

THE PASTOR'S DESK

August 30, 2009 - Sacrifice of Christ and Human Sacrifice



Dear Parishioners,

A week ago last Thursday was, liturgically, Thursday of the twentieth week in Ordinary Time. The readings that week had been taking us through the first half of the book of Judges. This book tells us of the period in the history of Israel after the death of Joshua and before the establishment of the kingship. During this time, Israel was led by Judges. These were strong religious and military leaders who worked to keep the Israelites safe from external enemies and to keep them from falling into pagan worship.

Jephthah was one such strong man. He was the son of Gilead by another woman. Gilead had other sons by his wife. These threw Jephthah out of the clan because he was the son of another woman. Jephthah made a living as a bandit. Judges 11, verse 3 tells us that he “dwelt in the land of Tob; and worthless fellows collected round Jephthah, and went raiding with him. Without a clan and a home this was probably the only other career option for him. As long as he was raiding the pagan neighbors, his clan was happy to be rid of him.

When the Ammonites threatened, though, suddenly this bandit became valuable to his clan and his people. His brothers came to him and begged him to become their leader in the fight to repel the Ammonites. He agreed and went up to fight the Ammonites. He made this vow to God: if he is given victory over the Ammonites he will sacrifice the first person that comes out of his house when he returns in triumph. Well, he does return in triumph and the first person out of his house is his daughter, his only child! He regrets the vow but knows it cannot be revoked. His daughter accepts her fate, asking only two months to mourn her maidenhood. After two months her father “did with her according to his vow which he had made.” After this passage, the lector said the usual “the Word of the Lord.”

This is one of those difficult “Words of the Lord.” What do we make of these events? Human sacrifice was condemned in Jewish Law. Jephthah’s vow runs contrary to God’s law. In fact, it is something he came up with himself. Although the Spirit of the Lord came upon him to fight the Ammonites, God did not direct him to make this vow. The only other time God directed someone to offer a human sacrifice was when Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac. But, we know, Abraham’s hand was stayed by an angel. Jephthah, perhaps, living in

pagan territory, adopted some of the pagan’s religious ideas, including human sacrifice.

Jephthah’s vow reveals a pagan understanding that the gods require some type of sacrifice in order to gain a favor. Jephthah thought he owed something to God for victory in battle. But, this event also reveals that we are sinners and have a dim understanding of God’s ways. As sinners we can recognize that something is owed to God, some sacrifice, but we can easily see that someone else needs to be sacrificed. It never occurred to Jephthah to sacrifice himself. When events showed that he was to sacrifice his own daughter, he perhaps wished that he had promised himself as a sacrifice.

We cannot put our sins on someone else. Perhaps that is why God forbade human sacrifice. Each of us is a sinner and each of us owes a sacrifice for our sins. No sinner can die for the sins of someone else, he can only die for his own sins. This is what makes the sacrifice of Christ effective. As the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, he had no need to offer sacrifice himself. He could, then, offer himself in sacrifice for us. Jesus wants us also to share in His work of salvation. How do we do that? By taking up our Cross and following Him. This means also sacrificing ourselves. The fullest participation we have at Mass is to join ourselves in sacrifice with Christ. The grace of Christ has already cleansed us of sin in Baptism. Through the sacrament of Confession we can be cleansed of sins committed after Baptism, especially mortal sins. In the penitential rite at Mass we are forgiven of venial sins. Everyone who comes to receive Communion is to be free from sin. The Church demands this because we can then fully participate in Mass; that is, become also a spotless sacrifice with Christ. We can offer ourselves in sacrifice for our family, our community, our country and our world. We do not vow to sacrifice someone else; we put ourselves on the altar joined with Christ in His perfect sacrifice. We can then fulfill St. Paul’s command to the Romans: “I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Romans 12:1.

**God bless,
Fr. LaHood**