

HOMILY 19B 2015

Today I want us to think about the *sacrifice* of the Mass. The Mass as sacrifice has been neglected in recent years. Neglected to our cost. In recent years the Mass has often been described mainly as a sacred meal. I've seen booklet after booklet – some of them preparing for 1st Holy Communion – in which there's plenty of mention of the Mass as a meal but no mention of the Mass as a sacrifice. And that just won't do. The Mass first and foremost is the sacrifice of Calvary. It is the Body of the Lord broken for us. It is the Blood of the Lord poured out for us. It is the sacrifice which takes away our sins and makes us children of God.

“But how does it do that?” you might ask. “How does the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ save us?” People have debated that question for a long time. We know the fact – the fact that Jesus Christ, by his death and resurrection, has made our peace with God the Father. *How* that works – well, theologians have come up with more than one explanation. You'll be glad to know I'm not going into those explanations here and now. I'll just state the fact: that our peace with God comes about through Our Lord Jesus Christ. He – the Son of God – became the Son of Man. He became one of us. And he raised our human nature in such a way that we become children of God. [cf Irenaeus]

The priest says a little prayer quietly during Mass. It comes as he pours a drop of water into the wine in the chalice. The drop of water represents us. And the priest says, "By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity."

And when do we see him above all "share in our humanity"? Surely it's at his death. Death will come to every one of us. St Paul says that "Christ made himself humbler yet, by accepting death, death on a cross." (Phil 2:8) It was above all by his death on the cross that Christ redeemed us.

Our Lord's sacrifice of himself made it possible for all people to become children of God, made it possible to be saved. On the cross Our Lord cried out "It is accomplished". (John 19:30) We could go on talking for ever about what happened on Calvary but we would never be able to say enough. There, all *was* accomplished.

But how would we get the benefit? Our Lord's death on the cross happened once and for all a long time ago. How can it benefit us *now*? How can what happened 2000 years ago benefit *all* God's people at *all* times and in *all* places? How can it benefit *us, now, today*? And the answer is: through the Holy Mass.

Yes, Christ died once and for all. He, the just one, died for sinners. The Lord for the servants. But through Holy Mass what Our Lord did once

and for all is made present for us today. Thanks to the Mass Calvary is present for us. Or shall we say, we are present on Calvary? This crucifix over the altar behind me *reminds* me of what happened on that first Good Friday, long ago. The Mass doesn't only *remind* us. Mass actually makes Calvary *present* for us.

I remember a 12 year old altar boy who saw that so clearly. It was in one of our Salford parishes. His mother told me he said to her one day, "Some of my friends say they are bored at Mass. How *can* you be bored? When we're at Mass we're on Calvary with Jesus." Not bad for a 12 year old! Yes, every time we offer Holy Mass the work of our redemption is renewed.

But *how* are we present on Calvary? Are we just spectators? Or are we involved? Engaged? I was out visiting and I met a pupil from the local high school. And I said to her, "How are you enjoying the holidays?" And she said, "Oh, I'm bored. There's nothing to do. I wish we were back at school." I must say I don't feel much sympathy for people who speak like that. We need never be bored. There's always something interesting to do. The trouble is that too often we just want to be entertained. The same can be true when we come to Mass. But we don't come to Mass to be entertained. We don't come as spectators, as if we're merely watching Our Lord on the cross, or watching the priest on the altar!

If we feel bored at Mass then we ought to ask ourselves some searching questions. “What am I *doing* here? What am I *giving*?” In his letter to the Romans St Paul gives us the right idea. Paul says, “I appeal to you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to offer your very selves to him as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God; the worship offered by mind and heart.” (12:1) There’s an echo there of what Jesus said at the Last Supper: “Take, eat, this is my Body *which will be given up for you.*” So, when St Paul urges us to “offer our very selves as a living sacrifice”, he’s saying “Do what Jesus did. Offer yourselves, like he did, as a living sacrifice acceptable to God.”

And that in fact is what Jesus himself tells us to do. When he said, “Do this as a memorial of me”, he didn’t mean just take the bread and simply repeat the same ritual. He was also telling us, “Offer yourselves as a sacrifice as you have seen me do ... for I have given you an example, that you also should do as I do.” (John 13:15)

But there’s a difference between Our Lord’s sacrifice on Calvary and our sacrifice of the Mass now. On Calvary Christ offered himself to his eternal Father. There on Calvary Christ Jesus offered himself up for us. But in the Mass today we offer *with him*. We have been baptised and confirmed. We are now members of his Body, the Church. So we see the Mass in a new way. It isn’t only *Our Lord’s* sacrifice. It’s *ours* as well. That’s what we mean when we say in one of the Eucharistic prayers, “May [Jesus] make of us an eternal offering to you [the Father].”

So we're not spectators when we come to Mass. We're involved. We're engaged. And that means we offer ourselves. We offer our whole week along with the offering Our Lord makes of Himself. We offer all we have and are: our jobs, our time, our health, our talents; the good things we do, simple things like a smile, a kind word. We join them with Our Lord's offering of Himself. We offer too the negative things: our failures, our sickness, the weakness that comes with age or poor health. You used to hear people say more often than they do now, "Offer it up". They meant some cross that came our way. "Offer it up". That's the true Catholic Christian response. Each of us can ask, "What is it that I can offer in this Mass today?"

Here at Mass we offer our whole week to God our Father. The mother or father going home from Mass and beginning a week made up of a thousand little things, but those things become important because they have been offered with Jesus Our Lord. The single person, young or old, doing the small things that seem to leave no trace, almost like a wasted day. But things done in union with Our Lord's offering take on an eternal value. The elderly or sick person offering their aches and pains, their illness: very personal and very important, even making up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ.

Because of the Mass there is no such thing as a useless life. We are all of great value if we are a living sacrifice with Christ. How could we be bored? How could we be missing? Let's give Pope St John Paul II the

last word: “When we celebrate the sacrifice of the Mass we are united with the liturgy of heaven. We become part of that great multitude that cries out: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, and to the Lamb’. The Eucharist is truly a glimpse of heaven appearing on earth. It is the glorious ray of the heavenly Jerusalem. It pierces the clouds of our history and lights up our journey.” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia* para.19)