

THE PRECIOUS BLOOD OF JESUS

‘You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.’ (1 Pet 1.18-19)

The month of July is traditionally a time dedicated in the Church to reflection on the precious blood. There are thirty-seven references to Jesus’ blood in the New testament letters alone, for example, the reference in the First Letter of Peter to how Jesus’ blood is the ransom payment for our eternal life.

This makes the blood of Jesus a currency we need to appreciate in our Catholic lives. Of course, the idea of sacrifice and blood is not something we feel comfortable with today. There is a Votive Mass, The Most Precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The Prayer after Communion of this Mass has these words, ‘Refreshed, O Lord, by this saving food and drink, we pray that we may always be bathed in the Blood of our Saviour, so that it may become for us a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’ Who in their right mind wants to take a shower in blood? The very concept reminds me of many of Jesus’ disciples at the end of his teaching on the Eucharist in John 6, this is intolerable language, who can accept it? And so we need to understand what all this talk of blood is about.

The Baptist points us to where Jesus will be found, the Lamb of God that is sacrificed upon the Cross. Because of the Fall, humanity has no wine, no fruitfulness in God’s Kingdom. We might reflect upon God’s rescue plan for the human race in many different ways. Whatever our thinking, we are brought back to the stark reality of the Cross. Above all, Jesus shed His precious blood. In the Garden of Gethsemane, the Passion begins and Jesus sheds blood. When He is scourged by the soldiers, Jesus sheds blood. When He is crowned with thorns, Jesus sheds blood. When His hands and feet are pierced by nails, Jesus sheds blood. When a lance pierces His Sacred Heart, blood and water pour out. This is not just a theological idea, a kind of leftover from Old Testament levitical sacrifice. This is what happened. But what does it mean? The Letter to the Hebrews puts it this way, ‘without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins’ (Heb. 9.22). St Paul proclaims this same truth, ‘In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace’ (Eph. 1.7). This is the fountain then, of cleansing and forgiveness promised us by the prophets, ‘on that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity.’ (Zech. 13.1)

We cannot experience life in Christ, if we do not understand the power of Christ’s blood on the Cross, made available to us through faith and the sacraments. And to be honest, I sometimes think the evangelical protestant Christians have more understanding of this truth than we do, Jesus lived the life I could not live and died the death I should have died. But of course, this is at the heart of our Catholic faith. The Catechism puts it this way:

‘Christ's death is both the Paschal sacrifice that accomplishes the definitive redemption of men, through 'the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,' and the sacrifice of the New Covenant, which restores man to communion with God by reconciling him to God through the "blood of the covenant, which was poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins". (CCC,613)

This whole section of the Catechism is entitled, Christ offered Himself to His Father for our sins - and it makes clear exactly how Jesus did this, by pouring out His blood in the sacrifice of the Cross.

This has always been Catholic teaching. In the first century, St. Pope Clement I invites us in these words, ‘Let us fix our gaze on the Blood of Christ and realise how truly precious it is, seeing that it was poured out for our salvation and brought the grace of conversion to the whole world.’ St. Pope John XXIII wrote an apostolic letter in 1960, entitled ‘On promoting devotion to the Most Precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Pope Benedict XVI said of this great truth, ‘the blood of Christ is the pledge of the faithful love of God for humanity. Looking upon the wounds of the Crucified, every man, even in conditions of extreme moral misery, can say: God has not abandoned me, he loves me, he gave his life for me — and in this way rediscover hope.’ (5 July 2009) I couldn’t put it better than that!

✠ David J Oakley
Bishop of Northampton