

Jesus on the Way to the Cross: True Sacrifice

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

Union Congregational Church, North Aurora, Illinois — Palm Sunday, March 20, 2005

John 12:1-33 NIV

Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me." Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.

The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the King of Israel!" Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written, "Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt."

At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him.

Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!"

Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

"Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!"

Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

"But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." [Jesus] said this to show the kind of death he was going to die (John 12:32-33).

The joyful procession wound its way up toward the city, and the sacred hill. There was great rejoicing and shouting — even dancing before the Lord — and the happy crowds lining the way joined in the celebration. The King was coming — coming into the city where he was to rule over the people of God and receive their honor and adoration.

No, I'm not speaking of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem in the year 29, but of another procession a thousand years before — that procession in which King David brought the ark of the Lord up to Mount Zion. We read the story in the Second Book of Samuel. The ark was a symbol of the Lord of hosts, the true

King of Israel for whom the earthly king was but a vice-regent. The Lord, *Yahweh*, was enthroned in invisible splendor between the wings of the cherubim, on the covering of the ark. Through the movements of the ark, he had led the people in battle against their enemies. Now, at last, he was coming “home” to the place of which Moses had spoken when he told the Israelites they would worship the Lord in the place he would choose for his name to dwell. “Open the gates,” cried the priests. “Open up, O ancient doors — that the King of glory may come in!” And everyone was filled with gladness. Even the ruler, David, lost whatever royal dignity he had and danced for joy before the Lord. The ark was taken to its resting place on Zion, and there David offered sacrifices to the God of Israel.

Not many years later, the rejoicing turned to sadness. Through David’s disobedience a plague struck down many of the people. David knew he had sinned, and a price had to be paid. The ark of God had once rested at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. Upon the word of the prophet Gad, David went out to sacrifice to the Lord at the altar that was still there. When Araunah saw him coming he rushed to meet David, and when he learned why the king had come he said, “Here — take my oxen for the sacrifice! And use their yokes, and these threshing sledges, for the firewood!” But David answered, “No! I must pay for the sacrifice myself. *I will not offer to the Lord a sacrifice that costs me nothing!*”

We speak so loosely of sacrifice, don’t we? We might “sacrifice” a few coins here and there, or perhaps a few bills, as a special offering during Lent or some other time. We might give up a favorite food, perhaps to lose weight, and call it a “sacrifice.” We might “sacrifice” our desire for a new computer by buying a new flat screen TV instead. In baseball, you can “sacrifice” by hitting a fly ball to the outfield allowing a runner to advance.

Such expressions hardly convey the meaning of David’s words, “I will not offer to the Lord a sacrifice that costs me nothing!” If it’s only an inconvenience, or a temporary delay in gratification, or a game, or a token gift when we’re blessed with such abundance, it’s not a sacrifice.

During these times when the young men and women of our country are fighting abroad in the war against terror, we come closer to understanding the true meaning of sacrifice. We have a grandson who has enlisted in the Army, effective this summer. We pray for him, that the Lord will keep him safe — for we’re well aware of how the loved ones from so many American families have made “the ultimate sacrifice,” giving their lives in the service of our country.

But even this understanding of sacrifice is not quite what the Bible means by it, for something is missing. True sacrifice is never a one-person act. In a true sacrifice there is the person who *gives*, but also the Person who *receives* it and acts on it — the Person to whom the sacrifice is offered, and who responds to it in some significant way. “I will not offer to the Lord a sacrifice that costs me nothing!” It’s not only that a sacrifice is *costly*, it’s also that it’s offered *to the Lord* as a way of pleasing him.

Fast-forward a thousand years to Jerusalem, AD 29. At the onset of his passion, Jesus enters the holy city in triumph, to joyful shouts of “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” The Messiah is coming — coming to do what a Messiah is supposed to do: to restore the true worship of God’s temple, and to lift his people to a new plane of service to the Lord in which the repression of their foreign enemies doesn’t matter any more. He comes triumphantly, receiving the accolades of a people longing for deliverance.

But it’s a temporary triumph, only a brief moment of celebration on Jesus’ relentless drive toward the destiny of the cross. Since the beginning of his ministry, Jesus has been walking the pathway toward the passion. At his transfiguration on the holy mountain, the disciples heard him speaking with Moses and Elijah about his departure in Jerusalem. And shortly thereafter, as Luke tells us, “When the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem” (9:51). “I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day,” he told his disciples some time later, “for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!” (Luke 13:33). Jesus has been on this mission from the very beginning — a mission of *sacrifice*, through which the purposes of God will be fulfilled.

And so the apostle John, in telling us the story, frames the Palm Sunday incident in Jesus’ teaching about his giving of himself. We’ve been following John’s Gospel these last several Sundays, as we’ve been walking with Jesus on the way to the cross. Drawing from John’s special concern for *the truth* — what’s

real and reliable and genuine — we've learned from Jesus about true *worship*, true *authority*, and true *insight*. Today, as we see him entering Jerusalem in joyful procession, we hear him speak about *true sacrifice* — the sacrifice of his death, his own blood.

He alludes to it, first of all, in the story of his anointing at Bethany. As John tells it, it was Mary, the sister of Martha, who took the expensive perfume, poured it on Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. To Judas, and perhaps the other guests at this dinner in Jesus' honor, this was an extravagant waste. This ointment could have been sold for a lot of money, and the proceeds given to the poor! But Jesus answers, "No, she was supposed to do this! You can do good to the poor whenever you want to, but you won't always have me. She has anointed me *for my burial*."

John explains that Judas objected because, being the disciples' treasurer, he used to take whatever he wanted from the moneybag. But I wonder if another thought wasn't running through Judas' mind. Why did he later betray Jesus into the hands of the authorities? The Bible doesn't explain his motives, only that in God's plan he was destined to do what he did. But maybe Judas had a different view of what a Messiah ought to be. Perhaps he thought a proper Messiah's first duty was to relieve the suffering of God's people, not just by throwing off their Roman oppressors but also by helping the poor in some grand sort of way. Jesus just wasn't fitting into the mold Judas — and so many others — had created for him. When Jesus said what he said about being prepared for his *burial*, how Judas must have recoiled! He *hated* the idea of sacrifice, the idea that the Messiah must *die* to redeem the people. Perhaps he betrayed Jesus in order to force his hand, and make him do what a Messiah is supposed to do — defeat the hated oppressors and rule them with a rod of iron. When Judas finally saw the truth about Messiahship and sacrifice, it was too late. His name has become synonymous with betrayal.

After the triumphant entry into the city, Jesus teaches more plainly about the meaning of his death, the true sacrifice he will offer. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," he explains. "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

What a paradox! Jesus is speaking of his death, yet he calls it being *glorified*! Jesus has come with the proclamation of the kingdom: God is working out his purpose in history, and in the lives of people who respond to him. He is filling his creation with new life, but that life can emerge only through *death*. If I have a kernel of corn, I have a choice. I can keep the kernel, or I can plant it. If I keep it, I can eat it and then I will have nothing more. Or I can keep it, hide it in a box somewhere, and it may keep for years but eventually it will mold or crumble and do no one any good. Or I can plant it in the ground. But, if I do that, my kernel of corn will change. It will lose its shape, and look like it's dying. It will sacrifice itself for the sake of what it's going to become: a plant that will grow up and produce many more like itself. In death, that seed will be glorified — glorified through sacrifice.

In the same way the Creator, who made all things to work as they do, will take the sacrifice we make in obedience to the directives of his kingdom, and build a far greater expansion of his kingdom. The life we try to hang onto, we lose. The life we give to God comes back to us, as we find our place in his eternal plan. It comes back to us as the lives of many others are touched through our giving of ourselves.

Jesus died an agonizing death. It was the most painful and demeaning death to which the Romans could consign someone they considered a threat to public order. Jesus' death has given us our word for the most severe form of pain we know, *excruciating* — a word that's derived from the very word "crucify." The victim was spiked to a stake, and the stake was then set upright in a hole in the rock. Sometimes the stake had cross arms, like our traditional picture of a cross. We don't really know the shape of Jesus' cross, for in the book of Acts both Peter and Paul refer to his death on a "tree" (Acts 10:39, 13:29). But whatever sort of cross it was, to be crucified was a humiliating spectacle. The condemned man hung naked, in full view of passersby who might hurl scorn at him. If you let your body sag you couldn't breathe; but if you tried to pull yourself up in order to breathe, the spikes in your hands and feet tore into your flesh. You might linger for several days on your cross, alternating between agonizing consciousness and stifling semi-consciousness, before you finally knew the mercy of death.

Jesus knew the sacrifice he would be called upon to make. He knew how he might die. Crucifixions weren't that uncommon; many people he spoke to had probably seen them before. And yet, he spoke of his crucifixion as his "lifting up" — a "lifting up" that would judge the evil and oppressive authorities of the world, a "lifting up" that would multiply the servants of the Lord, as a seed planted in the soil multiplies itself. "Now is the time for judgment on this world," he explained. "Now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." The Son would offer the sacrifice of his life, and the Father would respond by giving him a kingdom of many brothers and sisters through all the ages.

Sometimes the Christian faith is presented as the solution to our problems in life. Through following Christ, we're told, we can overcome relationship problems, enjoy prosperity, find fulfillment in our career, have a more exciting marriage, rise above depression, achieve a sense of worth, like ourselves more. In short, *we* can become a more successful person — even as the world defines success. I don't deny that applying our faith in the Lord, and following the principles of Scripture, make for a better life all around. In fact, I strongly believe that. But, in considering the benefits of being a Christian, let's not forget to ask ourselves: *Where's the sacrifice* — the sacrifice Jesus asked us to emulate, when he told us to take up our cross and follow him? Where's the sacrifice — the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world?

The Christian faith isn't about *us*. It's about the Lord God and the Lamb, and their victory over the powers of darkness and death. By his grace, we're privileged to share in their triumph. We share in their triumph when we make that true sacrifice, taking ourselves out of the center of the picture and putting Jesus there instead. We share in their victory when we unite with the Lamb of God in his sacrifice, laying aside our excessive self-concern and asking the Lord, "What do *you* want to make of my life?" We overcome with Jesus when we lay aside our phony ideas of sacrifice and say, with David, "I will not offer to the Lord a sacrifice that costs me nothing!"

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus wrestled with the thought of what was going to happen to him. "My Father, if it be possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). It was not only his death that was in his thoughts when he prayed this. The "cup" of his suffering contained more than the humiliation and agony of the Roman cross. For, dying there, he would take upon himself the *sins* of the whole world, including the petty self-centeredness that besets you and me and keeps us from enjoying a full and free fellowship with our Father. As Paul writes, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21). To take our sin upon himself was the greatest sacrifice our Lord could make. Yet he made it, as Paul adds, "so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Perhaps you've never said to Jesus, "I accept your true sacrifice in my behalf. I now see that my life isn't about me, it's about you and your heavenly Father. I accept *your death as my life*, and I sacrifice my selfish concerns to gain what can become mine only through your grace: eternal life in your kingdom." If you've never said this, or if you need to say it once again, could it be your prayer today?

Sermon text ©2005 Richard C. Leonard
Bible text © as applicable