

R C I A

Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults

Jesus

The Letter to the Hebrews sees Jesus as the *High Priest* who creates the ultimate *covenant* between us and our Maker. He does this work (as every priest works) by *ritual*, and being a Hebrew, the author describes this ritual as a *sacrifice*.

Priesthood, covenant, ritual, sacrifice are all words taken from religious history.

- A priest is one who offers sacrifice to God or to a god.
- A sacrifice is the total giving of a gift from man to God.
- Ritual is ceremonial which expresses spiritual things in physical form.
- A covenant is a solemn and enduring commitment between two parties.

All of these ideas are very important in Jewish history. All Jews were familiar with their meaning and importance. Jesus, therefore, knew and thought about these realities.

When we perform a ritual, for instance a marriage ceremony, a lot of these things can be seen in action. A covenant is being made which unites two people to each other for life; a solemn moment! There are ceremonies, like the holding of hands whilst repeating solemn promises, the gift of a ring, and the calling-down of God's blessing on what the people are doing. Invisibly, they are laying-down their lives in love for each other: so their action is priest-like, and a real sacrifice is being offered as well. They are preparing to sacrifice their single independent lives in order to "become one body".

The sincerity of the couple makes all these things not *mere* ritual, but a truly momentous action which changes their lives and makes them one. In doing this, they meet God who inspires us to such generous self-giving. This meeting with God we call a Sacrament.

When bride and groom belong to the same Christian communion, we can enclose the wedding ceremony in the ritual of the Mass, which displays the relationship between the marriage and the sacrifice of Jesus; the covenant between the couple mirrors the covenant between man and God which Jesus made by his sacrificial death on the Cross. The communion shared by the congregation mirrors the communion between the new husband and wife.

When Jesus goes to the Cross he is aware that he is forging "a new and eternal covenant" between us and God. He said this at the Supper he shared with his friends the night before he died. He made it clear that his life was about to be offered as a sacrifice to seal this covenant; he was prepared to lay down his life, so as to bond our lives with God. When he said *Do this in memory of Me* he was not only calling on us to enact a ritual in his memory, but to do as he had done: to lay down our lives in love for each other: or, as he put it, *Love one another as I have loved you* - that is, by the pouring out of our life for those we love. No-one has greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.

This sacrificial understanding was in Jesus but not in his friends. It is what he came to teach them, so how could it be in them? He taught it to them by his own death; but looking on the Cross was not enough. They needed an experience of the Resurrection, in which the real meaning of his death would be made abundantly clear.

We can't be entirely sure what form the experience of the Resurrection took. Some descriptions place it where he was buried (they found an empty tomb: or they met the Lord risen from the dead). Other stories frame it in the meeting of his community (Jesus came and stood in the midst of them and said, *peace be with you*). He walked beside others on their journey away from Jerusalem, and turned their hearts round as they walked this sad journey, and sent them back to Jerusalem, where they found the news of his rising was already announced, and their own story was welcomed as another experience of the Risen One.

- Two of the Gospels speak at length about signs of the oncoming providential birth of the Messiah. They are texts we see as providential, because they use language which acknowledges the eternal qualities of Jesus: he will be called *Son of God*, and *his kingdom will never pass away*. These birth-stories are very late additions to the Gospel tradition. They are not essential to it (that is why two of the Gospels do not contain them). They say in poetic ways what the Passion story says in true history.
- All of the Gospels establish a special relationship between Jesus and the dark side of human experience: suffering, separation, sin, death. Unlike the clean-living Pharisees, whom at first he was thought to resemble, he mingled with outcasts and people of low morals and abandoned life. He was ready to break taboos, to touch lepers and share his bread with sinners. It was no coincidence that “decent” and religious people would begin to hound him as a dangerous or lawless person.

A Few Questions

(don't be limited by these, if you have others)

1 Classical Christian faith has insisted on Jesus' true humanity and true divinity. The two words “divine” and “human” have been used as a contradiction of each other. How can we understand a person who is both?

2 St Paul (Philippians 2) says that Jesus “emptied himself of glory” in order to become what we are. This “emptying” would be necessary for the Son of God to be able to have a human body, to live in time, to suffer and die, etc. How do we think of Jesus' limitations, for instance as a baby, as a first-century man, as a man not a woman, etcetera?

3 For God to become human, it would be necessary for his life to encounter everything human. How do you think of Jesus' being *tempted*?

4 Jesus insistently coupled his life with the Cross, even when no-one else did. What was Jesus' special relationship with death? Why did he have to die?

5 Although we find ourselves using this language about him, God cannot be hurt, be offended, or suffer. Does that mean that *becoming human* actually added something to God?

