapters I have argued that our eucharistic practice stems not just from the Last Supper but from Jesus' table fellowship and the great feedings as well. Indisputably, however, the Last Supper narrative has been the central text for understanding the eucharist from the very beginning. How are we to understand it? The Roman missal offers one widely accepted reading, differing from Protestantism in the role it attributes to the priest, and the way it understands *anamnesis* (recalling or memorial) but sharing the view that Christ's sacrificial death is the heart of the eucharist. It is clear that we cannot get away from the language of sacrifice, but the question is how we understand it. For this chapter I have borrowed a title from the Texan ethicist Stanley Hauerwas. Christ's death, I shall argue, is intended to introduce an order which is not based on violence – a truly alternative order. Many notions of sacrifice, on the other hand, retain ideas of violence within them.

'We have no shrines and altars.' This is from the apologist Minucius Felix, writing towards the end of the second century, and it is a common Christian watchword of the period. The eucharist is often spoken of as fulfilling Malachi's prophecy of a 'pure offering' (Malachi 1.11). 'Prayers and sacrifices performed by worthy men are the only perfect sacrifices pleasing to God', writes Justin.² It is the boast of the second-century Church that Christians differ from their pagan neighbours by not having propitiatory sacrifice, an offering, frequently an animal, designed to obtain God's favour and appease God's wrath. The eucharist, for these writers, is not itself a sacrifice though, as Rowan Williams has put it in an eloquent exposition of their views on sacrifice: 'The effect of Christ's sacrifice is precisely to make us "liturgical" beings, capable of offering

¹ *The Weekday Missal* (Collins, 1982), page xx

² Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 117

ourselves, our praises and our symbolic gifts to a God who we know will receive us in Christ.³

We first discern a change in the next century when Cyprian, in North Africa, writes:

If in the sacrifice which Christ offered none is to be followed but Christ, assuredly it behoves us to obey and do that which Christ did. For if Jesus Christ, our Lord and God, is himself the chief priest of God the Father, and has first offered himself a sacrifice to the Father and has this to be done in commemoration of himself, certainly that priest truly discharges the office of Christ who imitates that which Christ did; and he then offers a true and full sacrifice in the Church to God the Father, when he proceeds to offer it according to what he sees Christ himself to have offered.⁴

It seems that the emphasis has moved from the idea of moral sacrifice, and the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, to the idea that the bread and wine are themselves the sacrifice. The reasons for this change are quite unclear, but it led to profound changes in the celebration of the eucharist. Instead of the table from which both eucharist and common meal might be eaten is an altar. An altar requires a sacred place, and so it facilitates the change from an ordinary house to a sacred building. In understanding the sacrifice, Cyprian appeals to Old Testament models. Increasingly Levitical models of priesthood are now adopted. The president of the assembly is replaced by a priest who must offer sacrifice, and who is dressed in special priestly garments to do so.

Two further changes are noteworthy. In the fourth century, the eucharist is increasingly described in terms similar to those used by the mystery religions. We have already seen how the early emphasis on the joy of fellowship with the Risen Lord is replaced by a new emphasis on awe and fear.

The second change relates to the new situation of the Church which began with the conversion of Constantine in 315 and was endorsed when Christianity became the official religion of the state under Theodosius at the end of the fourth century. The last great persecution occurred under Diocletian in 303/4, and right up to that time the Church was in no position to put up great buildings and conduct ostentatious liturgies. Many pagans referred with scorn to the low status of those who became Christians. At least one ex-slave became pope in Rome, and the worship of the first three centuries was generally that of a poor community which might at any time have to 'go underground' in the face of persecution. Once the emperor had become Christian, however, there were new demands. It was obviously inappropriate to worship God in a poor building when the emperor lived in a palace. It was inappropriate to celebrate with humble vessels when the emperor supped off gold and silver. And so began the tradition of great buildings and liturgical magnificence,

³ R. Williams, *Eucharistic Sacrifice: The Roots of a Metaphor* (Grove Books, 1982), page 27

⁴ Cyprian, *Letter 63*

the clothing of the priest in gorgeous brocades to honour God the sovereign of all, and the production of exquisite chalices and patens of precious metals studded with jewels. How strange and novel this idea was can be seen from the behaviour of Ambrose who, although he had a high doctrine of the 'real presence', unhesitatingly had the Church vessels melted down to ease the lot of the poor during the Gothic invasion, explaining that the poor were the real treasure of the Church.

These changes in the third and fourth centuries were decisive for what followed for more than one thousand years. The doctrine of the 'real presence', already firmly entrenched in the Church, found cogent elucidation in terms of an analogy from Aristotle's metaphysics of substance and accident. Just as, when we look at a chair, what we see is, say, brown, hard and shiny, but the underlying substance is not visible, so it could be said of the eucharistic elements that their 'accidents' – what we see, touch and taste – remained the same, but their substance became the body and blood of Christ. The 'change' was bound up with the idea of the re-presentation of Christ's sacrifice for sin on Calvary. Transubstantiation and eucharistic sacrifice went together.

That the bread and wine were truly Christ's body and blood meant that tremendous care had to be taken to see that crumbs of bread were not dropped, nor drops of wine spilt. This concern led eventually to the denial of the cup to lay people. As partaking at the eucharist was now infrequent, adoration of the consecrated wafer, the 'host' (from Latin *hostias* meaning sacrifice), replaced it. Lay people gathered, often outside the church door, or looked through 'squint holes' in the rood screen, to watch the miracle far away at the high altar, the mystery emphasized through vestments, bells, incense and a clerical language. The priest stood with his back to the people and as the host was lifted high above his head the people genuflected and adored the mystery of God's presence in the sacrament, imaging the broken body and shed blood on the cross. Priests were required to celebrate daily but the corporate dimension of the eucharist was lost. The eucharist became the supreme form of intercessory prayer, a repetition of the great sacrifice for sin.

These developments did not go without protest during the Middle Ages. At the Reformation a certain restoration of primitive practice was effected. In some communions the altar again became a table. Cranmer wanted it in the centre of the congregation, which was the point of what later became 'north end' celebration. Communion in both bread and wine was restored to the laity and the liturgy was celebrated in the vernacular. But the late medieval emphasis on the death of Christ was not overcome. For Protestantism in general the Holy Communion was a memorial of Christ's death for sin. Much of the music written to accompany the Protestant communion was set in a minor key, calculated to call up sad and meditative thoughts. Both Luther and Calvin wanted the eucharist as the normal form of Christian worship on Sundays, but suspicion of 'the mass' as a piece of popery made this difficult. Calvin was overruled by the city council in Geneva, which allowed it once a month. In many Protestant communions it was fixed at four times a year and church members were

required to 'receive communion' only three times. The freedom of the early thanksgiving prayers was not recaptured.

The language of sacrifice is not dispensable – it touches roots too deep in human beings. The question is how we are going to understand it. We have seen that, in the second century, it applied above all to the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. To take this further we need to turn once again to the Last Supper narrative, remembering that we must not read it in isolation from the rest of the gospel story. The fact that Jesus' last act with his disciples was to share a meal is hardly a surprise, given the importance he attached to the sharing of food. In addition, this meal may well have had special significance, not just because Jesus could see his imminent arrest in view, and the likely outcome of that, but because, according to the Synoptics, it was a Passover meal. John depicts it as happening on the night before Passover but he has a theological motive for this, as he can then align the death of Jesus with the slaying of the Passover lamb. The case for the Passover dating, however, though strong, is not conclusive, and we have to be content with the fact that paschal ideas were bound to have been in the disciples' minds.

Of the four accounts of the meal, those of Luke and Paul seem to stand together on the one hand, and those of Matthew and Mark on the other. Mark is usually considered the oldest text on account of its semitisms and the difficulty of some of its expressions.⁵ All four agree that Jesus 'blessed' bread before sharing it, and Luke and Paul's use of *eucharistein* rather than *eulogein* to describe this may well be intended to make clear to Gentiles what is meant by a Jewish blessing, which is thanksgiving. This thanksgiving, which accompanied every meal, was not a consecration prayer in the later sense but rather expressed a sense of the holiness and given-ness of everyday life. According to Mark there followed a word of interpretation over the bread – 'Take, this is my body' – and after the meal over the cup – 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many' (Mark 14.22, 24). The Luke/Paul tradition adds, 'Do this in remembrance of me' or 'Do this that God may remember me.'

What do these commands mean? Do what in remembrance of me? We have already seen that Jesus does not seem to have been the man for rituals. In Jewish tradition 'blood' is the 'life' (Leviticus 17.11) and as body and blood here stand in parallelism it may well be that Jesus is referring to his life offering. When Jesus tells his disciples to 'do this', therefore, it may have the larger meaning: 'Let the breaking and sharing of your continued table fellowship remind you of how my life was broken and poured out for God's purposes of salvation, and may you do likewise.' The eucharist is therefore rooted in the whole practice of Jesus in the sense of what he did and the culmination of that doing on the cross. There is, therefore, a second sense of sacrifice, bound up with but going beyond praise and thanksgiving. Sacrifice here is self-offering for the sake of God's kingdom.

⁵ J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (SCM, 1966), pages 138f

Augustine seems to have understood it in this way in the fifth century. 'It is your mystery which is placed on the table', he said in a sermon. 'You hear the words, "the body of Christ"; you answer "Amen". Be a member of Christ, so that the "Amen" may be true.'⁶ As we have noted, in the Middle Ages, and continuing into the Reformation, attention was focused on Jesus' death as a sacrificial atonement for sin. But the emphasis in the narratives is less on death as such and more on a life lived to the uttermost for others, even to the limits of death. John and the author of Hebrews both stress this in their insistence on the obedience of Jesus, and this is consonant with the scene in Gethsemane which immediately follows, where Jesus prays, 'Remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want ...' (Mark 14.36). The stress is not on the death as such, but on a self-offering which may involve death. This is consistent with both the scene in Gethsemane and the emphasis on Jesus' obedience in Hebrews. The Greek text has 'do this' (*touto*) and not 'do thus' (*houtos*) and it seems that in this solemn and crucial moment Jesus sums up and refers to the whole movement of his life given for the kingdom he proclaimed. It is following him in 'this' which has to be 'done' by those who would follow him.

All our earliest traditions preserve the memory that Jesus spoke of the 'new covenant' at the Last Supper. In a way characteristic of the rabbis, the allusion was complex. What was probably in mind was Jeremiah's new covenant (Jeremiah 31.31-4), a covenant written on the heart which needed no animal sacrifice. Jesus, however, also invokes the ancient imagery of animal sacrifice, which sealed the covenant in early Israel (see, for example, the story in Genesis 15). Both aspects were reinterpreted as Jesus speaks of the inauguration of the new relationship between God and God's people through his commitment to the bitter end, even to death. This is the probable meaning of the 'blood shed, or poured out, for many'. Given that Jesus followed a man who had been executed (John the Baptist), that he was confused with him, and also identified with the prophets to whom Jewish tradition at the time popularly ascribed martyrdom (Luke 13.34), it is most likely that Jesus expected his death. How did he understand this? What kind of significance did he attach to it? I have already suggested that the words about 'my body and blood' may be understood as referring to his whole life offering. Did he think that his death would atone for sin? It is true that the Jewish world of his time attributed atoning significance to most deaths, especially those of martyrs, so it is not in the least implausible that Jesus attributed such a significance to his own death. A particularly attractive suggestion interprets Jesus' death for 'many' not as signifying abstractly 'all humanity' but the Gentiles for whom, according to tradition, there was no atonement.⁷ On this account Jesus goes to his death, therefore, to inaugurate the messianic mission to the Gentiles, to embrace the Gentiles within God's promises, to make them inheritors of the promises of the Fathers. In his life and death he initiates a movement which will culminate in the kingdom of God, when he will once more be able to celebrate not only with his

⁶ Augustine, *Sermon* 278

⁷ Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words*, pages 230f

disciples but with the great crowd they have brought with them, at the messianic banquet of the nations.

Though I grant that this is both attractive and plausible I wish to make an alternative suggestion, based on the understanding of sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible. The way we talk about 'the Bible', especially if we want to go on and say, 'the Bible is God's Word', disguises the extent to which there is debate and disagreement within Scripture. It seems to me there is a twofold tradition about sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible, and that Jesus opts for one of them over against the other.

The tradition which has fed in to conventional interpretations of the eucharist is represented above all by Leviticus. There, animal sacrifice is needed to atone for sin and guilt. Unless sin and guilt are atoned for God's anger will be visited on Israel. There is no doubt whatever that this understanding of sacrifice goes back a very long way, perhaps to the roots of human culture, but it is also very important to realize that these texts were edited during the exile. The exile, which marked the end of the Davidic kingdom, was the most traumatic event in Israel's history. God had promised that Jerusalem and the house of David were inviolate; now they were destroyed. Why? What had happened? The answer was found in Israel's disobedience. How was such a catastrophe to be avoided in the future? Obedience was the obvious answer, but perfect obedience seemed impossible. The redactors of Leviticus represent a theology which recast the old traditions of propitiation and of the scapegoat to say that God has given Israel this form of sacrifice as a means to wipe out guilt, to turn away its destructive consequences. It is a properly sacramental understanding. God ordains that lifeblood may function in this way, though it was perfectly well understood that this kind of sacrifice could not atone for any sin whatsoever. Its scope was limited; it did not atone for sins committed with a high hand; but so far as it went it was a gracious means for avoiding the kind of punishment the exile was seen to represent.

The earliest text we have which speaks of the other tradition about sacrifice is the terrible story of 1 Samuel 15. Commanded to wipe out the Amalekites, to commit genocide, Saul spares the flocks and herds and the king. The prophet Samuel greets him with the words: 'Behold, to obey is better than to sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams' (1 Samuel 15.22).

He then hews 'Agag in pieces before the Lord' and commands the destruction of the sheep. Despite the terrible context I believe it summarizes a whole reading of sacrifice which insists that true sacrifice consists in obedience to God's commands. When it is echoed later by prophets like Amos, Hosea and Micah, and by the Psalmists, it is always insisted that what God wants are works of mercy and justice. Amos may stand for all. He represents God asking, 'Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?' (5.25).

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil? ...
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you

but to do justice, and to love kindness (*chesed*),
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6.7–8)

In a text which Jesus quotes twice (Matthew 9.13; 12.7) Hosea puts these words into God's mouth: 'I desire steadfast love (*chesed*) and not sacrifice' (Hosea 6.6).

Paul, too, understood the Christian movement to involve the affirmation of this tradition of sacrifice: 'Present your bodies as a living sacrifice', he says to the Christians in Rome after his long rehearsal of the grace of God which has met them in Christ (Romans 12.1). The 'spiritual worship' of Christians consists in lives lived in obedience in response to grace, God's self-giving. The letter to the Hebrews represents a systematic exposition of this tradition. The blood of animals was really useless, says the author, as it clearly did not touch our lives. What was needed was Jesus' offering of obedience (Hebrews 5.8). Reflecting on the two traditions he says: 'He abolishes the first in order to establish the second' (Hebrews 10.9). It is by Christ's *will* that we are sanctified, not by his sacrificial blood. Blood is only a metaphor for obedience.

As we have seen, second-century writers continue Jesus' and Paul's option for the second tradition. The sacrifice we offer, they say, is one of thanksgiving and obedience. Only in the third century is Christ's death read in terms of the Levitical tradition.

It is true, of course, that there are many sacrificial allusions, and much use of sacrificial metaphor, in the New Testament. An intense pamphlet war raged throughout the eighteenth century as to whether this meant we should understand Christ's death sacrificially or not. Like most pamphlet wars it generated more heat than light but at least it becomes clear that there is no *compulsion* to read these texts as endorsing vicarious sacrifice. They can all be understood, as I have argued above, in terms of Christ's self-offering to the uttermost.

One problem with reading them in terms of vicarious sacrifice has recently been highlighted by the French anthropologist René Girard. Mimesis – imitation or copying – is fundamental to human activity. Unfortunately it generates violence, since it means we all want the same things and cannot all have them. Sacrifice, in Girard's view, is a way of dealing with that violence. It does so by scapegoating, which is ultimately a form of collective violence. In the scapegoat ritual a person, and later on an animal, is chosen as the symbolic focus of all the community's rage and anger. In the rite set out in Leviticus 16 the whole community throws stones at the goat until they drive it to its death over a precipice. This act of collective aggression is a kind of bloodletting which is designed to keep the community free of violence until next time.

Jesus, in Girard's view, saw that violence was the key human problem. Girard makes sense of two verses which leave conventional New Testament scholarship stumped. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus says: 'I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world' (Matthew 13.35). The last phrase is repeated in Luke's account of Jesus' dispute with the scribes:

Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute', so that this generation may be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world. (Luke 11.49–50)

The secret Jesus will reveal, says Girard, is the secret of human violence, enshrined and sanctified in the sacrificial system. Christ's mission was to uncover the secret of the scapegoat mechanism, and to establish a human community based on peace rather than violence. This constitutes the very heart of Christian revelation and it is what is truly redemptive in Christianity. Unfortunately, from the very earliest days, from the writing of the letter to the Hebrews, Christianity betrayed its master, re-instituting Christ as the supreme sacrificial victim. To do this was once again to legitimate the violence of the scapegoat mechanism. According to Girard, 'Historical Christianity took on a persecutory character as a result of the sacrificial reading of the Passion and Redemption.'⁸

Both as an explanation of human violence, and as an account of sacrifice, there is no doubt that Girard's thesis is simplistic. Nevertheless, Girard has done a great service by drawing attention to the immense violence implicit in the traditional reading of the passion stories. As many feminist theologians have also argued, understandings of Christ's death as a 'perfect sacrifice' have functioned to underwrite sadomasochistic views of the self, and violence within society. The God who suffers as the scapegoat has validated scapegoating. This theology has encouraged the view that there is something valuable or redemptive about suffering *per se*, and this has been used to insist that the poor, and especially women, should bear with and put up with all sorts of things they should not have put up with.

Further, no matter how sophisticated the understanding of expiation it has also been difficult to get away from a picture of God who needs the death by torture of the Son in order to forgive humankind. This grotesque view of God has rightly seemed morally repulsive to many.

Finally, it has also underwritten the idea that we have to 'pay' for our sins by suffering. The eighteenth-century 'penitentiary' drew heavily on this strand of 'Christian' thinking. Jesus' distinctive emphasis on the re-creative nature of forgiveness has thereby been lost.

Girard is surely right, by contrast, to insist that Jesus stood for an alternative which was peace and not violence, forgiveness rather than punishment, friendship rather than excommunication. The kingdom he preached was the fulfilment of Isaiah's vision of creation at peace, where the wolf will lie down with the lamb, the leopard with the kid, the calf with the lion, and a nursing child shall lead them – the peaceable kingdom (Isaiah 11.6–8). This is another part of Jesus' alternative which the Church has found

⁸ R. Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (tr. S. Bann and M. Metteer, Athlone Press, 1987), page 225

too difficult to live with. Much easier to retreat to a sacrificial liturgy than to live sacrificially to establish peace in the world!

What we have to take from the rehearsal of Jesus' death, therefore, is to recognize that the kind of sacrifice Jesus endorsed, the offering of our lives for others, for the marginalized, the weak, the victims of violence, may be necessary to usher in that kingdom. This is not to make a virtue out of suffering. How could the One who came to bring fullness of life to all possibly do that? It is to recognize that in the contest for fullness of life, for the right to feast and drink, as Jesus loved to do, it may be necessary to take on the powers that be and to die. To be faithful to the economic reading of the eucharist we may need to 'imitate' Christ's 'sacrifice' – his life given for the kingdom.

It is in this context that we can understand the command to 'remember'. Jeremias argues that the phrase looks back to Old Testament usage, and to the Passover liturgy, and is not a request for the disciples to 'remember' (for how are they likely to forget?), but for them to petition God to 'remember' God's people and God's promises. Thus at the Passover the head of the family prayed for 'the remembrance of us, our fathers, the Messiah and your holy city Jerusalem'.⁹ In the same way Jesus asks his disciples to pray that God will remember his Messiah and the movement to the kingdom he initiated. 'By coming together daily for table fellowship in the short period before the parousia, and by confessing Jesus as their Lord, the disciples re-present the initiated salvation work before God and pray for its consummation.' Perhaps not daily but weekly, which was the ancient and is now the modern practice, our eucharist is prayer for the coming of the peaceable kingdom, and a step on the road to its realization.

⁹ Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words*, page 255

