

Message for February 21, 2021

Leviticus 16:20-22

Hebrews 10:1-10

As the story goes, there was once a manager of a minor league baseball team who got sick and tired of his centre fielder's poor play. It is said that one day during practice the manager got so fed up that he grabbed a glove and stormed out onto the field; he was determined to show him how to play the game. The first ball hit towards the manager though took a hop and hit him right in the stomach. The next hit was a high fly ball which the manager lost in the sun; he didn't have a clue as to where it was until it smacked him in the forehead. The third hit was a hard-line drive which went right towards the manager. He put his glove up to catch it but missed; the ball passed right over the top of his glove and hit him in the face. Angry and humiliated, the manager then stormed over to the centre fielder, grabbed him by the uniform and yelled: "You idiot! You've got centre field so messed up that even I can't do anything with it!"

By some incredible leap of logic, the manager blamed the ballplayer for his being hit three times; in other words he made him his scapegoat for his poor play. All of us of course sometimes act like that manager and perhaps even have our own favourite scapegoats that we like to blame for anything and everything that is wrong in our lives. Scapegoats in fact are what both of today's scripture passages are all about.

One of the holiest days on the Jewish calendar was and still is the Day of Atonement. It is a solemn day of repentance when people think about their sins, how they have wronged both God and others, and pray for forgiveness.

As a part of the ceremonies back in the days of the Old Testament, a goat was brought before the High Priest. The priest would put his hands on the animal's head and say a prayer of confession. It was believed that through his doing this, the people's sins were transferred from them to the goat; the people were no longer sinners, the goat was! After the prayer

there was a large festive parade during which the people joyfully escorted the goat out of Jerusalem. The poor animal was then driven off into the desert where it would wander until it finally perished of hunger and thirst. The people though had no pity for the scapegoat since, because of it, they now had a new beginning in their relationship with God and others. They were now at peace with both God and one another. That sense of peace and well-being however didn't last. Before long the cycle started all over again leading up to the following year's Day of Atonement when a new scapegoat would be found. But we might wonder though, what has this ancient ceremony to do with us?

Unlike God's people of long ago, we don't put the blame for the things that we've done wrong on a poor animal and then drive it off into the wilderness to perish. Even so we do, in a manner of speaking, still have our scapegoats. Take politics for example. How often do we ever hear politicians accepting responsibility for their mistakes? More often than not we hear things like, "it's not our fault!", "it is the previous government's fault!", "it is the economy!" It is anyone's or anything's fault or responsibility but theirs. Or to use another example, a sports team has a disappointing season. Do the players accept responsibility? Sometimes, but not often. Rather the usual solution is to fire the coach and make him the scapegoat for the team's less than stellar performance. And if we are honest about it, we too have our own favourite scapegoats for whatever may be wrong in our own lives; indeed many of us sometimes love to play the blame game.

Now there are times of course when the target of our anger really is responsible. Too often though we pass the blame and say that it's someone else's fault without ever really considering the truth of what we are saying. It can be far easier and satisfying to blame other people for our mistakes rather than accept responsibility ourselves. Yes, we do have our scapegoats but while this may be our way it certainly isn't God's.

I sometimes wonder if, in the eyes of God, we are more like squabbling children than mature adults when it comes to accepting responsibility for the things we say and do. One of the great teachings of our faith however is that in the end we will stand before God and give an

account of our lives. And we will be held responsible too; passing the blame onto our favourite scapegoat won't wash with God. But while the prospect of giving an account may well fill us with fear and dread, it need not; it need not because we can and in fact will be forgiven because of *the* ultimate scapegoat who is of course Christ himself.

According to the author of the letter to the Hebrews, there was no longer any need for such as the Day of Atonement ceremonies including the poor scapegoat. There wasn't because, as this unknown author insisted, Christ is the ultimate scapegoat who has taken all of our sins upon himself and died on the cross. In the words of St. Peter: "He himself bore our sins on his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed". Christ has set us free from the burden and power of a guilty conscience. In the words of an old gospel hymn, Christ is the one "Who yielded his life an atonement for sin and opened the life gate that all may go in". I like the way the writer Jim Taylor puts it:

"I had a writing course to teach in Ottawa just after war started in the Persian Gulf. Suddenly, the Canadian capital became extremely security conscious.

I couldn't get into the building without a pass. The security guard took my driver's licence and made someone come down to the lobby and sign for me.

But nor could anyone else get in without a pass. At least a third of the staff seemed to have forgotten their passes. They too had to hand over driver's licences and have someone else sign for them.

And they were furious. 'I've been working here 17 years!' stormed one man. 'I'm cleared for Top Secret documents! You mean to tell me I can't get in just because I forgot to bring a lousy card sealed in a piece of plastic?'

One woman refused to accept the new restrictions. 'There's no one up there to sign for me,' she said. 'I open up the offices. If I'm not there, no one can get in.'

'I'm only doing my job,' shrugged the security guard.

'You can't stop me!' she announced, heading for the elevators. 'I'm going up!'

The guard was out of her chair like a shot and in front of the elevator. 'You are not!' she stated, with a firmness quite at odds with her former casual tone.

I thought we were going to see fisticuffs, but at that moment one of the other staff members arrived. With a pass.

'Thank God you're here,' the angry one spluttered. 'Sign for me so I can get in!'"

As Taylor goes on to write, this in a manner of speaking is what Jesus has done for us. We may like to think that we have earned our way into heaven or deserve it because of our faithful and dedicated service. The truth however is that our own efforts can never be good enough to merit the life everlasting as a reward. We need someone who can 'sign in for us' and that is what Jesus has done.

This is the good news of Lent, Good Friday, Easter, and even the very gospel itself. We don't need to blame our scapegoats for our mistakes and shortcomings; we can act like adults and accept responsibility for the things we say and do. We can because when we fail to live the lives and be the people that God has called us to be, we are forgiven. We are through and by Christ, the one who willingly chose to become the ultimate scapegoat. And that is what Lent is all about.