
Consequently, when Christ came into the world, He said, ‘Sacrifices and offerings You have not desired, but a body You have prepared for Me; in burnt-offerings and sin-offerings You have taken no pleasure. Then I said, “See, God, I have come to do Your will, O God” Hebrews 10:5-7 (NRSV)

As we gather in worship this week, and hear of Mary’s and Elizabeth’s shared joy at their pregnancies, it is appropriate also for us to rejoice in the joy and mystery of life – your life. Every human being on this earth is unique and special: you are unique and special. Even identical twins are different (as seen by the fact that they *do* have different fingerprints: BTW, one person reflecting on this has concluded: *“Assuming the Creator didn’t make fingerprints solely as an aid to law enforcement, what are they for, anyway? One author has said he thinks he knows. He calls fingerprints “friction ridges” and suggests they make it easier to get a grip. And these days, God knows, couldn’t we all use the help?”*)

Think of the way your heart beats; the colour of your eyes; even the cells of your body. Life is a precious gift, and a mystery. One other author reflecting on this has also said this: “Ponder the atoms of your body... your body can contain atoms of people who have died.” (Cf. 1 Cor.6:19-20: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body”).

As we enter into Christmas, our Christian Faith (and the essential message of ‘Christ-mass’) is that God has come in a human body, that is, the body of Jesus.

In reflecting on this the writer to the Hebrews has said (as a theological reflection): “Consequently, when Christ came into the world, He said, ‘Sacrifices and offerings You have not desired, but a body You have prepared for Me’ (Heb.10:5).

In exploring this text there are a number of things it is helpful to know about this verse. First, the writer to the Hebrews is here referring to a verse from Psalm 40 (v.6).

However, if you were to read an accurate translation of this verse it would read: “Sacrifice and offering you have not desired, but ears You have dug for me.” One Bible Commentator reflecting on this has said: *“The hearers of Hebrews would have been familiar with this... In the Old Testament, if you wanted to remain someone’s slave for life, the potential owner would then pierce your ears as a symbol that you are his slave until death. (Exodus 21:6).”* This commentator goes on to say, *“That was a part of what God called on this*

special King to do – it was the main mission of The King not to sacrifice other people or sheep or bulls, but to use His own body for the purpose of His Master. The body that God prepared for Jesus was one that would be enslaved to death.” And so we can say (along with the writer to the Hebrews) that Christ said (Heb.10:7): “See, God, I have come to do Your will.”

The great mystery of the Christian Faith is that in Jesus – the babe born in Bethlehem – is the radiance and brilliance of the glory of God. As we ponder this mystery, and as we say our Creeds, it is also appropriate for us to consider the apparently ‘absurd’ nature of this (as our ‘world’ sees it). The God of the Universe, the Creator of atoms stars, the Former and Fashioner of your body, has Himself taken on a human body. (And we will draw out the implications of this in a moment).

As we gather in worship of Him, and as we ponder the great mystery of ‘Life’ (that is, The Word made Flesh), it is also appropriate why we ‘congregate’ here: to ‘glorify the Triune God in worship and work’ and to ‘bear witness to the Lord Jesus Christ through the proclamation of the Gospel’. And part of this ‘glorifying of God’ and ‘bearing witness to the Lord Jesus Christ’ is acknowledging that we are sinners, and without Him we are dead.

In a devotion book I use there is this reflection, *“There is no reason to believe that Mary was sinless. She was poor in spirit, lowly, a servant, God-fearing, hungry, and empty – and, importantly, she knew it. An ‘honest realist’ we would label her. Her self-portrait (Luke 1:46-55) is ‘warts and all’. In sheer grace, God filled this lowly, human-sinful girl with the fullness of His Kingdom – the Saviour Jesus Christ...*

The author goes on to say: *Even God cannot fill an already full bottle. What can God do with someone who is filled up with themselves? Unless there is an understanding of the emptiness at the very core of yourself, you forfeit carrying Christ yourself... We have nothing to offer God – that is, in ourselves – nothing to us to impress. Admit that emptiness, and appreciate it as Step One in the walk of faith.*

This word – when Christ came into the world, He said, ‘Sacrifices and offerings You have not desired, but a body You have prepared for Me’ – has profound impact upon us in life and faith.

First, who are you that the Lord of heaven and earth would become a human being, would care to know your name, and bring His healing? Well... you are a sinner (cf. I Jn.1:7). You are an ‘empty vessel’. You have a body that one day will die (in ‘earthly terms’). And... you are loved. You are loved by God. You are loved by Jesus who “came in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin-offering for us” (Romans 8:3).

Second, this means you have access to The Creator of the stars. Why wish upon a star when you can pray to The One who created it? And this ‘expression of prayer’ is not some wish or hope. Just as you can speak to

someone around you by calling on them by name, so you can call on God by name for He has given us the name of 'Jesus'. Jesus has filled us with His Spirit that we may know God as 'Father'. God has come in a body. You, in your body, are loved by God in Jesus.

Finally, as we reflect on these words – when Christ came into the world, He said, 'Sacrifices and offerings You have not desired, but a body You have prepared for Me' – it is also appropriate for us to remember that the writers of the Old Testament never condemn the sacrificial system itself. Rather, they speak out against the improper use of such sacrifices. Sometimes as people read words such as Hosea 6:6 (where God says, "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings") these words have been used to say that the sacrificial system did not 'really matter'. However, it was the abuse of sacrifices that concerned God. In Old Testament times some would 'make sacrifices' and then see that that allowed them to actually go out and harm people. The call was to love people, and not use sacrifices as an excuse to sin. And whilst the Old Testament sacrificial system has been 'completed' by Jesus, the call to 'offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God' (Romans 12:1) still remains.

In these coming days, as our world 'celebrates Christmas', you have the great joy and privilege in knowing what this is really all about: it's about God coming to us in the body of Jesus. It's about how much He loves us. Jesus is real.

Also, as you come to the Sacrament of the Altar you may also hear those words of Jesus: "A body You have prepared for Me... This is My body... This is My blood..." As we seek to "make diligent use of the Means of Grace", and as we seek to "lead a Christian life in love, humility and peace, endeavouring through admonition, consolation and encouragement to edify one another"... we also seek to "glorify the Triune God" as we "bear witness to the Lord Jesus Christ" in the bond of faith.

Our bodies are a gift from God. But we know that these bodies are weak, and mortal, and one day we will die. This Christmas will be the first Christmas without a certain 'loved one' for many people in our world: someone they have known and loved has died. But Jesus says, "A body You have prepared for Me."

We won't understand the point of Jesus' birth unless we see it in the shadow of the cross: God took on human body (this baby was born) to be The Offering (that is, to die) to take the place of 'sacrifices and burnt offerings' so that the dead might be reborn to live. Jesus' body brings the ability, and the strength, to repent of sin (to acknowledge we are 'empty vessels'); Jesus' brings the gift of forgiveness and peace; the body of Christ brings life to the world and the unity of love. Amen.