A Sermon

Preached
in the Chapel

of

ALL SOULS COLLEGE

by

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Today, on Remembrance Sunday, we honour the sacrifices of those who, in doing their duty, have fallen on foreign fields. These themes, of duty and sacrifice, emerge repeatedly in scripture. Today's first lesson, from Leviticus, makes clear the consequences of obeying or disobeying God's laws, including the code surrounding sacrificial offerings. Obedience will bring prosperity, and triumph over enemies. In case of disobedience, however, God says:

> I will even appoint over you terror, consumption … ye shall be slain before your enemies: they that hate you shall reign over you; and ye shall flee when none pursueth you.

No one can accuse the God of Leviticus of mincing words. To modern eyes, the impression is one of a divine protection racket. God is, so to speak, making the Israelites an offer they cannot refuse.

This approach is not without merit. Just as a domestic dog or small child will feel happier when it is clear who is in charge, and which actions lead to either reward or chastisement, so there is appeal in a God whose favour can be purchased by diligent observation of prescribed rituals. The constant threat of damnation may be a price worth paying for the prospect of fine harvests and vanquished enemies. In this sense, the God of the Old Testament is terrifying but, potentially, manageable. We can do business with him.

The image in today's second lesson could hardly be more different. St Paul calls us to offer our bodies as 'living sacrifices', in response to the ultimate sacrifice of Christ on the cross. He conjures up a striking image:

> For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.

Gone is the bewildering array of burnt animal offerings prescribed in Leviticus. Instead, we are to sacrifice *ourselves*, and on an ongoing basis. What is more, this sacrifice is not simply a way to channel, towards our enemies, the destructive power of a trigger-happy God. Rather, we are to see each other as different parts of one body – not simply as brothers and sisters in Christ, but as aspects of a single organism. The only jarring note in this chapter of St Paul's Epistle is a reference to the heaping of coals on an enemy's head. Yet even this is to be accomplished, counter-intuitively, by feeding our enemy if he is hungry, and giving him drink if he is thirsty. St Paul's God, it seems, is not above divine retribution – but he will at least take care of vengeance on his own terms, rather than in response to a properly sacrificed bullock.

Compared to Leviticus, St Paul presents a far more challenging view of sacrifice, as well as a more complex relationship with God and with each other. His account is, I think, vastly more appealing. For it offers hope in terms of the prevailing modern dilemma – that is, not a lack of smiting, but a lack of solidarity.

At root, we are social animals. The ability to live in community with others has made possible our development as a species. Astonishing feats of co-operation

have created a complex world in which we are utterly dependent on each other for the economic essentials of life. There is nothing new about this – Aristotle viewed it as the basis for the formation of city states.

Now, though, this social and economic complexity has created a situation where it is possible to achieve unprecedented levels of personal isolation. Online banking and shopping have only made more obvious a longstanding reality – that while we may struggle to survive without economic engagement with others, it is perfectly possible for this engagement to take place without any meaningful personal, social interaction. Each of us can become, in Donne's words, 'an island, entire of itself'.

This is not, of course, the fate for most of us. It may be unfair to judge a community by the extreme cases of those who fall completely by the wayside, whether by accident or design – by the number of cremations attended only by undertakers appointed by the local authority. What about the majority?

One answer is suggested by an old Glaswegian story, set in the days when horses and carts were still a familiar sight. A man emerges, blinking and suitably refreshed, from a hostelry on Sauchiehall Street. He is confronted by a carter, struggling to attach a nosebag to his restive beast. On surveying the scene, the bystander cannot contain himself. 'You'll never do it!' he shouts. The carter, in no mood for advice, asks 'What will I never do?' The response: 'You'll never fit that big horse into that wee bag!'

For many of us, life can feel like the carter's struggle as perceived by our hero. We sense a world of possibilities – of knowledge, of love, of adventure – but we know that our time to grasp them is limited. And so we struggle – sometimes valiantly, sometimes despairingly – to cram in as much as possible. We may come to view our lives as a process of working through a checklist, with happiness and fulfilment marked by a series of concrete experiences and achievements. We try, in effect, to wrestle the big horse of the world into the wee bag of our individual lives.

In doing so, we may turn to a more modern form of the bargaining, trading-off kind of sacrifice we encounter in Leviticus. Instead of seeking to appease a wrathful divinity by burnt offerings, however, we attempt to purchase our vision of success by sacrificing other aspects of our lives.

On a trivial level, we talk of sacrificing chocolate in pursuit of a trim physique. More seriously, we may come to realise that in furthering our career we have sacrificed our health, our leisure time, even our family connections. We may start by viewing the process of sacrifice and reward as manageable – just as an ambitious Israelite may have viewed the God of Leviticus as manageable. But we may end by feeling that our sacrifices have consumed too much of ourselves: not least because the success of those sacrifices, even in their own terms, depends not on the pleasure of a God who at least lays down clear ground rules, but rather on the inherently unpredictable interaction of our hopes and dreams with all the vicissitudes of time and chance.

St Paul suggests an alternative – a possible answer to the inevitable frustration of trying, and failing, to capture happiness by a series of sacrifices aimed at cramming as much as possible of the world into a single life. If we are all members of the same body, then we need not see our lives as individual struggles to wring the greatest pleasure and triumph out of the world before we depart it. We are, instead, part of a greater enterprise. In the words of the King James Version, we:

> Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.

Of course, being merely an aspect of a greater whole is a humbling thought. We may perceive such an idea as threatening our very sense of self, and of self-worth. We may react to it by devouring the works of Ayn Rand, and rejecting as repugnant any notion that the success of our lives is defined by our interaction with those around us. Yet to embrace what may, at first, appear a diminishment of self, is to state proudly that one is bound up in the success or failure of the collaborative endeavour of mankind – an endeavour grander in scale and scope than could be contemplated by any individual.

The implications of relinquishing claims to untrammelled individuality and independence, in return for a stake in the greater whole, are elaborated by St Paul in his Epistle to the Corinthians. Not only are we one body, he says, but in this body:

> … the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you … God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked. That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.

No man, in other words, is an island. If we accept that our fates are linked, with all the diverse and disparate people we find around us, then we share in their triumphs. But we share also in their sorrows. This, perhaps, is the essence of being a 'living sacrifice'. As parts in a single body we are not alone, but nor are we free of obligations. We cannot look with pride on the glory and beauty of our creations and achievements, without being aware that they are blighted by the ugliness of the suffering of others. We may write the cleverest books, or paint the loveliest pictures, or amass the most impressive fortunes: but while a child goes quietly hungry, or a prisoner languishes in injustice, we ourselves are demeaned.

Seeing ourselves as part of a greater body is, therefore, a challenge as well as a reassurance. We must take the rough of community along with the smooth. And there is an alternative. Certainly, we may attempt to live in splendid isolation, rejoicing in a proud sense of independence and self-reliance. We may choose to pity the 'feeble' wretches we encounter around us, but deny that our fates are linked by anything other than neighbourly sympathy and, perhaps, enlightened self-interest. Depending on our scruples, we may choose to sacrifice others on the altar of our own desires and ambitions. Inevitably, we will sacrifice some of ourselves.

We may do all of this: but in the end we will, in the words of today's Psalm, 'walk through the valley of the shadow of death' – and we will do so alone. If, instead, we view ourselves as part of the greater body of mankind, then we can at least hope to be joined in fellowship and common endeavour with the triumphs and tribulations of all those who walk through that same valley.

To declare ourselves as one – not only with those around us today, but also with all the departed whose souls this College commemorates, and all those yet to come – is a sacrifice. It cannot be compared to the sacrifices of those in whose honour we wear our poppies today. But to acknowledge that we owe each other duties – not just because we are pack animals and instinctively recoil at the sight of another's pain, but because our lives are *defined* by our common humanity – is a sacrifice, in terms of how we see ourselves, and of how we see our achievements. Yet it holds the promise of imbuing our small lives with a greater meaning. For those of us who are fortunate enough never to be called on to lay down our lives for others, the prospect of being a living sacrifice can still offer, I think, both the greatest of comforts, and the greatest of inspirations.