

THE BLOOD OF JESUS

Sermon on Matthew 26:27-28

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Blood! We are both fascinated and horrified by blood. Blood is a wonderful, powerful substance that nourishes our bodies and keeps them alive. It carries oxygen and nutrients to the cells; then it removes the wastes and toxins from each part of the body. It protects us from infection by its antibodies and fights disease in our bodies. And so we value blood highly. Yet we are also rather squeamish about blood. We avoid the sight of it and are afraid of contact with it, because we feel that it somehow stains us and makes us unclean. We even use “bloody” as a swear-word, as if blood made things repulsive and disgusting.

It is no wonder then that many of us are put off by the whole business of sacrifices in the Old Testament and the message of Christ’s bloody death on the cross. If we are honest, we find the talk in the New Testament about the power of Christ’s blood rather distasteful, so much so that we reckon nothing is lost when modern translations of the Bible speak about his death instead. Most of all, we’re appalled at the thought of drinking blood. Only the most primitive savages do that. And so we avoid thinking and speaking about that part of the Lord’s Supper.

We aren’t the only people who find that aspect of our worship offensive. St John tells us that many Jews who were once disciples of Jesus were so disgusted at His insistence on their need to drink his blood that they left him for good. And that was quite understandable, given their religious upbringing. Even though blood played an important part in the worship of God at the Temple in Jerusalem, God had strictly forbidden the drinking of blood from any animal. So strict was this prohibition that they had to slaughter the animals in such a way that all the blood was drained from it. The life of the animal lay in its blood. Only pagans and savages drank the blood of sacrificed animals to get vitality and health, energy and power from them. But the Israelites were not allowed to do that. They could not get life-power for themselves from the blood, because all life belonged to God, and God only. In fact, God said that he would excommunicate anyone who drank the blood of any animal.

You can therefore well imagine how shocked the disciples were on Maundy Thursday when Jesus instituted Holy Communion and told them to drink his blood. He asked them to do something that they as Jews had never done before. They had to violate an ancient religious taboo. Yet at the same time they would have sensed that that Jesus was offering them something absolutely new. He linked his blood with the new covenant, his lasting legacy to them. By giving them his blood to them, He gave something special of himself to them. In it lay the secret of his life and death for them. In it he offered them something never given before. In it he somehow shared his whole life with them in an amazing way. Later on after Easter, when they had thought long and hard about it as they celebrated his

holy supper each Sunday, they came to appreciate its importance. And the whole of the New Testament is full of the wonder at the greatness and power of this gift.

Jesus invites you to come to his supper today to drink his blood. But before you do that, he wants you to know why he gives it to you, so that you can appreciate it and use it appropriately. He offers to do three things for you as you drink his blood: to give you life, to cleanse you, and to make you holy.

1. Drink the blood of Jesus and you will receive his life.

Blood is life and the stuff of life for every human being. The heart pumps it around to all parts of the body through the arteries and capillaries. It feeds every cell with nutrients and provides life-sustaining oxygen to piece of muscle and tissue in the body. Blood gives life and supports life. Without blood there is no life. The loss of blood leads weakness and death.

Malcolm Muggeridge, a well-known English journalist, tells how he first began to understand what the Christian faith was all about. He was visiting a remote part of Africa with his wife. While they were there, she suffered such a severe hemorrhage that she was at the point of death. She needed a transfusion, but there was no blood bank there. When the doctor discovered that Muggeridge had the same blood type as his wife, he transfused the blood directly from him into his wife. He saved her life by transfusing his own life-blood directly into her veins.

Jesus has done something far more wonderful than that. He did not become a human being just to model the right way of life for us in human terms; no, he became a man for us to give us his own life, eternal life, divine life, a share in the life of the Triune God. And that abundantly! What's even more amazing, he did not convey his life to us genetically by becoming a father or mother for us. He did not convey his life mentally to us by teaching us about it. Rather, he conveys his life personally and orally to us in the Sacrament of the Altar. There he transfuses his own resurrected life into us as we drink his blood with the wine from the chalice. He says in John 6:53, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day." So then, drinking Christ's blood brings his life-giving Holy Spirit right into you. It gives you spiritual vitality and energy; it makes you more and more alive, as you live in Christ and he lives in you; it gives life to your dying bodies and prepares them for the resurrection; it gives you a foretaste of the resurrection here and now in this earthly life. As you drink it you receive the Holy Spirit and share in the divine life of God already now in this life.

We Christians are like people who suffer from hemophilia. Just as they need repeated transfusions to stay alive, we need Christ's blood to keep us going spiritually. So come to the Lord's table to receive the lifeblood of Jesus. Even though you can't see how it works, take him at his word and trust in his blood to keep you spiritually alive. Rely on the blood of Jesus to give you eternal life.

2. Drink the blood of Jesus and it will cleanse you.

Do you realize that your blood actually purifies your body? As it brings nutrients to each part of you, it soaks up the waste material produced in your body and brings it to the

kidneys for removal by them. If your blood did not remove the impurities and toxins from the cells in your body, they would gradually contaminate and poison your whole body. And you would die. Your blood therefore removes the pollutants from your body and purifies its organs from self-pollution. But it does even more than that. It produces antibodies and uses them to destroy the germs that cause sickness and disease. It fights against infection and protects the health of the body by attacking the germs that pollute it.

Paul Brand was a missionary doctor who worked with lepers in India. He tells a story that illustrates the cleansing power of Christ's blood. When an epidemic of measles spread through Vellore, his daughter came down with a very bad case of it. Since he had no vaccine to treat her, he located a person who had recently recovered from measles. He withdrew the blood from the person who had overcome measles and injected the plasma from it into his daughter. She was healed with blood that was borrowed from a person that had overcome measles, the blood from an overcomer of that sickness.

St John tells us that the blood of Jesus does something far greater than that. He says in 1 John 1:7: "the blood of Jesus God's Son cleanses us from all sin." When we sin we pollute ourselves. Sin contaminates our conscience. It makes us unclean. This does not just happen when we sin; it also happens when others sin against us. Their sin stains us; it taints our conscience just as our own sins do. We therefore feel unclean, unworthy, and out of place in God's presence. No matter how much we try, we can't cleanse ourselves from sin and its pervasive pollution. We all know that; we have all had some experience of an unclean conscience that makes us feel so rotten about ourselves and so unworthy of God.

Jesus gives you His blood to counteract that. His blood washes you clean inside; it gives you a clear conscience. What a precious gift that is! His blood does not just remove your spiritual impurity; it also overcomes the sin that causes it. Remember Paul Brand's daughter. The blood of the person who had overcome measles overcame her measles. It is like that with Jesus. He took on all our sin and overcame every temptation that we could ever suffer. He did this to produce the antidote to sin for us. He took on the sins that we have committed, as well as the sins that have been committed against us, to give us his righteousness; he took on our impurity to give us his purity; he took on our spiritual sickness to give us his spiritual health. And he conveys all that to us in his blood. The blood of the God's Son who overcame sin for us cleanses us and overcomes sin in us.

The power of Christ's blood to cleanse came home to me when I preached on it in Malaysia some years ago. As I was helping the pastor distribute the Lord's Supper after the sermon, I was struck by a young woman who was crying as she received the chalice from me. She was dressed in drab clothes and stayed on long afterwards at the altar. When the service was over, the pastor told that something remarkable had happened. He did not have time to tell me about it because we needed to greet the people at the door. When that woman came to us, she took both my hands in hers and fell on her knees before me, saying "Thank you! Thank you!" After all the people had left, the pastor told me more about her. The last time that she had communed was at her confirmation eight years earlier. But her life had been ruined soon afterwards by sexual abuse from a member of her own family. No matter how much her pastors had tried to help her, they could not remove the awful taint, the crippling sense of shame from that abuse. Since then she always sat at the back of the church, coming in after the service had begun and

leaving before the service was over. But her reliance on the blood of Jesus for cleansing changed all that. She is now married and has become a mother of two children.

Do you feel unclean and spiritually unwell? Then come to drink the blood that cleanses and heals your soul. Jesus does not provide it for those who are pure and well but for those who know that they are unclean and infected with sin. Borrow blood from Him. Drink the blood that cleanses you and overcomes sin in your soul.

3. Drink the blood of Jesus and it will make you holy.

In the Old Testament God told Moses to use the blood of the sacrificed animals to make people holy and fit for his presence. After Moses had sacrificed some animals at Mt Sinai and had splashed part of their blood on the altar there, he sprinkled the rest of their blood on the Israelites. In this way he consecrated them and made them God's holy people, his royal priesthood. And whenever a man was ordained as a priest, an elaborate ceremony took place. Some blood was taken from a sacrificed ram and placed on his right ear, his right hand, and his right foot. Then blood was taken from the altar and sprinkled over him and his vestments. In this way that man became holy and fit for access to God's presence. He was covered and empowered by God's holiness.

In the Lord's Supper the blood of Jesus makes and keeps us holy. We do not produce our own holiness; Jesus shares his holiness with us. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says in 13:12: "Jesus suffered ... in order to sanctify the people by his own blood." This means that we are all saints, holy people, people protected and empowered by God's holiness. Because Jesus shares his own holiness with us by giving us his blood to drink, we can approach our heavenly Father with great boldness and confidence as if we were Jesus himself and had his status as God's Son. We enjoy the privilege of access to heaven here on earth as we receive the holy Sacrament. We can "enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus" and "approach with a true heart in the full assurance of faith" (Heb 10:19-22). We can bring our own needs and the needs of others to God in prayer.

Together with the word of God and body of Jesus, his blood is the most holy thing that you have from God. It makes you holy through and through. You are as holy in God's eyes as Jesus is. Since you share in Christ's holiness, your body is the temple of the living God. Wherever you go God goes with you. God uses you to reach out and touch other people. Whether they know it or not, they meet Him through you. Since you are holy you live as in God's presence; you belong to his holy priests that bring people and their needs to God in prayer, just as they bring God and his blessings to the people around them. All this is yours because Jesus gives you his holy blood to drink, the blood that consecrates you and keeps you holy. So drink his blood and share in his holiness.

Blood is indeed a remarkable, powerful substance. We depend on it to remain alive and healthy. But the holy blood of Jesus is an even more remarkable substance, something far more powerful than human blood. There is power in his blood. His blood brings life and cleansing and holiness to those who take him at his word when he says: "Drink from this cup, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Believe it and you will receive its blessings. Believe that you receive eternal life in his blood and he will give you eternal life. Believe that you receive cleansing from sin in his blood and he will cleanse you through and through. Believe that.

you receive holiness from him in his blood and he will keep you holy. Believe and receive. Then you will have good reason to rejoice and sing:

*Glory be to Jesus,
Who in bitter pains
Poured for me the lifeblood
From His sacred veins. (LHS 69)*