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Epiphany 2

The offering of sacrifice for the expiation of sin has long been a prominent part of the history and life of the people of Israel and indeed of other cultures around the world. The reality of a sacrifice as being a part of a community's ethos is the acknowledgement by the recipient of the sacrifice that he/she could be offended. However, because he/she is somewhat above human beings who are not as perfect, when humans trespass, there should be a means by which we could be redeemed.

But even more than that, the reality of a sacrifice for the expiation of sin in the life of a community is the establishment of the fact that there is either a tacit desire on the part of the divine to always be in communion with humans or the divine places reconciliation with humans above any and all things and ultimately seeks to live in harmony with humans.

There is a tribe in my native Ghana which celebrates an annual festival by name "Aboakyer" which literally means "Catching an animal." According to the history of this festival, members of this tribe offended their god and the god punished them by inflicting the people with a deadly epidemic. In an attempt to understand the causes of the epidemic, they consulted the god who told them of their offense and suggested a restorative measure. The god asked the people to sacrifice a healthy male every year. But they always run into problems with who they should offer as a sacrifice to their god. After a couple of years, they consulted with the god and asked for a change.

The god suggested that they sacrifice a live lion every year. They naively thought that catching a lion and offering the lion as a sacrifice was a better option, however, after a couple of years they came to realize that more people died in an attempt to catch a lion than offering one person. They went back to the god and asked for a change. This time he suggested that they sacrifice a deer every year. So for generation after generation, this ethnic group has offered a sacrifice of a deer to their god and continues to do so.

Even though a twenty-first century member of this ethnic group is far removed from the actual incident and can probably offer a scientific and intellectual explanation as to why the epidemic occurred in the first place, no explanation can disregard the core relevance of the desire of the divine; whether big or small to be in communion with humans.

For humans thrive in community and humans are created to be in community and it is within the context of our relationship with ourselves, our neighbors and with the divine are we appreciated, loved and affirmed. In many ways, it is the community that offers meaning to our lives and it is within the life of the community that redemption becomes a tangible experience that is not valued by only one person but is valued by the entire community because all are equally invested in it.

That is why personal salvation or redemption is of no avail to me nor does it appeal to me. Because the more I seek to personalize my Christ, my Messiah and my Savior, and the more I seek to personalize my relationship with him, the more I come to realize that so many others are involved in my relationship with Christ than I am willing to acknowledge. But even more than that, the sacrificial offering of Christ was not to blot out my offenses and to hold yours against you nor was it to clean your offenses and hold mine against me, but it was meant to take away the sin of the whole world. The sin of the whole world!!

That is the way John introduced him to all who were with him in today's gospel. Having already baptized Jesus, he sees Jesus again and proclaims him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. But John goes on to situate Jesus over and above him and sets himself as one to whom the Lamb has already been introduced. John sees Jesus the next day and hails him as the Lamb of God. Two of John's disciples who were with him left him, followed the Lamb and spent the rest of the day with the Lamb.

Andrew was one of the two disciples of John who left John and spent time with Jesus. He later finds his brother Simon and tells him "We have found the Messiah." But he doesn't stop there, he doesn't say "oh my God Simon, we just found the Messiah and spent some wonderful time with him. It was fun and I wish you were there." Rather, Andrew takes his brother Simon to see the Messiah. Andrew takes his brother Simon to the place where he could also experience the fullness of life. Andrew takes his brother Simon to see the Lamb who takes away his sin and could take away Simon's sins.

For all we know, Andrew probably did not understand all that John said about the Lamb, but yet Andrew found it expedient to appropriate the idea of the Lamb with his understanding of the Messiah. He established a relationship with the Lamb and eventually tried to build a community with him by involving his brother Simon.

What I find interesting in the story is not so much about the future sacrifice of the Lamb; rather it is about Andrew's desire to introduce his brother Simon to the Messiah. For all he knew about Jesus, Andrew believed his brother could also benefit from knowing Jesus.

And so to me, if so many people, both black and white believed in the message of Martin Luther King Jr., they did so because they also came to believe like Andrew, that it is not enough for only me to see the Messiah, it is not enough for only me to experience the fullness of life that he offers to all neither is it enough for only me to enjoy the fruits of his redemption, my brother also needs to be a part of this story.

If personal salvation or redemption was all that counted, Moses could have resisted the call of God to go back to Egypt if personal freedom and satisfaction was all that one needed, neither Martin Luther King Jr. or Mahatma Gandhi or Nelson Mandela would have bothered themselves or would they have put their life in danger. But they recognized that their personal satisfaction was not enough if it was not linked with the total satisfaction of all, nor was their personal redemption enough if it was not linked with the total redemption of all.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said that not only is the Negro diminished by his/her relationship with the dominant power but the dominant power is equally diminished by its relationship with the Negro. Guess what, I can be saved all I want and in fact you and I can be saved all we want, but our salvation is half empty if like the tribe in Ghana we do not insist on the communal redemption and emancipation of all **Amen.**