

Readings: Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 1: 14-20; Jonah 3:1-5; Psalm 62:5-12

Have you ever noticed how pictures can help us understand important ideas, speaking volumes. Today I want us look at two pictures that will help us understand the idea of Jesus as priest and sacrifice.

Picture 1 : the poppy

On this Remembrance Sunday, the Sunday nearest to 11 November, Armistice Day, the poppy offers a useful example of a picture that ‘speaks volumes’. The poppy has become a symbol that reminds us of the day the guns fell silent and the noise of battle ceased as the First World War ended. It has become a symbol that reminds us of those who fought, those who were wounded and those who fell on the battlefields of the First World War and those who have fought, those who have been wounded and those who have fallen on battlefields ever since. And, being red, it has become a symbol that reminds us of blood that was shed in the war to end all wars and that is still being shed today. It has become such a symbol because after the war thousands of poppies grew on the battlefields as the soil churned up by the fighting settled.

It has also become a symbol of sacrifice and of how we understand it – ‘sacrifice’ a word often used on Remembrance Sunday. For members of the armed forces went to fight to save the country even though they knew they might die – the ‘bigger picture’ was more important.

Not everyone’s sacrifice meant dying in battle. For some it meant giving things up, doing something they didn’t like to help others, changing the way they lived. Women weren’t allowed to fight, but many took on challenging and demanding jobs to help the country.

Picture 2 : the Temple

And here is another picture that ‘speaks volumes’ – a picture of how the Temple in Jerusalem would have looked, the Temple in Jerusalem a place of sacrifice.

Our reading from Hebrews talks about a sanctuary made by human hands. At the beginning, the holy place where people met God was simply a tent in the wilderness. But when God’s people were settled in the promised land and Solomon was king, the first Temple was built in Jerusalem, the sanctuary made by human hands. It had a huge space for worship, and a much smaller place at one end called ‘the holy of holies’, separated from the rest of the Temple by a curtain.

On the day of Atonement, the high priest put on the ‘holy vestments’, took the cleansing sacrifices and went behind the curtain and into the presence of God – but to everyone else this conversation with God was unseen.

The writer of the letter to Hebrew Christians says that this way of worshipping on earth was a picture or copy of the holiest place of worship – heaven itself. But the high priest couldn’t go into heaven, only to the most holy part of the Temple. Through Jesus, God changed things for ever:

- Jesus was like the high priest, but he didn’t go behind the curtain in the Temple – he went into heaven itself.
- Like the high priest, Jesus was obedient to the will of God.
- In the past, people had been cleansed by animal sacrifice, in which the animals had no choice. Jesus gave his own life in obedience to God’s will, so that the relationship between us humans and God could be restored.
- Animal sacrifice couldn’t change anything, so it had to be repeated every year. Because Jesus’ sacrifice was a willing self-offering, it only had to happen once.

Jesus, as priest and sacrifice, transformed the way we approach God.

The bigger picture enabled people to give their lives in the first and second world wars and in wars since then, and the tiny poppy reminds us of the bigger picture. The writer of Hebrews reminds us that the Temple worship was a pointer to the bigger picture – the worship of heaven. Jesus’ willing self-offering was so that everyone could have an open relationship with God.

As followers of Jesus, how does this ‘bigger picture’ show in the way we live our lives?

