

“The Real Presence of God”

Hebrews 9:24-28

Last week, on All Saints’ Day, we focused our attention on the union and communion between the Church on earth and the Church Triumphant. The connection, the union, the common bond we have is Christ. They are in the presence of Christ; we are in the presence of Christ.

We do not say we have “lost” our loved ones who died in the faith. To say they are lost implies we don’t know where they are. We know where they are. They are a part of the great cloud of witnesses which surround us. They, as the company of heaven, gather with us and the angels and arch-angels and laud and magnify God’s glorious name. We say those words each week in our liturgy, but this is not some new concept put together by the church throughout the years.

In the letter to the Hebrews, there is quite an extensive section which explains Christ as our High Priest. And the comparisons are made to the Old Testament high priests serving at the Temple in Jerusalem. They would offer sacrifices every day. They would enter the Most Holy Place once per year – on Yom Kippur; the Day of Atonement.

They would come with blood that is not their own. They came with the blood of a goat – the scapegoat. And with that blood, they would make atonement for all the people. But when you read the description of that day in Leviticus 16, you hear that atonement is not made directly for the people, but rather the high priest would make atonement for the Holy Place of God because of the uncleanness and transgressions of the people.

Why would God have the high priest come into the Most Holy Place – and this is the only time he would come in the entire year – why would God have him come and put blood on the golden Ark of the Covenant to make atonement for the Ark? This was “the footstool of God”. This was the place where heaven and earth were joined together in the most tangible, obvious way. When Moses would come out of the Most Holy Place, the glory of God lingered on him and his face was radiant. If there is any place on earth that doesn’t need atoning, you would think it would be the Most Holy Place of the Tabernacle or Temple where resided the Ark of the Covenant. This is the place where the glory of God is seen on earth.

The Letter to the Hebrews says, the “holy places made with hands” were “copies of the true things.” What was going on in the Most Holy Place was a copy of a greater reality which is revealed in Christ.

Christ comes to earth and becomes the place where God dwells on earth. John writes in the beginning of his Gospel, “the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.” And He came to make atonement for the people once and for all.

On the Day of Atonement, the high priest sprinkled blood on the Ark of the Covenant to make atonement for the Ark, because God had willingly chosen to take the sins of the people upon Himself. Therefore, atonement had to be made for the Most Holy Place of God.

When Christ entered the world, once again God willingly chose to take the sins of the people upon Himself. Paul says, “He who had no sin became sin for us.” Christ became sin personified. All the guilt of the world was placed upon Him, and He carried that burden to the cross and the grave.

What happened each year among the Israelites was a foreshadowing, a copy of the greater reality. Christ came as our High Priest and made a once and final sacrifice of Himself. There is no need to come back over and over again and shed His blood. We have received God’s new and better covenant – a new covenant in Christ’s blood which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Christ’s blood, the blood of the ultimate and final scapegoat, which was shed for the forgiveness of all our sins, is poured out as He hangs on the cross. And atonement is made.

Now what happens here at this altar as we gather around the broken body and shed blood of the Son of God is not a re-sacrificing of Jesus. There was one final atoning sacrifice made at Calvary. His body was broken and His blood was shed once and for all. However, Jesus says, “do this in remembrance of Me.” The blood is real. Jesus says, “This is My blood.” The presence of God among His people is real. God dwelling in your hearts and making you His temple is real.

What we have here is the reality, the “true things”, of which what went on in Old Testament times was just a copy, a foreshadowing.

What we experience here with the angels, arch-angels, and all the company of heaven is reality. What the saints who have gone before us, what the Church Triumphant is experiencing is reality. What all the saints, both in heaven and on earth, long for – the resurrection of the body and life everlasting is reality.

Our high priest, Christ our Lord, is the first-fruits of the resurrection and has entered heaven. The path is open. The grave cannot hold us. And we eagerly await to see Him face to face. As I said last week, “our eternal life has already begun in Baptism.” We live under God’s grace. We long for the joys of heaven. We pray “Thy Kingdom come.” And we rejoice that God still dwells on earth. Amen.