

*'That they all may
be one'*



UP TO THE ALTAR OF GOD

In sure hope of rescue by God the psalmist cries out: *'I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy'*. (Psalm 43:4 RSV). In marked contrast, not a few Christians close ears and eyes and heart to anything remotely smacking of altars and sacrifice. All that sort of thing has been superseded by Christ, they claim. To dally at all with such imagery seems like a betrayal, and the very idea of going up to an altar at communion time is totally unacceptable, heresy in fact. The Epistle to the Hebrews, they are convinced, makes it all quite plain. But does it?

Just as our Lord Jesus Christ assures us that he came not to destroy the law but to fulfil it, so his unique and all-prevailing sacrifice at Calvary does not overthrow the sacrifices of the old order or declare them null and void. They remain types to his antitype, as theologians would say, those Old Testament sacrifices being efficacious in their time because fulfilled absolutely by Jesus in his. That efficaciousness works forward too, as well as backward. The fruits of Calvary can be ours also through the graciousness of God and our willed reception in faith. Every Eucharist is an invitation to partake of those fruits in the sacrificial feast of Christ's body and blood, offered once and for all and now glorified.

Moreover, at each communion service (each eucharist, each mass), we proclaim our belief in Jesus the Lamb of God, he who takes away the sin of the world, Jesus our great High Priest, as the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of him. Here again we have a type and an antitype. High-priesthood is eternally fulfilled in Jesus. To speak still of sacrifice is therefore far from underestimating the redemptive work of Jesus. Rather it shows it up in all its glory.

William Bright (1824-1901) clarifies the issues, tentatively but cogently, in his well-known hymn *Once, only once, and once for all*. In the opening verses he asserts quite firmly that our Lord's death on the cross is the one unique sacrifice that satisfies for the sins of the whole

world. He is protecting himself, in advance as it were, from any possible charge of underestimating that uniqueness:

1. Once, only once, and once for all
His precious life he gave;
Before the cross in faith we fall,
And own it strong to save.

2. 'One offering, single and complete',
With lips and heart we say;
But what he never can repeat
He shows forth day by day.

The third and fourth lines of verse two, as can be clearly seen, take the thought forward, however. The Eucharistic sacrifice, our author claims, is in no sense a repetition of Calvary. Rather it is a repeated re-presentation of that all-prevailing act of atonement, both here on earth in our churches and also in the heavenly realms at God's altar on high. We are thus taken straight into the Epistle to the Hebrews, and related Old Testament passages, in the verses of the hymn that follow:

3. For as the priest of Aaron's line
Within the holiest stood,
And sprinkled all the mercy-shrine
With sacrificial blood;

4. So he, who once atonement wrought,
Our priest of endless power,
Presents himself for those he bought
In that dark noontide hour.

Hebrews can only be understood in relation to the sacrifices of the old law. Likewise verse three of our hymn is better understood if, for example, we read Leviticus chapter 16, and notably verse 14. The High Priest, we might say, stands for Christ who has indeed sprinkled the mercy-seat with his own sacrificed blood. That mercy-seat is 'within the veil', the other side of Christ's death, where he now is in the eternal sanctuary ever pleading his sacrifice on

our behalf to the Father (*Cf. Hebrews 9: 4-6 and 24-28, also 10: 11-15*).* Verse five of our hymn puts it thus:

5. His manhood pleads where now it lives
On heaven's eternal throne,
And where in mystic rite he gives
Its presence to his own.

This being so, our author is compelled to conclude, and thus hesitatingly to suggest, that the table of holy communion, the board we are invited to approach (*Revelation 3:20*) **is** at the same time still an altar, the place where we too have our share in the one, single and all-prevailing sacrifice:

6. And so we show thy death, O Lord,
Till thou again appear,
And feel, when we approach thy board,
We have an altar here.

To conclude we might glance at a prayer from one of our oldest liturgies, very much a part still of worship in the Orthodox Syrian Church of the East. It is the moment for the gifts to be offered and the deacon addresses the faithful:

*Let us now stand well . . . let us stand in comeliness . . . in holiness . . . in love and true faith, especially in the fear of God, and look upon this awe-inspiring and holy **Anaphora** (i.e. the bread and wine to be offered) that is set before us by the hands of this revered priest; for he offers the living sacrifice to God the Father, Lord of all things, on behalf of us all, in calm and peace.*

Can we find it in our hearts to respond, with the people, in a like calmness and peace?

This offering is for us mercy, peace, sacrifice and thanksgiving.

So may it be in every Eucharist, as we go up to God's altar in gladness, AMEN.