

October 17

Three scripture lessons, each with its own way to think of Jesus and his work.

In our third lesson, the Gospel from Mark, Jesus identifies himself as a *Servant*: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve,” he says.

Next-- working in reverse order here—in the second lesson, Jesus is described as a *High Priest*: The Letter to the Hebrews tells us, “Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you.”

And in the first lesson the prophet Isaiah tells of a mysterious individual who is himself a *Sacrifice*. He is “a lamb that is led to the slaughter,” Isaiah writes, and he “bore the sin of many.” Although these lines were written down centuries before Jesus, the church has always seen them as applying to him.

So we have Jesus as a servant, Jesus as a High Priest, and Jesus as a sacrificial victim.

So far so good: we have taken three kind-of-convoluted lessons and boiled them down to three basic ideas we can work with. Servant, priest, and sacrifice: these three terms are applied to Jesus in the scriptures before us today.

But in considering where to go with these three ways of thinking about Jesus, I am struck by the fact that none of them are ones with which we today have much personal experience. We may have eaten lamb, but we never thought of it as a sacrificial victim. We have priests, and bishops even, but we don't expect them to supervise animal sacrifices. And we have heard of servants, and maybe even seen them in movies, but very few of us, I suspect, have paid staff living in our homes to do our menial work. So for us these three Bible ways of thinking about Jesus might feel a little remote.

In Bible times however, the words servant, priest, and sacrifice, had very vivid connotations. People understood them automatically from their daily experience. So to get the good of our lessons, I propose we do a little work and translate these ideas into more modern vocabulary. The work is worth the effort, because the overall picture of Jesus that emerges, will help us think about our own paths of faithfulness to God.

Here is my suggestion then about that term, sacrifice: this is a word that gets used in modern baseball. The baseball playoffs are happening right now, so if you have been tuning in you will have heard the announcers talk about "sacrifice bunts" or "sacrifice fly balls." These "sacrifices" are when a batter hits the ball in such a way that he himself makes an out, but allows another player on his team to advance along the base-paths, and hopefully even score a run as a result. Interestingly, the batter who sacrifices himself and makes the out is cheered and praised for his selfless act. He doesn't get a hit himself, but he does something good for the team, and so the fans

applaud. Willingness to give one's self up for the benefit of others is the key concept about sacrifice, even in baseball.

What about another term applied to Jesus, servant? Well, not many of us have been servants, but most of us have been “employees.” It's about the same. If you are an employee, you go in and work on someone else's property and follow their rules and do what they say. You give up your time and freedom and sweat and blood and tears, to advance the interests of someone else—like your boss, or ultimately the shareholders of the company for which you work—all for the sake of a paycheck. That's a lot like being a “servant” back in the first century AD. Servants in ancient times also had to put the interests of their masters ahead of their own interests, in order to have a livelihood. Interestingly, we I think we could say that—once again-- willingness to give one's self up for the benefit of others is the key concept.

So far, both with “servant” and with “sacrifice,” willingness to give one's self up for others has turned out to be the key concept. That couldn't apply to the term, High Priest, could it? Being a High Priest sounds like being a big shot, who gets all the glory while others do the work. You wouldn't think a High Priest would give himself up for others, would you? Nevertheless, the letter to the Hebrews insists that is exactly the kind of High Priest that Jesus is.

According to Hebrews, Jesus is a High Priest who suffers. Jesus did indeed offer up prayers and supplications, the letter says—and that is the job description for a High Priest—but he did it with “loud cries and tears.” This

is a reference to Jesus' suffering on the Cross. Furthermore, the result of his self-offering, the letter says, is that "he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." Once again, willingness to give one's self up for the benefit of others is the key concept.

Amazingly then, all three of the terms applied to Jesus, Jesus as servant, Jesus as sacrifice, and Jesus as High Priest, come out in the same place. Jesus willingly gives himself up for the sake of others.

I'm pleased when the lessons for an appointed Sunday work together. It doesn't always happen that way. But this time it does. All three scriptures combine to agree on a basic notion about Jesus and his work. Jesus does not sit back and glide effortlessly back up to heaven. No, he invests himself, with blood sweat and tears, and not for his own benefit, but for ours.

How do we come to terms with this way thinking of Jesus? How do we get the good of it in our own lives?

Well part of the answer comes from the Letter to the Hebrews, which we have been considering. The Letter is at pains to say that Jesus' role as High Priest did not end with his self-offering on the Cross. His High Priesthood continues to this day: Jesus continues to offer prayers and supplications for us, investing himself in the work of intercession with the same total commitment he showed when he was with us on earth. That's encouraging to know!

Furthermore, his blood and sweat and tears, are mysteriously identified with our own sufferings and difficulties as we walk the path of faithfulness to God. When we have griefs and sorrows, they are taken up into his griefs and sorrows. This is to encourage us to continue in the all-important work of being willing to give ourselves up for the benefit of others.

Jesus is perfectly clear on this point: he wants us to imitate him: “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

Sometimes Christians are criticized for the way we glorify suffering. But this misses the point. It is not suffering for its own sake that we are interested in: no, following Jesus means investing ourselves in good works for a reason. If we suffer as a result of following Jesus, and doing good works for his sake, there is a purpose to it. The purpose is that others may somehow benefit. We are willing to invest our blood, sweat, and tears—for others-- because Jesus did so first.

But our story would be incomplete if we were to stop with suffering and death. That was not the end of the story for Jesus, nor is it for us. Christ did benefit in the end, if we can put it that way. Our Gospel speaks of Christ entering into his glory, using the image of a celebratory banquet where he sits at the place of honor. Hebrews speaks of Jesus being saved from death, and becoming perfect. And even Isaiah tells us that his mysterious sacrificial victim will see light, and will find satisfaction, and be allotted a portion with the great.

In other words, God is faithful and just. If God invites us to live in such a way that we put the interests of others ahead of our own, God will surely rank our interests highly, and will reward us, in God's good time.

All of which makes sense. The baseball player who makes a sacrifice bunt is cheered by the fans. Employees who do good work get a paycheck. High Priests who are faithful can feel close to God. So a way of life that systematically puts the interests of others ahead of one's own makes sense, which is good, because that surely is the life to which Jesus calls us.

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