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Christ the High Priest Atones for our Sins

From a homily by Origen on Leviticus



This reading is taken from the Roman Church's Office of Readings for Monday of the 4th week in Lent with the accompanying biblical reading being Leviticus 16:2-28. One of the interesting things about this reading is that it tells why the Christian custom arose of "orientation" or praying towards the east. This custom was so pervasive that once Christianity was legalized, churches were almost always built facing east.

Once a year the high priest, leaving the people outside, entered that place where no one except the high priest might enter. In it was the mercy-seat, and above the mercy-seat the cherubim, as well as the ark of the covenant and the altar of incense.

Let me turn to my true high priest, the Lord Jesus Christ. In our human nature he spent the whole year in the company of the people, the year that he spoke of when he said: *He sent me to bring good news to the poor, to announce the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of forgiveness.* Notice how once in that year, on the day of atonement, he enters into the holy of holies. Having fulfilled God's plan, he passes through the heavens and enters into the presence of the Father to make him turn in mercy to the human race and to pray for all who believe in him.

John the apostle, knowing of the atonement that Christ makes to the Father for all men, says this: *Little children, I say these things so that you may not sin. But if we have sinned we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the just one. He is the atonement for our sins in his blood, through faith.* We have then a day of atonement that remains until the world comes to an end.

God's word tells us: *The high priest shall put incense on the fire in the sight of the Lord. The smoke of the incense shall cover the mercy-seat above the tokens of the covenant, so that he may not die. He shall take some of the blood of the bull-calf and sprinkle it with his finger over the mercy-seat toward the east.*

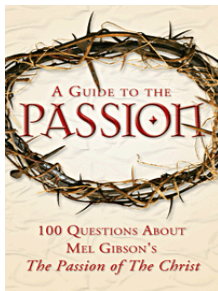
God taught the people of the old covenant how to celebrate the ritual offered to him in atonement for the sins of men. But you have come to Christ, the true high

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priest. Through his blood he has made God turn to you in mercy and has reconciled you with the Father. You must not think simply of ordinary blood but you must learn to recognise instead the blood of the Word. Listen to him as he tells you: *This is my blood, which will be shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.*

There is a deeper meaning in the fact that the high priest sprinkles the blood toward the east. Atonement comes to you from the east. From the east comes the one whose name is Dayspring, he who is mediator between God and men. You are invited then to look always to the east: it is there that the sun of righteousness rises for you, it is there that the light is always being born for you. You are never to walk in darkness; the great and final day is not to enfold you in darkness. Do not let the night and mist of ignorance steal upon you. So that you may always enjoy the light of knowledge, keep always in the daylight of faith, hold fast always to the light of love and peace.

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