

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, B – November 7, 2021 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Bham – 5pm Sat. Vigil; 7:15, 8:30, & 11am Sunday Masses – 800 words

The theme of sacrifice permeates the readings this Sunday. There are the two widows: the one in the first reading, who sacrificed (with faith and trust) all the remaining provision she had to feed Elijah, her son, and herself, and was blessed by God for it; and the widow of the gospel, who gave her whole livelihood to the temple and was praised by Jesus himself. The widows' sacrifices each in their own way foreshadow the priestly sacrifice of Christ, which was "once for all" – total, complete, and encompassing all time, as the second reading taught.

Indeed, these last couple of weeks we have been hearing from the section of the Letter to Hebrews that contrasts Christ's high priesthood with the temple priesthood. The Lord assumed a priestly nature by virtue of the incarnation: by becoming man – by uniting a human nature with his divine nature – he, a divine person, could offer to his eternal Father a fitting and pleasing sacrifice for the sins of all who also bear a human nature. And because he is a divine person, that same sacrifice would be total, complete, and for all time – "once for all".

Every priest of Jesus Christ and his new covenant offers the same sacrifice that he did. What takes place on our altars is not in any way a re-doing of the Lord's sacrifice, as if he were having to die again. No: as our teaching makes clear, it is a re-presenting of it. His one sacrifice, valid for all time, is re-presented in a sacramental manner on our altars. As one of the Prefaces says, "heaven unites with earth" – it is like a window being opened up onto eternity, and the one sacrifice of Christ is brought to bear on this moment of time, too.

Now I said that the sacrifices of the two widows foreshadowed the Lord's – inasmuch as they were total, truly putting their own lives on the line for a greater good. They pointed ahead to our Lord's saving act. But they also pointed ahead to our own participation in the Lord's sacrifice now, for he invites our participation in it, too. In a few moments, I will invite that participation by saying, "Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father" – each one of us is invited to take part, to give.

This invitation is by virtue of our baptism, which gives us all in a share in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. We call it the "common priesthood of believers", and all of us have the task of making an acceptable offering to the Lord each day. Concretely – and I have spoken about this many times –, we do this by striving to order the whole of our lives and everything in them to God. But it would be wrong for us to see our sacrifices as being distinct from the Lord's – ours are to be united with his; they are to be included in his.

Christ's invitation to take up our crosses and follow him, repeated various times in the gospels, is another way of describing the phenomenon of uniting our sacrifices to his. Well, what parts of our lives are not yet in the shadow of the cross? What are we yet withholding from him? When we respond, "May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of his Name, for our good and the good of all his holy Church", is there still something that we have not "put on the table", as it were – on the altar?

We would hope to be like the widow of Zarephath, stepping out in faith and offering our all for God and his prophet, if the opportunity arose; we would hope to be praised by Jesus, too, if he saw what we sacrificed for him. It's probable, though, that for both widows, these were not solitary heroic acts, but the fruit of long habit: they had both learned to trust God and in his providence, to order their lives fully to him, to put him and his kingdom first. Their sacrifices were surely the crown of a life already permeated by sacrifice to God.

In turbulent times like ours, as the world seemingly spins more out of control each day, we have a unique chance to fix the trajectory of our lives on the sure and stable compass-point which is the Lord. If we offer each day to him and strive to let the cross's shadow fall on all areas of our lives, we, too, will be a priestly people praised by him. And when we arrive to eternity's blessed threshold, we will see how we, too, participated in the "once for all" sacrifice of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.