

## **“The Blood of Christ Marks Our Passover from Death to New Life”**

*Mass on the Occasion of the Lunar New Year*

*February 20, 2016; St. Mary of the Assumption Cathedral*

### **Introduction**

Our first reading relates the ancient institution of the New Year among the Jewish people. While still in Egypt, Moses and Aaron were instructed by the Lord on how the Israelites are to celebrate the beginning of a new year: with the Passover. Our selection speaks of the sacrifice of the paschal lamb but omits the directive to smear the blood of the lamb on the doorposts of the home. The avenging angel will pass over the homes marked with this red blood. The Hebrew people will be spared and they will be able to escape from slavery and oppression in Egypt.

### **Lunar New Year and Passover Old and New**

The story, so familiar to us, resonates with a legend associated with the Chinese New Year. An ancient story is told of a ferocious monster called the Nian that would come down from the mountains annually on New Year's Eve and wreak havoc, devouring anyone found outside the walls of the city. The villagers asked a holy monk how to rid themselves of this horrible beast, and he informed them that the Nian was afraid of loud noises and hated the color red. So the custom grew up of celebrating the Lunar New Year with firecrackers and masks to frighten the Nian away, and decorating doorposts with red signs.

I imagine students of comparative religion would be intrigued by the similarities between these stories, but for us as Christians the symbolism of Passover is associated with the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. The theme runs all through the New Testament and resonates frequently in the liturgy, especially during the seasons of Lent and Easter. Just as the Israelites were protected by the blood of the lamb smeared on the lintels of their homes, and they escaped from slavery into the Promised Land, so we are saved by the Blood of Christ, who delivers us through his death to the joy of resurrection, which brings us into the promised land of heaven.

Our Gospel reading reminds us that Christ is not only the sacrificial Lamb, he is the Good Shepherd, the Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. Unlike the paschal lambs offered up in the Temple, Christ went to his death freely, voluntarily giving his life: “No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it up again” (John 10:18). Death came into the world as the result of our revolt against God; it is by his obedience that Jesus unties the knot of our disobedience and carries us home on his shoulders.

The paschal mystery is at the heart of our Catholic faith, and we might ask, “Why not make Easter the beginning of our religious year?” Actually, for many centuries it kind of was, more or less. Early Christian traditions, as far back as the late second

century, held that the conception and death of Jesus both took place on the same date, March 25<sup>th</sup>. For this reason it became customary in many places to observe March 25<sup>th</sup> as New Year's Day. It was on that day that the Son of God began his human life, and it was on the day that he offered his life on the Cross. A little later in the Church's history this tradition was discontinued, but the associations of Passover, Chinese New Year, and Good Friday are evocative: when you see the red papers decorating the doors of houses, it can call to mind the blood of the paschal lamb marking the doorposts of the Hebrews, which in turn calls to mind the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ, the Lamb who redeems the sheep.

## **Honoring Our Natural and Spiritual Ancestors**

Another custom associated with Chinese New Year is the honoring of ancestors. Devotion to one's family, including prayerful remembrance of those who have died, is an instinct deep in the human heart, and it is expressed in various ways in every culture. For us as believers, that veneration is extended to our spiritual family, to those ancestors in the faith who first brought to our forebears the Good News of Christ's saving death and Resurrection. In today's Gospel we hear Jesus say, "I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice" (Jn 10:16). Over the centuries heroic missionaries have traveled great distances and borne with many hardships to bring these other sheep into the one flock of Christ.

Recently our Holy Father was asked for his impressions of China. He answered, "For me, as a boy, whenever I read anything about China, it had the capacity to inspire my admiration. ... Later I looked into Matteo Ricci's life and I saw how this man felt the same thing in the exact way I did, admiration, and how he was able to enter into dialogue with this great culture, with this age-old wisdom. He was able to 'encounter' it." The encounter of Ricci and many other heroic missionaries planted the seed of the Gospel in China, and those great men and women are worthy of our veneration.

Many of those missionaries in China and their converts bore witness to Christ's saving death by their own deaths, the witness of a martyrdom that proclaimed their conviction that Christ had broken the reign of death. Their blood, too, marks the lintel of China's doors. Perhaps people in your own family have given this final act of testimony; others have suffered in many other ways. And we know that life is not easy today in China for the followers of Christ. May the courageous witness of our brothers and sisters there inspire us, and may we support them with frequent and heartfelt prayer.

## **Conclusion**

What sustains believers in times of persecution is the food of immortality, the Holy Eucharist. Saint John Chrysostom invites us to associate the blood marking the doorposts of the Israelites not only with Christ's Passion, but with the re-presentation of his death that becomes present whenever we offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass: "... When the destroying angel saw the blood on the doors he did not dare to enter, so how much less will the devil approach when he sees, not that figurative blood on the doors,

but the true blood on the lips of believers, the doors of the temple of Christ" (Second Reading, Good Friday Office of Readings). There is no better way for us to bless this New Year than by what we are doing now. The Eucharist is our best expression of thanks for the year that has just ended and the most powerful source of grace to meet the challenges of the year that now begins. This sacred banquet is not the food we bring to the graves of our ancestors, it is the feast that they have bequeathed to us. May the Precious Blood of Jesus be our hope!