

Passion Sunday 2023

“Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of?” (St. Matthew 20.22)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Heifers are young female cows – two or three years old -- that have not had a calf. Right now, it is the calving season, and farmers are watching their heifers carefully – the ones that are pregnant for the first time. Their concern is whether the heifer will ‘own’ their calf and nurse it after the birth. A heifer holds a lot of potential – the potential of seven or eight solid calving years. But there is something else besides calving potential that is intended in today’s Epistle. The reference to an heifer was actually to a red heifer.

The Mosaic Law (as set out in the Book of Numbers) specified that the red heifer was to be “without defect or blemish” and to have never borne a yoke (Numbers 19:2). The sacrifice of the red heifer was unique because of its colour and because it was a female. For us, the red heifer would be like an albino deer – a rare animal.

After the heifer was taken outside the Israelite’s camp and killed, the priest sprinkled some of its blood toward the front of the tabernacle seven times (verse 4). Then the priest oversaw the burning of the carcass of the red heifer (verse 5). As the red heifer burned, the priest was to add *“some cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet wool”* to the fire (verse 6).

The ashes were then collected and stored *“in a ceremonially clean place outside the camp”* until they were used *“in the water of cleansing; it is for purification from sin”* (Numbers 19:9). According to the law, *“Whoever touches a human corpse will be unclean for seven days. They must purify themselves with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; then they will be clean”* (verses 11–12).

This sounds strange – even extreme -- to our modern ears, but the possibility of coming into contact with a dead body was very real in the ancient world. The Israelites lived in close quarters, in tents, and it was entirely possible in the process of attending to the dying that someone might touch a corpse. The same could happen in battle. So, as prescribed by God in the Law, some ashes from the heifer were put into a jar and fresh water was poured over them. Then a man who was ceremonially *clean* took some hyssop, dipped it in the water and sprinkled anyone who had touched a human bone, a grave, anyone who had been killed, or anyone who had died a natural death. (19. 17–18).

The Law around the red heifer were, on the one hand, about public health standards. It was not sanitary to touch dead bodies, especially when the cause of death was due to disease. On the other hand, the Law involving the red heifer was much, much deeper. The slaughtering of the red heifer was a foreshadowing of the sacrifice of Christ for the sins of the world. The red heifer was “without blemish”; Jesus is the sinless Lamb of God. The heifer was sacrificed “outside the camp” (Numbers 19:3); Jesus was crucified outside of Jerusalem (Hebrews 13:11–12). And, just as the ashes of the red heifer cleansed people from the contamination of death, so the sacrifice of Christ saves us from the penalty and corruption of death.

That’s the thing: the red heifer was a foreshadowing of JESUS. And today’s Epistle makes that clear with a simple question – “How much more shall the Blood of Christ purify your conscience from dead works?” The

heifer's ashes were good for cleansing the outside; but something more was needed to purify the inside: that invisible part -- the soul or the conscience, as noted in today's Epistle. And only the Blood of the Son of God could do that.

Today's Offertory hymn speaks to the power of the precious Blood:

There is a fountain filled with blood/ Drawn from Immanuel's veins; And sinners, plunged beneath that flood/ Lose all their guilty stains: Lose all their guilty stains,/ Lose all their guilty stains; And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,/ Lose all their guilty stains.

The story behind this hymn is laid out in the Rector's Corner, so I won't go into it. But the point is, that the precious Blood of JESUS has power to cleanse you and me from the stain and guilt of sin. It is efficacious -- effective. The Scripture is absolutely clear on this: that every person who admits their need, confesses their sins, and places their faith in Christ -- in His ability as the Son of God to be our Substitute and Sin Bearer -- will be cleansed; forgiven; healed; saved; restored.

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace." (Ephesians 1.7)

"But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1.7)

When we talk about JESUS dying to save us from our sins, we are saying that His death is worth more than any human death. We are saying that the Blood which Jesus bled on the Cross is different from any other blood. our Saviour. Why? Because He is the Son of God -- the God Man. He truly God and truly Man. He is, as the Nicene Creed says, "God, of God; Light, of Light; Very God, of very God". He is of "one substance with the Father". And, His love is so great for you and me, and for this world, that He shed His Blood -- He gave His life -- as the antidote for our sins.

This is a truth within the Christian Message that every person in the world must make a decision on. Here is a gift that offers Peace and Hope. With this gift, we have a new identity and new life. We are forgiven and free! The Blood of JESUS cleanses us from all sin and there is nothing we can ever do to add to that. Think of it: what could I possibly do to increase my standing before God, above and beyond the precious Blood of His Son? The answer is *nothing*. JESUS has done it all for us at the Cross.

But there is something that must be said at this point. It is absolutely true: there is nothing that I can do to make my stature better in God's eyes. That said, having received His amazing grace through Christ, I should not be smug and lazy as though I have a 'pass' on life. This is where today's Gospel comes in. James and John come to the Lord with their mother, requesting the best seats in the Kingdom of God. And JESUS asks, *"Can you drink the Cup that I shall drink of, or be baptized (immersed) with the baptism that I am baptized with?"* Then He added, "Whoever will be great among you, let him be your minister (your servant)."

This is a sobering Word to us as members of the Church. As those who have received cleansing from sin's guilt and power by the precious Blood of Christ, we are called to follow Him in service -- in a life of service. As His Body on earth, we are to be the hands and feet and lips of Christ wherever He has placed us.

When we come to receive the Holy Communion, the Chalice is presented to us which speak to us about the Blood of JESUS on two levels: first on the level of its saving power to give us everlasting life; and second, on the level of our response – on the gratitude and service we must offer:

“The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life: Drink this in remembrance that Christ’s Blood was shed for thee, and be thankful.”

The Altar hangings have been changed to the colour of what is appropriately called ‘ox blood’. This is so, because in these last two weeks of Lent, the Bible readings focus on our Saviour’s Passion – His suffering. The ox blood is a heavy colour. Without a word being spoken, we sense that there is something very serious being communicated. And, of course, there is: the Blood of Christ shed for this broken world, once for all, on the Cross, outside Jerusalem. To accept His Sacrifice by faith is life-changing and life-giving. The words in the Prayer of Consecration summarize this well: “That by the merits and precious death of thy Son Jesus Christ, *and through faith in His Blood*, we and all thy whole Church may obtain remission of our sins, and all other benefits of His Passion”.

Dear friends: *“If the ashes of an heifer sprinkling those who are unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh, how much shall the Blood of Christ...purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God”.*

And now unto God Almighty: the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost...