

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Sharing in the Priesthood of Christ Holy Saturday Night: The Easter Vigil/B

April 4, 2015 8:00 PM **Gn 1:1—2:2; Ex 14:15—15:1; Is 55:1-11; Ez 36:16-17a, 18-28; Rom 6:3-11; Mk 16:1-7** (Offering Jesus to the Father, which we do through the Eucharist, and offering ourselves, praying for others, and doing corporal and spiritual works of mercy.)

Many of the references in the readings this evening are to Baptism. The creation story is really a backdrop to **a new creation that begins for us in Baptism.** The story of the Exodus is the backdrop to the **deliverance from darkness and corruption** that Jesus accomplishes for us and we are inserted into through Baptism. Isaiah invites, “Come to the water.” He is prophesying about a time, an age of renewal, when **God will re-create his world** after the fashion he originally intended, and for us that begins with Baptism. Ezekiel prophesies about clean water cleansing the people from all impurities, and our Church believes that **in Baptism we are cleansed of all sin.** All these references borrow the motif of water, which speaks of life. Even scientists are agog today when water is discovered on some planet or some moon because it means, well, maybe there’s life. So this is a profound connection that belongs to who we are.

But **in the ancient idiom blood was also a powerful symbol of cleansing and atonement**, although for reasons that are difficult for us to comprehend. Both these symbols, **water and blood, play a major role in the symbolism of the Temple and in the symbolism of Baptism.** In the idiom of the ancient world, blood was believed to have a purifying power. The reason is that they believed that life was in the blood. And even after the animal died the life remained in the blood. Furthermore, if an animal was offered to God, God took possession of it, and so the blood of that animal had a special cleansing power, and was used in all kinds of rites of atonement, meaning rites of purification, rites of cleansing, all of which speak of **the re-creation of the earth according to the proper order that God originally intended.** This is an ongoing theme in Scripture. For our part, we see blood today as the source of all kinds of germs and bacteria and viruses, and we want to stay away from it. So **we have to stretch a little bit to comprehend the biblical use of the term “blood.”**

In the Temple once a year on **Yom Kippur** the high priest would enter through the veil of the holy of holies. This is where the throne of God, called the “mercy seat,” resided. It was

high; it was above the Ark of the Covenant. And there the Jewish people believed God had an abode, of course invisibly. **The high priest would enter with the blood of a goat offered to God and would pour it forth to atone for the sins of the people, cleansing the Temple and the people, as it were canceling the transgressions of the previous year.**

But before entering the high priest had to remove his ordinary clothes, wash in the sacred laver, which was a basin that reminded the people of the waters of creation, and then put on special vestments made of white linen, symbolizing the purity of God, because he was entering into the place where God dwells. At the Last Supper **Jesus spoke of his blood being poured out for forgiveness of sin, a clear reference to the rite of atonement**, but now in a new and final way.

Baptism is our incorporation into the life of the risen Christ, including his priestly intercession for others and his extension of mercy to sinners. The atonement was connected to the mercy seat. It was the radiation of God's mercy to the world. Jesus took on that role; we take on that role. Baptism symbolically incorporates the believer into Jesus' priestly ministry by divesting him or her, and tonight it is two "hims," of street clothes, entering the bath of the font, like the laver in the Temple, and clothing them anew, just like the Temple high priest on Yom Kippur. Jesus is the high priest of the new covenant, and all people who are baptized share in his priestly ministry. **It involves us in sharing in the priesthood of Christ, both offering him to the Father, which we do through the Eucharist, and offering ourselves, praying for others, and doing corporal and spiritual works of mercy.** This is the priesthood of Christ. We sincerely partake of the Eucharist when we are doing our best to offer ourselves in these ways. In Baptism there is no room for passive participation. Faith is not a spectator sport. It is being the hands, the feet, and the mouth of the living God.