

## GOAT

When I was talking just now about John saying ‘Behold the Lamb of God’ there was possible yet another animal in his mind, since he went on to say ‘Who takes away the sin of the world.’ Since you recall I mentioned that Middle-Eastern sheep and goats are quite hard to distinguish, that isn’t perhaps so surprising. The taking away of sins seems to echo part of the ritual of the Day of Atonement in the Temple which involved a goat rather than the bull of the central sacrifice, or of a lamb. Let me read you words from Leviticus:

‘When he has finished atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness. ‘

It is a part of Leviticus which causes scholars some puzzlement. In the introductory words to the whole ritual, it talks about this goat being the goat for Azazel – a name which occurs nowhere else. It is generally thought to be the name of a desert demon – and that this offering of a goat was to ward off his evil intentions toward the people of Israel. But that doesn’t really tie in with the symbolic carrying away of the sins of the people. The likelihood is that there are two separate and very ancient and primitive rituals being combined here, and we are not in a position to untangle them. But that in itself is a learning point for us.

Let’s take the Azazel business for a moment. I don’t suppose there is anyone alive today anywhere who is afraid of a desert demon by that name. But that people are afraid of things that are beyond their control is an everyday matter. So this primitive desire to keep evil at bay can be seen in all sorts of cultures, including Christian ones. There are certainly devout Christians who feel safer for having some religious symbol – perhaps a cross - in their home – that somehow that is a protection. Maybe we are not all as sophisticated as we like to think. And modern psycho-babble frequently uses the idea of people’s personal ‘demons’ – the darkneses within ourselves which threaten us. That faith can deal with demons may be helpful picture language even if we don’t believe in malevolent spirits living on Clee Hill! It raises the question of superstitions in general. It is very easy to say they have no place in Christian faith – and that is true. Nonetheless, they play a significant part in many people’s lives at some level or other, and it is a little facile to assume that once people find faith, all those superstitions will immediately disappear. The New Testament says that perfect love casts out fear – interestingly the same language as casting out demons! What we celebrate today is the perfect love of Christ, which has the potential to deal with all our irrational fears and superstitions. But until that task is completed, we must also see that faith can help us live with our superstitions until they are properly dealt with. After all, we may not be aware of them at a conscious level. It was the wisdom of those ancients who kept the ritual of the goat for Azazel which stopped them throwing out

something which clearly helped some of the people to try to live as those who trust God and fear nothing else.

And the other aspect of the scapegoat ritual is the symbolic carrying away of sin. It underlines for me the importance of ritual acts. And this is nothing to do with churchmanship and churchy rituals, but rather how human beings behave all the time. We feel comfortable when people use the rituals which our society has evolved, and uncomfortable when they don't. So whether someone shakes your hand may carry a huge significance – as you can see when someone offers their hand to someone, and it is ignored. They may feel hurt or offended, slighted and ill-used. Symbolic gestures can carry meanings way beyond their immediate physical sense. If there is some terrible disaster, and the Queen or the Prime Minister goes to the place where it has happened, they are not actually achieving anything for the people involved. But they are doing something which may carry enormous weight – a sign of caring, sympathy and so on. We are constantly people who live by our personal rituals, from the order we put our clothes on in the morning to the way we take them off at night.

If we come back to the Day of Atonement ritual – the sacrifice which made the difference was the slaughtering of a bull. If they believed that was the necessary sacrifice for the sins of the people, then it was done and dusted. But it clearly helped people to see that what had happened was real when they saw their sins, which had been dealt with physically carried away on the head of this goat – taken to a place from which they could not return. It acted out the effect of the sacrifice in a way people could actually see. Occasionally people have done this in modern church rituals by asking people to write their sins on pieces of paper which are then burnt in front of everyone – showing that they have been forgiven, and must not continue to haunt people. It is the same principle.

We need perhaps to put all this together with the words we have just heard from Isaiah which talks of the Suffering Servant carrying our faults. In Isaiah's terms, the servant is suffering on behalf of others. We can't know who Isaiah had in mind – but remember that however much, and however rightly we apply the meaning of this poetry to Jesus, that was not Isaiah's original intention. He may have meant himself, he may have been talking about the whole community as being the suffering servant – it remains a subject of endless speculation. Christians have heard pre-echoes in these words of what they came to see Jesus had done on the cross. But we do have to be very careful about applying poetry in a literalistic way. I came to faith within a part of the Christian spectrum which talked endlessly about Jesus dying in our place, that the suffering he had was what we deserve. And although I don't want to discard that language entirely, because it has a poetic significance which can be helpful, it does raise for me now all sorts of theological and moral problems if it is taken literally. The basic theological one is that Jesus never used the language of the suffering servant to apply to himself. If this is how he wanted us to understand his sacrifice, that seems strange. And morally, I understand the sacrifice of Jesus to be doing something about the guilt I may have because of my inherent sinfulness. If I go along with the c.17<sup>th</sup> German hymn writer who said 'Twas I Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee, I crucified thee' then I am landed with a much more intolerable guilt. I find it more productive to talk in

terms of Jesus doing something for me which I could not do for myself. In that sense he is suffering on my behalf. And the language of the scapegoat then moves from the one which is echoed in the way we use that word in secular language today – ‘someone who cops it so others can get away with it’ – which has no moral authority, to something which is about taking away for ever something that otherwise would restrict and disable me.