

“Ourselves, Our Souls and Bodies” - Sacrificial Giving in a time of Sacrifices

If the 80 million or so Google search results are any indication, ‘sacrifice’ has become a key way of thinking around the Covid-19 pandemic. We are called to make sacrifices in our daily lives. Some argue that we are sacrificing too much. Others suggest that many of those who have died have been sacrificed to the economy.

Used in news headlines, ‘sacrifice’ is often a negative term. And yet it doesn’t have to be that way. One of the most powerful parts of the pandemic, for me, has been watching the community of Fleetwood, where I’m the curate, come together. Before the government had sorted out its provision for people who were shielding, a group of local churches, charities and community groups had arranged to deliver weekly food parcels to residents in need, not just in our town, but throughout North Fylde.

The commitment to this project was amazing. One young man, a local college student, managed to put in over 500 volunteer hours by the end of the summer, and food and donations poured in. There is now a permanent space, ‘the Pantry,’ run ecumenically by local churches, and support is still strong. More than one generous standing order has come from people who are no longer able to donate food from their own shopping, but still want to contribute.

Throughout our Diocese and indeed the nation as a whole, communities have pulled together through collective sacrifice, of time, energy, and money, not in a negative sense, but a positive one - collective sacrifice has built community and supported those most in need.

I’d like to suggest recovering this positive notion of ‘sacrifice’ as a way of thinking about our Christian response to the pandemic.

Christian discipleship is about sacrifice - it is about ‘taking up our cross,’ (Luke 9:23) about having the same mind as Christ who ‘emptied himself...and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross’ (Philippians 2:7, 8). This is part of what we mean when we say that discipleship is about imitating Jesus.

Although thinking about discipleship as sacrifice has become less fashionable recently, it’s still central to the Christian life. When we gather, in person or online, for the Eucharist, day by day, week by week, month by month, we gather to remember Jesus’s sacrifice.

But why do we remember it?

It’s not just so that we don’t forget everything Jesus has done for us - it’s so that we can take to ourselves that sacrifice, here and now. As we share bread and wine, body and blood, we make a commitment, together, to follow Jesus ever more closely - and Jesus in turn gives us the grace, the ability, to do so.

That’s why the Eucharist is an interactive process: Jesus makes the perfect sacrifice, once for all; we remember it together, bringing it into the present, and joining our own self-offering to it “ourselves, our souls and bodies” and “our alms and oblations,” as the Book of Common Prayer says. Jesus makes the perfect sacrifice, and that once-for-all sacrifice also sets the pattern for our lives.

This is a challenge. It’s easy to do things we want to do, to make the sacrifices that make us feel good. This is why both Jesus and the Prophets continually remind us that true sacrifice goes beyond that: “you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters...these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others” (Matthew 23:23); “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices...cease to do evil, learn to do good” (Isaiah 1:11, 16, 17)

It is much harder to do things that we don’t want to do. Today, that’s often giving money. Getting out and doing stuff, volunteering, giving time and talents are great - but sometimes they hold us back from giving the things we really value. A wise priest once said to me that the last thing to be converted is the wallet, which is really just another way of saying ‘where your treasure is, there will your heart be’ (Matthew 6.21).

As our communities and our churches continue to feel the effects of the pandemic, the idea of sacrifice as imitating Jesus is an invitation to consider where *our* treasure is, and to reflect on how our sacrifices reflect the commitment of our Baptism, a commitment we make again and again, each time we receive the gifts of the Eucharist.

This 'Call to Pray and Give' suggests on one-off, sacrificial gift to your parish on the first Sunday back after churches re-open. As we pray and consider our gift, this recovery of an understanding of sacrifice at the heart of the Christian life helps us to understand what we are called to do – not just to give money to the parish on that day, but to reconsider all our giving, understanding this gift and all gifts as an act of sacrifice and worship, brought before God as part of the Eucharistic action, for our good and that of the whole church.

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