

## Death Row Dinner

Acts 4:1-22

If you've been following along with us, you will know that over the past few weeks we have been talking about the covenant: the covenant system was broken. To recap, by God's grace we were included in a covenant: a promise that God would be Israel's God and they (we) would be His people. And God tried. I don't mean that He tried to keep the covenant. He did keep the covenant. God tried to keep His people from wandering, from their propensity to be unfaithful, wandering eyes and hearts, flat out falling all over other gods. But they failed. Over and over again, they failed. Along the way, God made other covenants but the people failed to be able to keep those as well. So the relationship between God and his people, the God who made the covenant and who kept the covenants and the people who did not and could not keep the covenant, the relationship was broken, one sin at a time, a hundred million times broken, shattered really. And so that created a problem. Because how can a God who is holy live in relationship with a sinful people? Impossible. The punishment for sin is death. And so, humanity, all of humanity is living under a death sentence. Humanity was living on death row.

It's the one question Kirk asks all our dinner guests: "if you were on death row, facing execution tomorrow, what would you order for your last meal?" Nothing like nice, light dinner conversation, right? Kirk will go first because he's got his answer in his back pocket and that gives our guests some time to think about how they will answer. He always says a Turkey dinner: turkey, gravy, mashed potatoes, dressing. And I always say lobster with melted butter, potato salad, and his mother's homemade rolls." It's an icebreaker, a way to open conversation, to break the silence, to say something about ourselves and to learn something about our guests. Everyone from the oldest to the youngest around the table is able to join in. We laugh and joke about it because, of course, we aren't on death row. But we have been.

The covenant system was broken. And the punishment for sin was death. But because of God's great love for us, He made a way for the punishment to be satisfied and for his beloved children to be reconciled to him again, for the relationship to be restored and for amends to be made for sin. That way was through sacrifice. Francis Chan and David Platt remind us in the Multiply book that sacrifice is as old as sin itself, beginning when Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the garden and suddenly they became aware of their nakedness and they were ashamed. And they hid from God. They tried to hide the shame of their sin from God. And so God made coverings for them – despite cartoons which always seem to picture fig leaves, the scriptures say that he made a covering of skin, and we can assume that it was the skin of an animal since there were no other humans in those days. And so Chan and Platt remind us that at the beginning, an animal, just freshly created in the garden, was sacrificed to cover the sin and shame of humanity. As the human population increased, so too did the sin. And so God would turn again to sacrifice as a way to restore a broken relationship. One day, one day a year called the Day of Atonement. On that day, the priest would go into the movable place of worship called the tabernacle,

a tent really, sectioned off by a curtain. The section behind the curtain was called the Holy of Holies and God was present there. On the Day of Atonement, the priest was to enter the tabernacle and offer a sacrifice: a young bull, and he was to kill the young bull and sprinkle some of the blood – the bull was given to atone for the priest’s own sin, before he could ever even come before God on behalf of all the sinful people. After the bull, he was to take two goats: one goat would be sacrificed and with the blood of that goat, the priest would go behind the curtain, into the Holy of Holies where he would sprinkle the goat’s blood for the sins of the people in the presence of God. When he had finished, the priest would place his hands on the head of the other goat. And he would confess the wickedness, the waywardness of all the people and on that goat, he would place their sins. And that goat, the scape goat, would be driven out into the wilderness. God made a way, through sacrifice, for reconciliation, for atonement for our sins, so that once again, we could be at one with God.

But over time, it became clear that the sacrificial system too was broken. The Day of Atonement was only once a year but sin was a daily reality. One day was never going to be enough to cover all the sins of all the people. So, the sacrificial system was broadened: a lamb for this, two doves for that. And no longer was it observed on just one day. Sacrifices were made all through business hours at the temple. Sacrifice supermarkets were set up where out of town travellers could buy animals to cover their sins. If the temple were a movie set, it would have a graphic violence disclaimer. Because the truth is, sin has terrible consequences, bloody consequences. We don’t like to think about it but our sin is offensive to God who is Holy, so offensive, he cannot look at it. Our sin is messy. The thought of all those sacrifices, the animals, the blood, makes me sick to my stomach. Even God was sick of the sacrifices: the meaningless killing of animals, disingenuous hearts. The sacrifice no longer represented sorrow and sadness and turning away from sin and longing for a restored relationship with God. They were on death row. And death, was all around them. But strangely, sickeningly they adapted to it. They set up marketplaces where death was bought and sold. It just became part of their lives. They were no longer horrified by it. They accommodated their schedules to fit in the required elements. Sacrifice had become just another broken system: as an economic system it was no doubt successful as people bought and sold animals for sacrifice. But it had become just another meaningless religious and cultural practice rather than a true act of repentance and seeking forgiveness. God speaks out against these empty practices in the book of Malachi where he says “ Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors so that you would not light useless fires on my altar. I am not pleased with you and I will accept no offering from your hands.”

And that’s when God again took matters into His own hands, literally. And He sent Jesus, lamb of God, to be the once for all sacrifice for our sins. We say that phrase, Jesus paid it all. But what we forget was that He paid not with a cheque. He wasn’t picking up the tab for us. He paid it with his life. His blood poured out. Do you remember when Mel Gibson’s movie, The Passion of the Christ came out and there was a loud controversy about the gratuitous violence in the movie. And, yes, it was incredibly violent but I doubt very much that the Roman crucifixion was a non violent event. God took the matter of the sacrifice into his own hands: two hands nailed to the cross.

The sacrifice is here on the table this morning. Somehow, we've prettied it up a bit so that it is hardly recognizable: body and blood. That's what the symbols, bread and wine or grape juice are meant to remind us of. And we need that reminder. We need that reminder often. Because sadly, we forget that we were once on death row, sinners killing time until our day would come. Looking back now I can see: can you see it? The prison you were living in, the shackles of sin that kept us from being free. And there was nothing we could do for ourselves, no way we could clean ourselves up, no new year's resolution, no amount of self improvement, self help could fix us. Only Jesus. That's what Peter told the religious elite still caught up in the practices of a broken system: Salvation is through Jesus Christ alone. There is no other way: no right number or combination of sacrifices. There is no other name: I cannot save myself from death row. You cannot save yourself from death row. There is only one way: through Jesus. There we were, drooling over our death row meal, when all along, the table had been set and we had been invited. Come, celebrate and give thanks. You and I were once on death row but in Christ Jesus, we are free. Come and remember – this is his body, this is his blood.