

Blood and Guts
Corpus Christi, Year B
14 June 2009

Richard Dawkins is a militant atheist. He is a scientist who is so in love with the theory of evolution that he believes he can use it as a battering ram to demolish organised Christianity. His books are best sellers, and he uses the profits to tour the world preaching his evangel that religion is bad for you.

Recently an atheist philosopher friend of his got very sick, almost to the point of death. In their concern some of the philosopher's friends told him that they had prayed for him, and were so relieved to see that he had got better. To these words of comfort he sarcastically replied – "And did you also sacrifice a goat?"

Few practices so separate us from the religious style of people in the ancient world as the sacrifice of animals as a central act of religious worship. What went on in the Temple at Jerusalem was not just the singing of psalms, but also the slaughter of animals. That was the main activity of the priests, they're ritual killing of all the live offerings that were brought to them, a process that took place on an almost assembly line basis.

Today's readings are full of the significance of blood sacrifice as a central element of Jewish religious activity. Moses splashes the blood of recently sacrificed bullocks over the people as a way of sealing the deal that has just been made between God and them on Mt Sinai. It wasn't enough to put it in writing, and to agree to the promises of the covenant out loud. This very dramatic, and lets face

it, rather disgusting symbolic action is what shows that both sides mean business.

There is more blood splashing going on in Hebrews, only this time it is the High Priest who does it once a year on the day of atonement, when he emerges from the holy of holies and lets fly with the red stuff as a way of letting the people know that their sins have been cancelled out – for now anyway. You will be relieved to hear that the author of Hebrews believes that we don't have to do that anymore. Jesus Christ is the new High Priest whose once for all sacrifice of himself on the cross does it better, has a much more powerful effect, and that means that the sacrificing knives can be put away.

Nevertheless, this means that the powerful, and rather shocking metaphor, of Christ as our great High Priest stands at the centre of what we do Sunday by Sunday. He is, as they say, both priest and victim in the Eucharistic feast, and it is our business this morning to explore what that means.

We are blessed to be living in a time in which the Church has restored the Eucharist to central place in its Sunday worship, because lets face it, a hymn, prayer sandwich just doesn't cut it when it comes to giving us enough spiritual sustenance to get through the week. Along with the more frequent celebration of the Eucharist has emerged the metaphor of a family gathered around the meal table, which is why Carole had the nave altar placed here. This image of a community in intimate communion with God and with each other has a lot going for it, both in terms of its New Testament resonances, and in its ability to build up the fellowship of the local Church. But sometimes it has the effect of making us just a little too blasé, a little lacking in reverence and devotion.

We can, if we don't watch it, take God for granted in this matey huggermugger around the Eucharistic kitchen table. When that happens we lose sight of the fact that this is a costly meal for its host, our Lord Jesus Christ – that what happens here, is rooted in a transaction between heaven and earth, which has powerful spiritual consequences for us the participants.

The central issue in all this is the dilemma faced by human beings as they consider what they have to offer God. Worship is a movement towards God in love and praise. To figure out what is going on here you have to think hard about what lovers do. Amongst other interesting activities that they get up to, they exchange secrets and they exchange gifts.

In this first part of the Service God has been letting us in on his secrets of his Divine being, and of his ways with us. The Scripture readings and the sermon aren't just about information and facts. They are the inside running on God's personality and character – the plot lines if you like of his love affair with the human race.

In the second part of the Service we try to respond by offering gifts, which always raises the issue faced by us at every birthday and Christmas, of finding something suitable and special for the person on the receiving end. Here God has got us over a barrel, because he made everything anyway, and he has got everything he might possibly need. So we are at a loss to know what to present in that movement of offering. What can we offer – that is our dilemma?

There is only one thing that is in fact suitable – the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which has made us who are and what we are as Christians, and as the people of God. The bread and

wine placed on the table, the Great Thanksgiving Prayer said over it, the acclamations said or sung by the people, the ritual gestures, all these together make up the symbols and the representation of all that Jesus did for us. What we are doing is offering them to the Father, and as we do so Jesus Christ our great High Priest stands alongside us in this movement of offering, identifying himself with these symbolic representations of his life, death, and resurrection.

Let me make it clear – this is not a repetition of what Jesus did for us once and for all on the cross – a doctrinal possibility that got people very hot and bothered around the time of the Reformation. It is in fact a moment of exchange within the Triune life of God. What the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are doing all the time is to pass around between themselves all the time a circulating movement of energy, initiatives and responses. We have simply plugged in to this for a brief time as we celebrate the Eucharist.

As this is an exchange, and as God the Father longs to give himself to us at every opportunity we present him with, he takes these representations of his Son's life, death and resurrection, and so invests them with the Divine life that they are given back to us in the power of the Holy Spirit, dynamically alive with the risen power of Jesus Christ. Or to put it another way, the content of the Kingdom that Jesus talked about so much is given to us in a concentrated form under the forms of the bread and wine that we consume at communion. God is so generous that he can't help himself giving back to us our offering changed now into a vehicle of the Divine presence, a carrier of the Divine life to us. That is why we should treat the consecrated bread and wine with

great reverence and devotion. It is a gift so identified with the sender that it has the power to confer the intimate life of the Triune God to us.

I need hardly add that this movement of offering Christ our great High Priest to the Father, and then receiving him back again for our Eucharistic dining, is also bound up with us offering ourselves, our souls and bodies, to God the Father, and receiving the mystery of ourselves back again in a likewise transformed Spirit filled manner. But that is another subject worth a sermon in its own right at another time.

What matters for now – what we need to get our heads around this morning - is that Christ replaced the blood and guts dimension of Jewish cultic worship with a dimension of spiritual sacrifice that carries us right into the heart of what he was on about in his ministry, and of who he is within the circulating energies of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This Eucharistic worship is powerful stuff – we stand on holy ground here.

The trouble with militant atheists like Richard Dawkins and his philosopher friend is that they suffer from stunted religious imaginations, without which one will never get what worship is all about. The point of slaughtering a goat was humankind's halting way to try and find the most precious thing it could offer the God it loved. The flowing blood represented life itself. We have got beyond the need to be flinging blood around at our worship assemblies. Richard Dawkins needs to wake up to the fact that when you come to a celebration of the Eucharist its as though you have come into the presence of lovers who have avidly sought out each

others company again – and they are about to exchange secrets and gifts.