



## Sermon for Passion Sunday

Hebrews 9:11-15 &

St. John 8:46-59

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April 10, 2011 — Passion Sunday

Our focus each of these Sunday in Lent has been on the love of God that flows from the cross to us, and then on how that love flows out of us—back to God in gratitude, and out to our brothers and sisters, and eventually to the whole world. And yet as we each look at our own lives—and if we’re really honest with ourselves—we’re all going to see a lack of love. Jesus tells us that if we love him, we *will* keep his commandments, but we all walk to a lesser or greater degree in selective obedience. We’re willing to give up those sins that don’t cost us much, but we hold tight to our favourites. When it comes to the good things Jesus tells us to do, we do the ones, again, that don’t cost us a lot, or we do the things that make us look good to other people, but we ignore the things that require hard work, or that require us to give up our time, or that cost us financially. We all also walk in selective love when it comes to others. It’s easy to let sin, and anger, and pride get in the way of actually loving our brothers and sisters the way Jesus loves them. We take offense at something and it’s easier to cut off a brother or a sister than it is to swallow our pride and seek reconciliation. Or we lose focus on what’s important. I got into a theological argument with someone this week and let pride get the better of me. I realised after the fact that my focus was on being right myself, when it should have been on helping a sister in Christ find God’s truth. I put my pride before her well-being. We all have a long way to go as we grow in the love of God.

The solution is to meditate on the cross. Isaac Watts wrote those wonderful words we opened with this morning: “Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an off’ring far too small; love so amazing, so divine, *demands my soul, my life, my all.*” The love of God to me—to us—demands my all—our all—in return. But do we give our all? I don’t. And I don’t *because* I’ve failed to fully grasp the depth of

God’s love for me, or maybe I get it, but I’ve failed to let the knowledge of God’s love that I have in my *head*, work it’s way into my *heart*. Or I’ve compartmentalised it, failed to let it permeate every area of my life. The bottom line is that I’m still too full *me* and not full enough of *Jesus*.

Hopefully, as we grow in Christ and as the Spirit does his work in our lives, the ratio of “Jesus” to “me” gets higher and higher and completes the work that started when each of us first believed. At least on some level, we’ve got to understand the supremacy of Jesus in order to be saved. I’ve actually had people tell me—people who are supposedly Christians—that God loves them because they deserve it, because they’re good, or because they’re somehow worthy of his love—because of something they’ve done. And I think—I hope—we all balk at that. The Gospel message is that God showed us his love and sent his Son to die for us, *while we were yet sinners*—while we were his *enemies, dead in sin*, deserving nothing but death and eternal damnation. As long as we think we’re deserving of God’s love, we can never truly believe and accept the Gospel message. And yet while we may not be so blatant in denying our sinfulness, you and I are still often guilty of pride in our works. We admit we’re sinners, we say we trust in Jesus’ sacrifice that he made at the cross, but when it really comes down to it, we still don’t *really* and *fully* understand just how bad our sins are and we don’t truly understand that we were *dead* in our sins. We think of ourselves more as just being sick in our sins—maybe even really, really sick, but not actually *dead*. We still like to think that we have something to offer God, something to contribute to our salvation, even if it’s something very small. So we trust in Jesus—*mostly*—but we still trust in ourselves. And as long as we keep trusting in ourselves—even if it’s only a little bit—we will never truly understand the depth of God’s love and we’ll never truly live the life that Holy Spirit is working in us to perfect. Brothers and sisters, the solution is to meditate on the cross. That’s what Isaac Watts did. In the first verse of our hymn he wrote: “When I *survey*—when I look on and meditate on—the wondrous cross, where the young Prince of Glory died, my richest gain *I count but loss*, and *pour contempt* on all my pride.”

As we enter Passiontide today, our Gospel lessons will put our attention on the cross,

but it’s not enough just to know that Jesus died on the cross. We need to understand *why* he died on the cross and we need to understand just *who* it was who died there on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins. And that’s where our Epistles point us. They help us meditate and reflect on Jesus and the cross—not just the image of some nice guy who was crucified for something he didn’t do, but on God Incarnate—God himself—who offered himself up to save sinful men and women from eternal death.

I want especially to look at our lesson from Hebrews 9 this morning. This is a passage that will weave its way through Passiontide. As the Gospels tell us the story of the Passion, Hebrews reminds us of the *why* behind Jesus’ Passion—it gives us the behind-the-scenes look at our own redemption. It takes us back to the Old Testament—to the types and shadows that pointed to Jesus—and it shows us how he fulfilled them. And as it shows us those things, it also explains *who* it was who died and *why*. Look at Hebrews 9:11.

### **But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come...**

This is what Hebrews is all about: Jesus, our High Priest. If I were stranded on a desert island and could have only one book of the Bible with me, it would be Hebrews, because it not only lays out the Gospel message clearly, but it explains it and it explains the majesty of Jesus, the holiness of God, the sinfulness of my sins, and the love and mercy and grace that were poured out at the cross. The writer of Hebrews—we don’t know who he was—takes us back to the Old Testament and particularly to the descriptions of the tabernacle and the sacrificial system and to the priests who made those sacrifices in the tabernacle on behalf of the people. And now he tells us: Jesus came, and he came specifically to be the “high priest of the good things that have come.”

This is how St. John saw Jesus in the vision he records in Revelation: standing in the midst of the seven candlesticks of the temple and clothed in the white robes of the high priest. Jesus is the new High Priest. The descendants of Aaron served as high priests over the sacrifices of the Old Covenant—over all those things that, even in their imperfections, were established by God to point the people to Jesus. And now, Hebrews tells us, Jesus has come: the High Priest of the good

things—the perfect things—that the Old Testament only hinted at.

In the Old Testament God was still teaching his people, still working out his plan of redemption—and to do that he started with a select group of people and a little piece of land he had carved out for them among the nations. But God had no intention of leaving things that way. He established an earthly kingdom that pointed to a heavenly kingdom. He built an earthly temple that pointed to a heavenly one. He established an earthly priesthood that pointed to a great high priest who would be God himself. And God did all this so that he could prepare the people by teaching them the sinfulness of their sins, by teaching them about holiness, and by showing them that sin can only be overcome and reconciliation with God can only be made by his grace.

Hebrews reminds us that Jesus brought that training period to a close when he came to fulfil that first covenant and subsumed it in a new and better one—when he came and brought heavenly reality to those earthly types and shadows. Verse 11 goes on:

**...then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation)...**

The tabernacle that God instructed Moses and the Israelites to build was an amazing and beautiful thing, but there was something better. It was imperfect. Jesus came as the high priest of the better things that had been promised. In his role as priest, he entered not into the earthly tabernacle—not the one built by men—but into a heavenly and spiritual tabernacle. In the Old Testament the high priest entered once every year into the Holy of Holies. It was partitioned off from the rest of the tabernacle by a heavy curtain. The *shekinah*—the presence of God that had followed the Israelites as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night—was there in the Holy of Holies, resting on the Ark of the Covenant and no sinful man could ever enter the presence of our perfectly holy God. When the priest did go in that one time each year, on the Day of Atonement, he had to undergo a long ritual of purification, and even then he went in with a cord tied to his ankle so that if he were struck down the other priests could drag him out without having

to enter the Holy of Holies themselves. And it wasn't just any priest who would enter the Holy of Holies on that one day; there was only one mediator between God and man—there was only the one high priest who would enter to make that annual sacrifice for the sins of the people—and yet he too—just like the tabernacle itself—was imperfect. He too, because of his sins, might turn out to be unacceptable to God and be struck down.

That's the image Hebrews draws on: that one high priest, ritually purified, dressed in his high priestly robes—but not his ordinary robes, but special robes just for that one day, entering the Holy of Holies to sprinkle the blood of the day's sacrifices before the presence of God, and no doubt he stood there trembling at the awesomeness of what he was called and commissioned to do.

As I read this I can't help but imagine myself standing behind the trembling high priest as he carries his incense and the bowl of blood from the sacrifice, getting ready to enter. I see the other priests pulling back that heavy curtain so that he can enter, and as they do so, we see through the Holy of Holies where the presence of God rested in that great cloud, into the *true* Holy of Holies—into heaven itself where God sits enthroned in all his majesty. It's that truly heavenly Holy of Holies where Jesus entered as our great High Priest. Hebrews 9:12 goes on:

**...he [Jesus] entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.**

The high priest in the Old Testament could enter the Holy of Holies, but that's as far as he could go. There was no way for him to enter the full presence of God in the heavenly tabernacle, because even he was separated from the holiness of God by sin. He was able to enter the Holy of Holies because he carried with him the blood of the bull and goat sacrificed each year on the Day of Atonement—animals sacrificed for the sins of the people—but bulls and goats make imperfect sacrifices. They only get us so far. And they have to be made repeatedly. The Day of Atonement and this sacrificial ritual had to be repeated by the earthly high priest every year. But Hebrews tells us, that

Jesus sacrificed himself and entered the presence of God—entered the heavenly tabernacle—with his own blood. He made the perfect sacrifice—a sacrifice that took him past the earthly tabernacle, past the earthly Holy of Holies, and gave him access to the very presence of God himself. And because his sacrifice was perfect, he *finished* the work of atonement. Not only was there no more need for the imperfect sacrifices of bulls and goats, but even his own sacrifice only needed to be made once—for all time. The blood of bulls and goat purchased redemption for a year. The blood of Jesus purchases redemption forever.

The writer goes on in verses 13 and 14:

**For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.**

Here's another comparison between the Old Covenant and the New. God had given his people instructions on ceremonial purity. In the law there are long lists of things that render a person unclean. They're not generally things that are sinful—there's nothing inherently wrong with touching a corpse, being a menstruating woman, giving birth, having eczema, or having mildew in your house or on something you own. God's point in these regulations was simply to teach the people what it meant to be set apart from the world. These were basically object lessons in holiness. And so if you found yourself rendered ceremonially unclean, it meant that you couldn't enter the tabernacle for worship. Sometimes it meant having to live outside the camp for a time. But there were sacrifices that could be offered to restore "cleanness". Being sprinkled with the blood from a sacrificed cow would render you clean again if you had touched a dead body, for example. And yet you'd still have to go through life knowing that eventually—no matter how careful you might be—something else would happen that would render you ceremonially unclean. It was just a way of life for the Jewish people. In Rabbinic Judaism they came up with all sorts of almost neurotic rules—we see

many of them in today's kosher regulations (two dishwashers, two sets of pots and pans, two sets of Tupperware, all so that meat and dairy don't mix)—to help people avoid the preventable things that would render them unclean, because of the inconvenience it could cause.

All that for the purification of flesh that would inevitably become unclean again and again. In contrast, Jesus offered his own blood, that we might be purified from so much more—that we might be purified not just from petty things that would render us temporarily unclean in the flesh, but from the very sin in our lives that renders us spiritually unclean and that condemns us not just to a few days or weeks living outside the camp of God's people, but that condemns us to living in eternity outside the City of God, outside the place of his presence, away from his people, away from the Body of Christ, and that condemns us to hell.

Why and how? Because Jesus wasn't just some nice guy who died on a cross. As the writer of Hebrews tells us: his was a sacrifice "without blemish". As St. John shows us in today's Gospel lesson, there were two characteristics that made him the perfect sacrifice for sin: First, he was sinless. Jesus got into an argument with the Jews over whether or not they were truly following in the works and in the faith of Abraham. Basically, he pointed out that they were sinners and they turned around and said, "No. You're the sinner!" And so he asks, "Which one of you convicts me of sin?" And of course, none of them could. They made all sorts of accusations against him, but nothing was true and when he asked them, point-blank what his sins were, there was nothing they could say. And this is how and why he could offer himself as a sacrifice for sins: because he wasn't guilty of sin himself.

But second, he was God. Part of his condemnation of the unbelieving Jews was that they claimed to listen to and to follow God, but they refused to listen to Jesus. He explains to them that if they claim to listen to God, then they'd better listen to him. What he's really doing is asserting his divinity. And of course the Jews argue with him. They accuse him of having a demon and as the argument goes back and forth, Jesus starts making his claims of divinity more and more clear. First he tells them that the God they claim

to worship is his Father, then he claims to be the Messiah that Abraham looked for. They get angrier and angrier and when he finally claims to be Abraham's Messiah, they ask him: "How would you know who Abraham's Messiah was? Do you know Abraham? You're not even fifty years old and Abraham lived 2000 years ago! You're crazy!" And that's when Jesus says those famous words: "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." There's no clearer way Jesus could have claimed to be God Incarnate. He tells them that not only was he around before Abraham, but he says that he was and still is "I AM". That was the name that God gave to Abraham at the burning bush. When Abraham asked who he was supposed to say sent him to free the Israelites from Egypt, "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" St. John, in telling the story, even uses exactly the same unusual grammatical construct to say it that was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. There was no clearer way for Jesus to say: "I'm God!" And we know the people understood, because they got so angry they tried to stone him for blasphemy.

But friends, that's how we know Jesus could make the perfect sacrifice: he was God. If he wasn't God, we could never believe all the other claims the Bible makes about his sinless perfection and we'd always be left doubting whether or not he actually did pay the penalty for our sins at the cross. We could never truly live in full faith that he triumphed over sin and death, and without faith in him and in his death, we'd still be slaves to sin. Jesus could be that perfect sacrifice because he was God.

And so the writer of Hebrews goes on in verse 15:

**Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.**

Each one of us stands condemned by the law of God, but in Jesus we have the mediator of a New Covenant that promises eternal life—in fact, that makes us co-heirs with him in his sonship. All we have

to do is appropriate it—all we have to do is grab hold of it—by faith—by trusting *wholly* that his sacrifice is sufficient for our sins, and then showing our trust in him by truly making him our Lord and walking in his ways. Going back to where we started this morning: We stop trusting in ourselves, and instead trust in Jesus. If we will do that, he promises to be our high priest—our mediator with God, doing what you and I can never do for ourselves.

That's why, after his work on earth was finished, he ascended to heaven. As the Old Testament priests offered the sacrifice for the people in the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle, Jesus offers his perfect sacrifice in the heavenly throne-room of his Father. Through his broken body and his shed blood, he offers us eternal life as he unites us to himself. And that's what we celebrate and partake of this morning as we come to his Table. The Jews, if they were lucky, caught a glimpse of the Holy of Holies over the shoulder of the high priest, once each year, as the curtain was drawn back so that he could enter. But, brothers and sisters, as we come to his Table each Sunday, we enter directly into the heavenly throne-room of God as we receive the bread and wine. As you come today, survey—meditate and think on—the wondrous cross where the Prince of Glory died. Meditate on the love of the Father in sending his Son to die. Meditate on the love of the Son, who humbled himself and submitted himself to a brutal death for your sake. Meditate on that love—so amazing, so divine—and ask if you have truly committed to him your soul, your life, your all.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, we acknowledged in the collect that it is only by your mercy that we are preserved in body and soul from the consequences of our sins. Remind us each day of the cost of your mercy—that the price of our redemption was the blood of your Son, shed at the cross—that as we reflect on your lovingkindness, we might commit ourselves more and more to love of you, love of our brothers and sisters, and to truly living out your love in our lives. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.