

“The voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground”

Kurt Shaw

The kids arrived silently that morning, with none of the laughter or singing that often heralded their arrival from the refugee shantytown where they lived south of Bogotá. Normally they would have turned on the radio, tried out the rhyme of a new rap, asked to borrow my video camera to shoot a new scene of the documentary we were working on, gossiped about who was pregnant and what soccer team would win this weekend. That day they just sat against the wall, drawing blankets close around them to ward off the chill of the fog. Their friend Moreno had died that week, murdered by the paramilitary death squad that controls their neighborhood.

Cazucá, the no-man's land on a dusty mountain south of Bogotá where these kids live, is no stranger to violent death. One day that year, I had arrived to find the blood of 16 young men staining the ground. The paramilitaries had murdered them overnight, then left their bodies side by side close to the park so that other kids would know not to join any groups the paramilitaries didn't control. Even in the midst of this violence, this week was the first time that the kids who did theater at *Taller de Vida*, a small refugee rights organization, had lost one of their own. Though literally hundreds of their peers had died over the last year, Moreno's death threatened all of *them*.

"We've talked enough about him," said one boy.

"Talking doesn't help. Neither does crying. He's dead. And they can kill all of us too, and no one will ever do anything," a girl said quietly.

"Why do they kill kids?" I asked.

"They say we're filth."

"Subversives."

"Guerrillas."

"Gangsters and thieves."

"Even kids like us, good kids, we get in trouble when we tell the truth, when we

say that the paramilitaries are bad, when we say that they're hypocrites for selling drugs, then killing people for doing drugs," said Andrés, a twelve year old rapper, who had been living under a death threat because his songs condemned the violence of the death squads.

The conversation began to flow, twenty kids talking about the mafia that controlled their neighborhood, trying to understand why their neighbors sometimes even applauded when the death squads killed innocent kids. "Everyone is scared of us teenagers, but I don't know why. It's the adults that kill," said one girl. Somehow, this hurt them even more: not just that their friend had been murdered, but that supposedly respectable adults supported his death. As the kids talked, it became obvious that "teenagers" symbolized random, *chaotic* violence, while the paramilitaries – who call themselves "*la limpieza*", or "the cleanliness" – stood for *rational* violence, so to speak, violence aimed at bringing order back to the shantytown. Without the state to guarantee security, people believed that only the paramilitaries stood between them and the chaos of the teenagers.

"OK, so here's the point," said Jenny, whose father had been murdered a dozen years before for his work as a labor organizer. "We have to show them that kids aren't bad, that we help the neighborhood more than we hurt it. Maybe they'll kill us, but at least people will know that *la limpieza* is evil; at least no one will think they're justified."

Responding to Jenny's challenge, each kid vowed that he would do something for the neighborhood: several decided to dig a trench so that sewage wouldn't run through the school playground; others offered to give dance classes in the park, so that people would see kids doing productive things; one proposed to put on their play for the community, while another thought she could teach sex education to younger girls. The tone of the group had changed, and, as the kids left after lunch, I could again hear the strains of a rap and a beat-box as they walked back to the bus to go home.

For if the blood of bulls and of goats, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purge your conscience of dead works to serve the living God? For this reason, he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant.

- Hebrews 9:13-15

Talk of blood makes a lot of Christians uncomfortable. At best it sounds

antiquated; at worst, violently cruel. Yet in both the epistle to the Hebrews and in the letters of Paul, we find constant reference to the idea that death, blood, and sacrifice will redeem us. What can it possibly mean to say that "we are redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ"?

People who work in the field of human rights can't escape talk of blood. In a protest I attended months ago in Brazil, a rapper declared that the blood of his friend, shot by an ex-cop, called out from the ground like the blood of Abel, demanding that other young people stand up for justice. In Mexico, one organization that works with street children has seen so many kids die that it had to invent a curriculum about "the skinny ones," street slang for cadavers. This year I played a soccer tournament in what was once the most violent neighborhood in Medellín, only to discover that the field was built to cover the ditch where Pablo Escobar's *sicarios* – as well as many other murderers – had thrown the bodies of their still-bleeding victims.

Because the author of Hebrews begins with a reference to the "blood of bulls" and the "ashes of heifers", the Christian tradition has long related the words to the Levitical idea that sacrifice of blood is how one propitiates Yahweh. Though we are "sinners in the hands of an angry God", this theology contends that Jesus' blood – like that of the sacrificial bull – bribes Yahweh into docility with a sacrifice to end all sacrifices. The death of Moreno offers a challenge to this reading, suggesting that we shouldn't so quickly associate blood with a sacrifice to propitiate God's anger; *perhaps we need to look at the idea that it is not the sacrifice of Christ that redeems us, but instead his murder, our response to the shedding of innocent blood.*

The paramilitaries in Colombia justify their murders with an ideology of "social cleansing", a phrase they use without irony. As the kids at *Taller de Vida* said, *la limpieza* claims that killing children, delinquents, and subversives re-establishes a lost order in an off-kilter, violent, and chaotic world. The idea is the same as the sacrifice of a bull before the Temple: when the world sins and strays from the proper moral order, only spilling blood will return it to balance. The careful ritual presentation of the corpses on Cazucá's main street is only the contemporary Colombian equivalent of the detailed rules for sacrificing the bull or the red heifer. Though western moral thinking now demands that we sacrifice the "guilty" (or supposedly guilty) instead of a bull without blemish, it would not be wrong to say that Moreno was the victim of a sacrifice made by the paramilitaries.

Traditional Christian theology reads the death of Jesus through the eyes of the *beneficiary* of the sacrifice: people who get to enjoy the re-balancing of the world. According to this interpretation, Jesus is the sacrificial victim, and we Christians

gain access to God through his blood. What if instead we read his death not through the eyes of the *beneficiaries* of the sacrifice, but through those of the *victim*? What if we challenge ourselves to see the death of Moreno not through the eyes of the *paramilitaries*, but through those of his *young friends*? Isn't this closer to the way that the early Christian church understood the execution of Jesus on the cross? "He's dead. And they can kill all of us too," as the girl insisted on that cold, foggy morning. Many Christians might have said the same in Jerusalem, Antioch, and Rome.

Paul clearly did not write the epistle to the Hebrews, a book far from his polemical and down-home style, but one of his ideas will help us here. In baptism, he insists, the Christian dies with Christ: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death?... We have been buried with him in baptism unto death..." (Romans 6:3-4) *The Christian is not on the side of the sacrificer; she doesn't benefit from the sacrifice.* Instead, she dies and is buried along with him. When the children and teenagers at *Taller de Vida* heard their parents talking about the death of Moreno as a "necessary sacrifice to make the neighborhood safe," they were outraged because they knew that each of them might be next. In the same way, reading the idea of "redemption by the blood of Jesus Christ" as if we were the beneficiaries of the sacrifice is an affront to those early Christians who knew that they might die at any moment, that they were the next sacrificial victims of a Roman Empire trying to occupy a restive and rebellious Judea.

By reading the crucifixion of Jesus through the experience of his friends (or through the eyes of refugee children living in camps controlled by paramilitaries), we come to recognize that both Paul and the author of Hebrews are *condemning* sacrifice, exactly the opposite of the way that the institutional church and the beneficiaries of the sacrifice have read it.

This recognition raises a more significant question: if it is not by sacrifice, how can we say that Christ's blood redeems or saves the Christian? How can this claim, so central to the Christian gospel, make sense when we read the execution of Jesus from the side of the victim, not the sacrificer?

Here again, refugee children in Bogotá can teach us something important. Like Andrew and Peter and Mary Magdalene, when the children saw the blood of their friend on the ground, their first responses were despair and fear. Imagine the terror they must have felt in the labyrinthine cemetery, where coffins slide into the marble walls like boxes in a drawer. The paramilitaries had sent their representatives to the funeral to observe who was there, but mostly just to be seen. Little Andrés was carrying one of the corners of the coffin, lifting it into the wall, when one of Moreno's murderers pulled him away and forced the box

brutally into the hole, before turning to eye the crowd with an explicit threat.

Some days later, the voice of Moreno's blood carried a more important message than fear. It brought the children together with a new resolve to end the injustice of the paramilitaries, to show that children were not a threat, not a sacrificial victim to cleanliness and order. Hebrews says that the death of Christ "purge[s] your conscience of dead works to serve the living God" and then declares that "[f]or this reason, [Christ] is the mediator of a new covenant." These children enacted the same process. As they passed through the tragedy and terror of their friend's death, they purified themselves and made themselves ready to do something new, to make justice and peace in their communities.

Working with children who see blood every day, I have come to recognize that the process of redemption described in Paul's letters and in Hebrews is neither magical nor spiritual nor mediated by the economics of the sacrifice. When the author of Hebrews says that the blood of Christ leads us to a new covenant, the theology only describes empirically what happens to a community when one of its important members is murdered. When that community strives for love and justice – like Jesus's friends, like the children from Cazucá – that blood will call out from the earth, inspiring the community to take its commitment even more seriously, to strive for what Jesus called the Kingdom of God.

This isn't the only other response to murder, of course. Textual clues hint that two of Jesus' disciples wanted to use his death as a motivation for revenge and violent revolution. Luke calls Simon "the Zealot", a term with a closely circumscribed meaning in 70 or 80 AD, when the gospel was written: in the Jewish revolt against Rome in 66-70, the Zealots had been one of the most radical of the revolutionary groups fighting against the Empire. The name "Zealot" indicates that Simon, for one, saw Jesus' execution as a motive to take revenge on the Empire that had killed Christ. Some scholars have suggested that Iscariot, the name associated with Judas, is an anagram for *sicarius*, the "knife-men" or assassins who hoped to inspire the Jewish revolt through a directed campaign of terrorism. As I talked to the kids in Bogotá on that foggy Saturday, the zealots and *sicarii* also gave voice to their anger, some speaking of the temptation to join the guerrillas to avenge Moreno's death, others mulling over assassinating the paramilitary leaders. In the end, all of them decided that Jenny's idea of community building would work better, but an undercurrent of anger still flowed through the group.

In short, the rhetoric of blood that so disturbs many Christians today is only an empirical description of what happens to any community struggling for justice in a violent world. Its anger and fear can easily be harnessed for vengeance, but, with the help of good leadership and a holy spirit, it can turn its struggle toward

creating the Kingdom of God.

For Jews demand signs and Greeks wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

- 1 Corinthians 1:22-23

What can theology contribute to understanding and ending the bloodshed, oppression, and violence I've described in Colombia? Can a theologian offer anything to children forced to live on the street, murdered in refugee camps, or forced to soldier for a gang or an army? In short, what does it mean to preach "Christ crucified" among today's crucified?

The Bible details a long debate about exactly the issues that confront the children and teenagers in Bogotá, and this debate offers something very important to the struggle for human rights in contemporary Latin America. While the institutional religion of Israel focused on sacrifices, the prophetic tradition insisted on kindness and justice:

"With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

- Micah 6:6-8

Micah, like the other prophets before him and like Jesus and Paul afterward, insists that the proper relationship with God does not occur through the sacrifice, but through justice and kindness: relations with other people, not abstract virtues. In Hebrew, one is always *kind to someone, just with someone*. The prophets (and the Law) are quite blunt about who must be the recipient of this kindness: the widow, orphan, and stranger, which is to say, those who are excluded, oppressed, and forgotten.

When Paul declares that we come to a new covenant with God through Christ crucified, he's not saying anything new; he's only repeating the message that Micah and Hosea and Isaiah had long ago given to Israel. We are saved through the kindness we do to those who suffer, because their suffering is Christ's suffering. I am converted when I help the other. The other, in whose suffering I see Christ's image, saves me and brings me into the community that struggles for

the Kingdom, for justice and kindness.

During the meeting in Bogotá, I didn't once mention God. Nor did the kids: some of them are so mad at injustice that they can't believe in God, others rage against a church with gold altars downtown and not even a soup kitchen among their miserable shanties, and others know that some priests stand with the paramilitaries or with the guerrillas. Even so, the group was transformed when Jenny, a radical atheist, preached Christ crucified.

How could they be faithful to the memory of their dead friend? she asked. By making a world in which other boys would not have to die as he did. The anger they felt at his death could inspire them to work for peace, for kindness. She didn't preach wisdom or miracles, but Moreno's death.

Since the death of Martin Luther King, most social movements in the United States have changed their rhetoric, no longer preaching justice and kindness for all, but looking for concrete, clear benefits for their members. Thinking that people will be most compelled to support what is closest to them, social movements have become "special interests", based more on self interest than on universal principles. Though national political rhetoric pays obeisance to universal values, the rhetoric of community organizers too often falls into telling people how they will benefit from joining an organization.

The theology of Paul, of Micah, and of the epistle to the Hebrews teaches us why a social campaign based on self interest will not work, and may point out why American social movements have failed, one after the other, since the late sixties. Very simply, *our own plight does not inspire us to seek redemption*. It is the suffering of the *other*, the image of Christ crucified, which transforms us and brings us into the community that struggles for justice. It may be wisdom to fight for your own self interest, but wisdom doesn't really work. When my child suffers, or my mother, or a homeless kid I just happen to meet on the street, I am compelled to change, to ally myself to a group working to reduce suffering and oppression. Christ is crucified in every other person that I see suffering, and the injustice and wrongness of his "sacrifice" is what forces me to see that someone else's suffering is *never justified*.

Let me tell another story.

"We slept a winter there," Jeffer told me, pointing to a wall scarred by years of charcoal smoke. Then he turned to his friend. "Point the camera back there. They're tearing it down now, but you can see it was a pretty good place to sleep, hidden from the street, with the grill to keep the rain off of us." Jeffer's voice glowed with an unmistakable note of pride.

On the other side of the street was Punta Carretas, a shopping mall for the new rich of Uruguay. This site had brought Jeffer and his friend Sebastián to this part of the city, far from their parents' homes in the slums outside Montevideo. Beginning at the age of six, they'd stood at the entrance to the mall, opening the doors of taxis with Victorian courtesy, hoping for a quick tip. I had just shown them the basics of documentary filmmaking. We walked along the streets where they worked, interviewing the friends they had made over the years: the chief of the taxi driver's union, the man who "guarded cars" in exchange for alms, the local baker where they got a free pastry in the morning, the upper class drug dealer who gave them a bit of work from time to time.

Jeffer and Sebastián had no truck with common pieties: they were proud that they had survived ten years on these streets, dodging cops and death squads. Another filmmaker might have made a story to inspire compassion, but the two teenagers wanted to tell of their victories, not their suffering. "If there are other street kids who see this in Mexico or Colombia," Sebastián told me, "maybe our video can teach them something."

Halfway through the filming, Jeffer and Sebastián changed their tone radically. They were walking along the street, arm in arm with the camera held in front of them. "So what's up now, dude, what are we gonna do?" asked Jeffer.

"Yo, we're going to the park to show how we play tennis with the rackets we made," responded Sebastián. Then, suddenly, his face fell, his voice dropped an octave, and he addressed an imaginary audience. "But on the way, we're going to see some people who are really poor, and we'll show you what it means to live on the street."

For fear of shaming the homeless family they wanted to film, Sebastián took the camera to a berm high above the road. Only the silhouettes of a father and his children showed in the dim light under the bridge where they lived. "These people have been living more than a year here, and it is just injustice. The president gives money to other people, not to the people who need it, and that doesn't help the country."

"Let's see if the new president, when he comes to power, does half of what he says he'll do for poor people," Jeffer interrupted from behind the camera.

"If not, it's going to be a civil war in the country," Sebastián continued, "like during the dictatorship, when the green fascists [the army] turned against the people."

Sebastián turned the camera to Pablo, the street educator who had walked with us all day long. "But tell me," asked Pablo, "what's the difference between these people and how you were living in Punta Carretas?"

"Nothing," Jeffer responded without even a pause.

Jeffer and Sebastián would never have become part of a social movement for their own good. In spite of all that they had suffered, in their own minds they were quite all right, even proud of their strength and courage. They were redeemed – which is to say, brought into a community that struggles for justice – not by their own suffering, but by that of a family they barely knew. They saw Christ crucified under that bridge, and they would no longer accept such injustice. Symbolizing this, the documentary that they made ends at a protest for children's rights, where hundreds of homeless kids wave signs like "Please, don't let the cops put me in jail" while others jump rope or sing, making us wonder why any government would want to put children in prison.

It might seem that I have abused the word "redeem", claiming that becoming part of a community that struggles for justice and kindness is the essence of redemption. But to understand the theology of redemption, we have to return to the Greek and Hebrew texts of the Bible, where "redeem" doesn't mean anything like what it has come to mean in contemporary Christianity. The Hebrew word "*Ga'al*" (the root of words translated as "redemption") emerged from the concept of ransom, the price that one would have to pay to free a slave or prisoner from his or her chains. The Exodus story rid the word of its economic connotations: "Say therefore to the Israelites, 'I am the Lord and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.'" (Ex 6:6)

In Hebrew, "to redeem" is a very concrete, common word. It means "to set free".

Does the execution of Christ really set us free from our "sins", though? Again, we're betrayed by the way we've come to use "sin" in English. In Hebrew, the root "*Hattat*" (most often translated as "sin") just means absence or lack: for the Levitical tradition, sin is the lack of fullness of the Law, while for the prophetic tradition, it is the lack of justice, kindness, and humility. In Greek, *hamartia* (translated as "sin" in English Bibles) means "to miss the mark", like in archery, or simply "to lack". The examples of the kids in Montevideo and Bogotá make it clear that the crucifixion of Christ can in fact redeem one from sins: it can free people from the prison of their lack (lack of kindness, of friends, of justice) by bringing them into a community that struggles to overcome injustice and sin.

In this way, Christian theology brings an essential perspective to bear on

contemporary social movements, something that they have lost since the days of Martin Luther King. People don't come to these movements out of their self interest. We come to struggle for justice and kindness when we see the suffering of our friend, when blood calls up to us from the ground, when we feel the cry of a child living on the street.

Thinking theologically, we can transform social movement so that they no longer depend on the false wisdom of selfishness, but on redemption. Social movements are fundamentally *for the other*. In the process of setting the other free from his suffering and oppression, we redeem ourselves from sin. As Paul insists, we are redeemed by Christ crucified.