

Sacrifice

Dinah Livingstone thinks about sacrifice.

As temperatures fell well below freezing in many places on January 31st 2019, Channel 4 News reported there has been a 165% increase in the number of rough sleepers in England since 2010. Almost 600 homeless people died in England and Wales in 2017, (BBC report 20th December 2018). Overall, an estimated 2,627 homeless people died during the five year period 2013-2017.

A major cause of homelessness was the policy of austerity, brought in with a vengeance in 2010, which resulted in many people's income being savagely cut and some losing their homes. Thousands of other people now rely on food banks to avoid starvation and children go to school too hungry to learn. The rationale for this policy was the recession caused by the bank crisis of 2008. But in the ten years since then the wealth of Britain's richest people has doubled. The policy of austerity practises human sacrifice. Who is the sacrifice offered to? To 'the Economy' .To the capitalist System. Or we could say to Mammon, the only idol mentioned by name in the Sermon on the Mount. An idol has been defined as a false god that demands and feeds on death.

In the ancient world sacrifice of people or animals was widespread throughout many diverse cultures. People just assumed that their gods required sacrifices to honour or appease them. This included, among others, the Celtic gods of the British Isles and elsewhere, the gods of the indigenous Americans, the Greek and Roman gods, and Yahweh the god of Israel. In ancient Mexico, the Toltec semi-mythical 'once and future king' Quetzalcoatl is driven out of the city for opposing human sacrifice, because he declared God only wanted the sacrifice of snakes and butterflies. But human sacrifice continued and the Aztecs, who succeeded the Toltecs, offered frequent human sacrifices to their Sun God Huitzilopochtli, afraid that if he was not sustained with a constant supply of human blood he might fail them.

Human sacrifice was offered in the early cult of Yahweh. In the Old Testament story of Jephthah (Judges 11:30-40), he vows to Yahweh: 'If you will deliver the Ammonites into my hands, then the first creature that comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return from them safely will be given to Yahweh; I shall offer that as a whole offering.' The first to come out and greet Jephthah when he comes home victorious from battle is his daughter. He sacrifices her to Yahweh.

The gruesome story of the sacrifice of Isaac, in which Abraham is prepared to kill his son because Yahweh demands it, has been seen as a cultural advance by which the idea of God develops from a god demanding human sacrifice to one who only requires animal sacrifice. For in the end Abraham is told he does not have to kill his son but just a ram. Abraham is praised for his obedience to Yahweh through his willingness to sacrifice his son when Yahweh demands it. But to 'demand and feed on death' is the mark of an idol. Abraham would have been nobler if he had said: 'I will not serve!'

Yahweh enjoys the smell of roasting meat. Among the instructions for sacrifice in Exodus 29: 18 we read: 'Then burn the whole ram on the altar. It is a burnt offering to Yahweh, a pleasing smell, an offering made to Yahweh by fire.' But why keep on killing animals to please a god? There is a huge cultural dissonance between that Law and a recent event reported in my local paper, the *Hampstead and Highgate Express*. When his father died in the Hampstead Royal Free Hospital, a man came from Kenya to sacrifice a ram in the hospital's multi-faith chapel, as an offering to enable his father's spirit to rest in peace. The Health and Safety authorities prevented it, saying animals were not allowed in the chapel except for guide dogs and therapy pets.

The routine killing of animals to offer to Yahweh, prescribed by the Law, continued until the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70. (I sometimes wonder whether, if the



Abraham preparing to sacrifice his son Isaac fresco, Via Latina Catacomb, Rome. Italy, c 320AD.

Jerusalem temple was ever rebuilt, would those sacrifices resume?) In Luke's story of Jesus' presentation in the Temple, his parents 'make the offering prescribed in the Law of a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons'. So it would be quite natural for the early Christians, familiar with the Jerusalem temple and perhaps with the Greek and Roman temples throughout the Empire – all of which were also slaughterhouses – to develop an understanding of Jesus' shameful death on the cross as a sacrifice or sin offering. The Letter to the Hebrews (10:10-12) puts it: 'It is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all... When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.'

Today, although human sacrifice persists in our world, I am not alone in thinking it is a disgusting idea to regard this as a demand made by a good God to honour or satisfy him. It is something to be ashamed of. Liberation

Theology offers a better way of looking at Christ's death. Like other victims, Jesus was not crucified *for* the sin of the world but *by* the sin of the world. It is the sin or shortcoming of our society – the system we have come up with – that despite all its wealth, it has failed to provide for the basic needs of its members and this failure sacrifices the most vulnerable. That is the sin of the world which kills people. For Liberation Theology Christ is to be found today first of all in the 'crucified people' and their defenders. The crucified people, those killed or damaged by unjust social and political structures, are the 'lambs'.

The hallmark of a kind society, which Jesus called 'the reign of God', is that it is good news for the poor. That is why the *first* beatitude (Lk 6:20). is: 'Blessed are the poor for yours is the kingdom of God.' The struggle to create this fairer world by and with the 'crucified people' is Christ rising again – the 'whole Christ'. The story (or myth) of Jesus rising from the dead on the

third day is an 'earnest' of that resurrection. 'The measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' will be when all humanity live abundant, peaceful lives together in a society without human sacrifice.

The 'reign of God' preached by Jesus; the Christ Epic, with the whole Christ as a body of people 'all sharing the same bread'; and the idea of the beautiful city (*polis*) where tears are wiped away are three political visions of a kind society being realised in this world. Jesus was not a political activist or Zealot; he thought God himself would bring about a reign of kindness on Earth and soon. Jesus was a prophet of this imminent reign of God. He told parables about the 'kingdom' and how we should behave in order to belong to it. Bernard Brandon Scott describes him as a 'subversive poet'. That subversion was enough to get him killed. As the Spanish Jesuit Juan Mateos put it, Jesus preached 'a new society where, in *this* life, people are free, develop fully and can be themselves... That's why they killed him.'

cordobapedia.wikanda.es/wiki/Juan_Mateos

The reign of kindness has not yet come on Earth, except partially here and there. If there is no supernatural God to make it happen, it becomes up to us. Those who give their lives defending the poorest and struggling with them for 'resurrection' are heroic. Like Romero in 1980, the Salvadoran Jesuits in 1989 and countless others, they may be killed for it and 'there is no greater love than this'. That can be called self-sacrifice and is a special vocation.

It does not mean we all have to be full time political or human rights activists. But it does mean we should be on the side of the 'crucified people' and against human sacrifice, that we should behave kindly and generously and try not to hurt or damage other people. It does mean that, when others lack the necessities of life, we should not pile up excessive wealth, lured by 'the deceitfulness of riches'.

But the gospel is about human fulfilment, *fullness*, 'abundant life,' (John 10:10). As Juan Mateos says: 'The fundamental task set in the gospels is for humanity to reach its fulfilment, fullness. That is the new society Jesus wants.' (The Spanish word – *el hombre*: man – here translated as 'humanity' also means the human

individual.) Abundant life should be for everyone, starting with those who lack the bare essentials: their need is addressed specifically by Liberation Theology. But, Juan Mateos continues: 'Liberation Theology is just the first chapter in a great work which is the Theology of Fullness. It is not enough to say we need to liberate people *from* something but we must also liberate them *for* something.'

It is *for* people to be free to live together in peace and reasonable comfort, to develop their potential. People living their ordinary lives as fully as they can are contributing towards the fullness of humanity. Work builds the city. People maintaining the drains and sweeping the streets are vitally important. So are those who invented and those who built the sewers, as well as the scientists who discovered how germs can harm us. We need doctors and nurses to take care of us when we are ill. We need bus and train drivers to get us where we want to go, maybe to meet others. Gardeners create and look after beautiful green spaces to refresh us.

Love also builds the city. Laughter and the love of friends are vital, as are loving couples. Making love with skill and tenderness is part of human fullness. Some couples produce children and struggle to bring them up as well as they can. Then those children need good teachers. Human creativity and imagination make a huge contribution to abundant life. Poetry and music, singing and dancing are essential, not just to boost the economy or as therapy or moral lessons, but for their own sake, for enjoyment.

Finally, there is one sacrifice we will all have to make: death. This is not a sacrifice to appease a god but demanded by nature. That's how it is. We make room for another generation. We all go down into the dark. But if we have lived generously and productively, our memory and work may survive as a kind of compost to feed others in the future and make a personal contribution to humanity.

Recently I saw a hilarious production of *Don Quixote* by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Garrick Theatre in London. It was a glorious romp with elements of panto but with a serious note at the end when Don Quixote is dying. His loyal squire Sancho Panza makes a great speech saying: 'Do not denounce this dust.'