

Sunday 20th October – Hebrews 9:11-28 ‘The perfect sacrifice’

I wonder who your favourite superhero is? Perhaps you don't have one, perhaps superheroes are not for you. As a child, my favourite was always Spiderman, perhaps because I've always been fascinated both by climbing and by flight, and although Spiderman couldn't fly, the way he used his webs and scaled walls seemed a perfect combination of both flight and climbing. Or maybe it was his determination to stop the bad guys with as little actual violence as possible – something that modern versions of the Spiderman story have sadly been less concerned about.

Even if superheroes are not your thing, there's no question that they have become an increasingly large part of our popular culture. Frankly, you can't move for them. The appeal of these stories never wears out – someone who is like us, but not like us, who saves the world. Sound familiar?

Since 2008 Marvel studios alone has produced no less than 34 superhero films – roughly two a year – and 11 in just the last 3 years. The latest big release over the summer was 'Deadpool and Wolverine'. This is the way they work now, combining various individual heroes into joint adventures. I haven't seen the film, though I tried reading the plot on Wikipedia this week, and to be honest, I couldn't make head nor tail of it. All you really need to know is that the earth is under threat, and these guys do something amazing to save it. What I thought was interesting about the plot of this latest film is that they could each have saved the world alone, but to destroy the 'Time Killer' solo would have cost either of them their life. But they teamed up, and both survived by sharing the load.

Now that's interesting, isn't it? *One* of them could have given their life to save the world, but neither of them did. I wonder if you can think of someone who, alone and rejected, *did* give up their life to save the world? Whose eternal life only came after his sacrificial death? Today we'll think about that in detail, but a quick reflection before we get into the heart of our passage: **perhaps the enduring power of these stories is because they are echoes of the greatest story of them all?** Perhaps, try as hard as we might to avoid it, we can't somehow avoid reminding ourselves of the greatest story of all? In fact, perhaps the very growth of these stories in secular culture is because many want to avoid the 'God version' of the greatest story – but in fact they can't come up with a better one? It's the story we all need to hear – the lone hero who sacrifices themselves to save the world.

Today we pick up our big Autumn series in the amazing letter to the Hebrews, and let's remind ourselves that the one-word summary of the book is 'better'. To a small Christian community tempted to give up and go back to their old religion, the writer reminds them how foolish that would be, because **everything about Jesus is better**. He's not just a heavenly being or an angel, he is God's Son. And this divine Son comes to initiate a better covenant because he is both the perfect priest – the mediator between humans and God – and now, in this passage, we also learn he's the perfect sacrifice.

The middle part of the letter spends a lot of time describing how the Jewish sacrificial system worked. All this talk of priests and sacrifices might sound strange to our ears, but the basic point is simple: Jesus is unique because he fulfils, and therefore essentially replaces, all of it. **This great new promise of God – let's use the old word 'covenant' – is enacted entirely through Jesus.** He is the eternal priest, now at the right hand of God, interceding for us. As we saw last time, this makes the old covenant obsolete.

Now, in this passage, the author moves on to the other half of the ritual – having looked at Jesus the priest, the author looks at Jesus the sacrifice. Again, there's a lot of detail about how the sacrifices worked under Jewish law, but the main point is that forgiveness and cleansing requires the shedding of blood. As verse 22 insists, 'without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.'

If that sounds barbaric to our modern ears, we need to remember that the Law was given in an age when blood sacrifice was the normal way to approach any deity, and usually involved killing other humans – for example the pagan god Molech was worshipped using child sacrifice. The Lord God immediately put a stop to that, condemning the shedding of all human blood, and insisting that only animals could be sacrificed – and to a culture which killed animals for meat, there was nothing problematic about that.

But the principle remains: **‘without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.’ So how does God do it? What is needed is a perfect sacrifice.** As v13 says, the current system of sacrifices can make people outwardly clean, but not fully clean. That’s why it needed to be enacted every year (v25), by the high priest on behalf of the people. But Christ is the divine Son: the cross where he dies effectively becomes a heavenly tabernacle – in other words, the place where the sacrifice takes place and God meets with humanity. And his sacrifice only needed to happen once, for all time and for all people. It doesn’t need to keep being re-enacted – otherwise, as the author says, Christ would have to keep suffering again and again. No, they conclude, (v28) ‘Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many.’

What does all this mean? Well, first the fact that he died is what brings the new covenant into effect. The Greek word for ‘will’ is the same as ‘covenant’, and the writer makes the point that a will can’t come into effect until the person dies. So, Christ’s death begins, *inaugurates*, the great new promise of God, in which all people can find salvation.

Second, this salvation pays the debts that our sin incurs, once for all time, and therefore sets us free: v15 calls it a ‘ransom’, v12 calls it ‘redemption’, which is even more emotive language, because that is the language of buying a slave his or her freedom.

Third, this sacrifice makes us clean inwardly, and not just outwardly. Verse 14 tells us that the blood of Christ ‘cleanses our consciences from acts that lead to death.’ This cleansing is total – Christ comes to put his Spirit in our hearts, transforming us from the inside out. We now have not just forgiveness, but a new capacity to actually lead the new life we always wanted.

Finally, this salvation offers us what v15 calls ‘the promised eternal inheritance.’ We have eternal life, just as Jesus does. We still have to live in this fallen world, and we will still stand before the judgement throne of God – but now we don’t do that on our own. When we face God on the Day of Judgement, Jesus Christ standing at God’s right hand, will tap the Father on the shoulder and say: ‘it’s OK, this one’s with me.’

Is this not the best news you ever heard?! This is why the author wades through all this dense theology – because the conclusions are awesome. Every other religion, no matter how deep its teaching is, how compelling its rituals, how useful its lifestyle practices, falls short on this one thing: we have to keep *doing* stuff. We might be able to make ourselves outwardly clean, but not inwardly. You can summarise it with the word ‘DO’. But Jesus allows us to add two letters, the best two letters in the universe: DONE. Christ has been sacrificed once to take away our sin – he doesn’t need to do it again. **It’s done, it’s complete, it’s a fact of history: and now those who believe this, who receive it, can know full forgiveness, freedom from all that binds us, inward cleansing and eternal life.**

It’s DONE. And yes, grace finds us as we are but doesn’t leave us as we are: but the changed life that follows flows from gratitude, not fear or obligation. We don’t rely on religion anymore, we rely on Jesus, the perfect priest, the perfect sacrifice.

As we share bread and wine in a few moments, let’s remember today why this matters. ‘This is my body broken for you. This is my blood, shed for you.’ This is our forgiveness, our salvation. This is life. This is what Jesus came to bring us. May the Lord grant us all grace to keep believing it – it’s the greatest story of them all, the story that never grows old, that retains its power to heal and to save. It’s his story. Will it be yours? Amen.