

12.12.07      Hebrews 9    midweekchurch      Hebrews 9 (mid)

A few years ago rugby league was in the doldrums. There had been that big split between the traditionalists and super league. They had closed down some of the older clubs and tried to expand to other states. And player payments had got so high that the average rugby league player was no longer one of the boys, he had so much money they he began to lose touch with the working man, the supporters.

And then the NRL came up with a marketing campaign that was hugely successful in restoring rugby league's battered image. Do you remember what they did? For a couple of years they hired Tina Turner and she sung and sung and sung just one song, "*You're simply the best, better than all the rest.*" It became an anthem, which the game rode upon back to success.

But it could also be an anthem that the writer to the Hebrews could apply to Jesus. "*He's simply the best, better than all the rest.*" For throughout the first part of the book of Hebrews that is the message that we have heard loud and clear, again & again & again. Jesus is the best, he is better, superior, greater than all the rest. He is better than the angels, for they actually worship Him. He is better than Moses, better even than the priests of the old covenant.

Why? Well because he gives his people a better rest, he offers them better promises, he enacts a better covenant. Quite simply, if you compare him to the Jewish religion, the Muslim religion, the Buddhist religion, the materialism of the average Australian, there is no comparison - for he is simply the best.

But the writer hasn't finished with his comparisons yet, for with Jesus we have the best worship as well. And as the writer turns to this subject, he introduces us to the subject of blood, blood. And he compares the worship under the old covenant, through the blood of bulls and goats with the worship under the new, through the shed blood of God's Son Jesus.

**1. The Blood of Bulls** So lets turn to the first 10 verses of chapter 9 and have a quick look at the worship found in the OT. For worship there is centred around the Tabernacle or later around the Temple. But both these physical spaces are constructed with the very same floor plan. They both have three sections. The outer court with its place for the sacrifice & offerings is open to all Jews. Then there is the inner court, the holy place where only the priests can go and offer bread and trim the lights.

And then there is the most holy place, where only the high priest can go and he can go but once a year. And then only when he has blood to offer God, the blood of the scapegoat, which has been killed in the place of all the people of God.

Now if you read through the descriptions of worship in the OT there is a lot of colour and drama to it. The priest has these fancy and colourful robes that he wears. The tabernacle and then later the Temple are impressive structures that act as a palace for the King of all the earth. And the sacrifices of bulls or goats or doves and the burning of the bread and grains on the altar would have sent a whole cacophony of sights, smells and sounds into the worshippers sensory glands.

And right at the centre of everything that happens is blood. To get into God's presence, something had to die. You had to bring a perfect goat or bull or dove, place your hand upon its head and watch as its throat is cut and its life drains away in front of you.

It would impress on you time and time again, that coming to your God is never cheap, never just as easy as turning up when you want to. Blood has to shed. Sins need to be forgiven. Access to the Lord needs to be purchased. And so the ceremony, the drama, the theatre of it all would leave a lasting impression on you.

But the writer to the Hebrews points out that there was some problems with all this ritual. The first was that only one person could actually go into God's presence and that was the high priest. So worship was distant. It was like going to a concert. The majority of people are in the crowd, some get to go right up close in the expensive seats, but almost no-one is able to join the performers back stage. In that inner sanctum there is restricted access.

The next problem was that it was all pretty impersonal. You couldn't represent yourself, you couldn't see God yourself, someone else went in on your behalf. And lastly v 9 reminds us that the sacrifices of blood was able to clean the worshipper outwardly, but it could never change our hearts or our conscience. They were outward symbols that could only affect our outward appearance before God. The inner being, the real you is sadly untouched and still unclean.

It's a bit like that famous scene in Shakespeare's play MacBeth. Lady MacBeth has committed murder and she washes the blood off her hands, but she can only wash off the outward appearance. The inner reality still remains. And so she famously washes her hands again and again and again while saying "*out damn spot*". Nothing that she tries can cleanse the blood from her soul.

And this is our real problem as humans, it is not just the bad things that we do, it is what those evil actions do to our insides. And how the evil that is found in there builds up and up like the dirt and dust in my car. As Dr Albert Einstein once said "*The true problem lies in the hearts and thoughts of men. It is not a physical but an ethical problem, What terrifies us is not the explosive force of the atomic*

*bomb, but the power of the wickedness of the human heart.*” And these outwards actions, these symbols, this worship, can never clean that part of us up. All they did was show us that our sin meant we could never really have any real access to God.

Now lets stop there for a second and quickly think about how that applies to us today. What that is saying is that this type of worship can never, ever bring us to God. Worship filled with drama and theatre, dripping with symbolism can only change our outward appearance, not our inner hearts and minds.

Yet isn't that what Christian worship is full of? We build big cathedrals and nice Churches because we think that in their impressiveness or in their serenity that we will be led into God's presence. And we wont be. We pay our leaders to wear fancy gowns and robes or to act like a priest so that through their words and actions, we might be better ushered into God's presence, but that doesn't change anything.

A priest hearing your confessions on God's behalf, doesn't take away your guilt. A minister breaking the bread and the wine and passing it out to the congregation for them to eat will not automatically fill your insides with God's presence. Going forward at an evangelistic crusade or to get a touch or a healing from the pastor down the front will not usher you any further into God's presence. It can only touch your outside, it will never change your inside. The blood of bulls, the worship in an earthly building, the offering of sacrifices of animals or money can not change the heart. Only the blood of Jesus can do that.

**2. The Blood of Jesus.** So that is why the writer turns again to Jesus in verse 11 and following. His death and His resurrection is the only answer to these problems. His sacrifice is what we really need. It is only Jesus blood that brings us into the true presence of God. He is the lamb of God who not only takes away the sins of the world, but brings us into God's presence.

That is why the author sets side by side the old covenant and the new covenant to contrast one with the other. The beauty and dignity of the earthly tabernacle is great, but nothing compared to the majesty of the one in heaven. The temporary and impermanent sacrifices are compared to the once and for all time sacrifice of Jesus on that Roman cross. The blood of the involuntary animals is forcefully set along side the voluntary sacrifice of the son. The fact that the sacrifices have to be done daily is shown to not to stack up against the finality of Jesus once for all death. The annual reminder of man's sin is introduced along with the promise of God that he will forget our sin.

It is Jesus that gives us unrestricted access to God. His life was drained out of him on that cross at Calvary. He caused the curtain of the Temple to be torn in two. Now apparently, the veils in the Temple

were 60 feet long and 30 feet wide, about the thickness of a man's palm (four inches), and made of 72 squares that were sown together. The veils were so heavy that it took 300 priests to hang them, but it only took one man to break down that veil, our Saviour Jesus Christ.

He is the one who gives us access to God, he is the one that makes worship personal. Because we don't go via a priest we don't know or an animal that can't talk, we gain access to God through the one who knows us perfectly, our Lord Jesus Christ. And it is through him and his shed blood that not only are our outward appearances made clean, but our inner hearts and the consciences of our mind are made pure.

Under the new covenant God does not send in the team from Renovation Rescue to change the outward appearance of our house. He doesn't send the team from Cleo in to offer us a style makeover. He doesn't get a surgeon in to give us a skin graft, he instead gives us a new heart, a renewed mind and heart and conscience.

December 2003 at the tail end of a hot summer's day, our region got a severe hail storm. Remember the rains came, the hail stones came in some places the size of tennis balls and cars, people, gardens, business and houses all took a battering. One of my friends Graham had just a week before had extensions on his house finished. And the hail put dents, some small, some large in his brand new colour bond roof. Now when the assessor came around, it was decided that the whole roof, needed replacing not just the outwardly damaged ones. For the other panels were weakened, damaged on the inside and so next time may cause leaks and further damage.

Jesus then is the one who takes our damaged insides and outsides and cleanses them. He makes us whole. He makes us new. He gives us a new heart. And he sends his Holy Spirit into our minds, to renew our consciences and to start the work of making our minds think the way that they should think.

Now I don't know whether you have ever thought much about that. But when we sin, it affects our relationship with God, because sin is always against God. It affects our relationship with others, because we hurt them by our actions. But it also sears our minds, it damages our being and once we sin once, it is easier to sin a second time. That is why you hear someone who has committed adultery or murder or lied and cheated and when interviewed they say, "*I'm innocent, I have a clear conscience*".

Why do they have a clear conscience? Because when you go against your conscience you weaken it. You put holes in it and if you continue to do this you will eventually destroy it. So don't let your conscience be your guide, your conscience can be wrong.

But what the writer is saying is that Jesus blood cleanses your

conscience from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God. It is the blood that washes over the sinful black heart of the one who turns to Christ and makes their heart as white as snow. It cleanses us of sin, of guilt, of isolation. And it brings us into the presence of our God.

**3. The Blood of the Covenant** The blood of bulls are to point us to the blood of Jesus. And that is the blood that seals the covenant. That's what verse 15 to 28 are all about. For it is the blood of Jesus that brings the new covenant into effect.

In the past when we agreed to something we shook hands, didn't we? Now we sign our signature and that makes a contract lawful. But in ancient days you talked about cutting a covenant. And if you are interested in seeing how it all worked I encourage you to look up Genesis 15 for a good example. You see the two parties would cut an animal in two halves and then they would walk through the two halves together. In effect they would say, if I don't keep my side of the bargain, I deserve to end up like this.

For our writer's thoughts now turn to a will and how it is only enacted when someone dies. Before blood is spilt it can be changed, it cannot be relied upon. But after the death of the person, it becomes legal. Likewise Jesus took blood with him into heaven, his own blood and offered it to God as the decisive event that meant the new covenant could begin. And so now we can have access to God through Jesus blood. Now we can have our sins completely removed as far as east is from west because of Jesus once and for all death on the cross. It is through the death of the Son of God that life is now available to me.

Let me now conclude. During the days of the Great Depression in Missouri, a man named John Griffith was the controller of a great railroad drawbridge across the Mississippi River. One day he took his eight year old son, Greg to work with him and they enjoyed letting the trains go through and then letting the ships pass through.

Just after lunch, the Memphis express, roared along with 400 passengers on board, but the drawbridge was up. John lowered the bridge but as he looked down he noticed that his son Greg had fallen off the observation bridge into the bridges massive gears below. His leg was caught and if the bridge continue to be lowered he would be crushed. But if he didn't lower the bridge, 400 people would die. What was he to do?

He knew he had to sacrifice his son and so he lowered the bridge and buried his head in his hands. But when the train passed by he looked up at the passing windows and saw businessmen casually reading their afternoon papers, women sipping coffee, children eating ice cream. No one looked down, no one noticed what was happening below. He yelled out "*I sacrificed my son for you people... don't you care?*" And

he recalled the words of Lamentations 1:12 *“Is it nothing to you, all who pass by?”*

Friends is it nothing to you that God the Father sacrificed his Son for you? Is it nothing that his blood was shed to enable your sins to be forgiven? Are we going to go home tonight as if this is just another soap opera or tele-movie or news programme and be unaffected?

So be thankful. Meditate on what God has done. Ponder your response. And be willing to make a sacrifice. No don't offer the blood of a goat or a bull, offer yourself. I like the story of the little boy who came in from Sunday school just as the offering plate was being handed around at Church. He took it and put it on the ground and stood in it. “I was told in Sunday School that I was supposed to give myself to God.” he declared.

Could we do this tonight? Could we give ourselves to God tonight? And if we did what difference would it make to our lives tomorrow?