Eid al-Adha – the Feast of Sacrifice

The Feast of Sacrifice is part of the pilgrimage to Mecca and it is the last of the Five Pillars. People go on pilgrimage to Mecca because by so doing their sins are forgiven. On their return they can continue their lives with a clean spiritual slate.

At first the believer walks around the Ka'aba seven times while reciting a special prayer of submission to God. There are also other rituals to be observed – e.g. drinking water from the well of Zem Zem. On the fourth day of the pilgrimage the believer goes on to Mina where the Qur'an is recited and prayers are said. On the ninth day he/she goes to Mount Arafat – the mountain of mercy. The commitments for this day are dictated in the Qur'an. All the rest of the activities of the pilgrimage come from Sunni or Shi'a tradition. Once he/she has fulfilled the obligations of this day, the believer is called a Hadji. He/she then returns to Mecca to walk around the Ka'aba seven times. Next he/she returns to Mina to celebrate the Feast of Sacrifice and this signals the end of the pilgrimage.

The Qur'an speaks of Abraham about to sacrifice his son without mentioning the son's name. (Q.37:99-113) Sura Assaaffaat – 'those who stand together') There is a tradition that Abraham wanted to sacrifice his son but the angels told him to take a ram as a sacrifice instead and declared the day a day of festivity for his children and their offspring. So throughout the world every Muslim family sacrifices a ram on the day of the feast.

The ram (or a male goat) is killed early in the morning in the way proscribed in the Hadith and then the meat is cooked or kept. Usually the TV is on and the family watches the pilgrimage in Mecca. Reports of this are broadcast throughout the day. The killing of the animal is carried out in a ritual way. The head is pointed towards Mecca and the carotid and jugular blood vessels in the upper part of the neck are cut. Then the animal is hung upside down to allow the heart to pump out the blood. The ram should be without defect, adult and male. It should not be drugged or stunned before it is killed.

It is a day of great activity. The meat is cut off, the fleece is washed and covered with salt and left to dry. Spicy sausages and dried meat (qdid) are made and hung along the walls to dry. The bones of the animal are not broken on that day. Traditions differ from country to country. In the Arab World it is common for the right shoulder and the right front leg to be smoked and stored away for the New Year feast when the family eat it all. It is said that the head of the house's fortune for the coming year is written on the bones with invisible letters. If the shoulder and leg bones are broken by accident before the New Year feast then bad luck is predicted for the family.

The feast is a true 'family happening'. In the same way as Eid el-Fitr at the end of Ramadan, this feast emphasises the unity of the family in Islam. There is no religious ritual in the world as huge as the pilgrimage to Mecca. Now with TV all Muslims are watching the events in Mecca. All families kill a ram and Muslims eating this feast together feel an enormous alliance. Everyone is hoping that in some way they will obtain pardon for past sins by the sacrifice done.

The Lamb/Ram in the Bible

It is easy to see that the lamb/sheep/ram has a central place in successive Bible stories. We can see this from Genesis 4:4 to Revelation 21:22 and 22:1-3. The culmination comes in John the Baptist's statement, ***"Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world"*** (Jn. 1:29, 36). Here the lamb represents the Lord Jesus. Whenever we read of lambs/rams in the Bible we see something of the character of the Lord Jesus.

- The Lamb leads his flock and is the Shepherd (Rev. 7:17)
- The Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (Jn. 10:11)

- As the Lamb He sacrifices Himself for them

"In Him we have redemption through His blood – the forgiveness of our sins …." (Eph. 1:7).

Many lambs were killed both in the Tabernacle and in the Temple, but their blood could never wash away sins. Those sacrifices only pointed in faith to the blood of the Lord Jesus (Heb. 9:14, 26; 10:1, 2 and Rom. 3:21-25).

We remember regularly the great sacrifice of the Lord Jesus that is the only grounds for the forgiveness of our sins. Since we have already received pardon for our sins by the death of the Lord Jesus, there is no more need to sacrifice lambs/rams (Heb. 10:11-13).

Five possible passages to share with your friends over Eid al-Adha

1. The Sacrifice of Isaac – Gen. 22:1-19 and Heb. 11:17-19
2. The Institution of the Passover and its parallels with Eid al-Adha – Ex. 12:1-14
3. The Day of Atonement – Lev. 16
4. The concept of Redemption – Ex. 13:1-16 and Is. 52:13-53:13
5. The Lord's Supper – Mt. 26:17-29 and Jn. 6:48-59

1. The Sacrifice of Isaac.

In the second millennium BC and into the first millennium people in the Fertile Crescent practised child sacrifice. This only ended completely with the implementation of Roman rule. The Romans hated the sacrifice of children! So in Abraham's day, in his cultural context, God's command to offer up his son was possible. What made the command difficult was that through this son, given to him miraculously in his old age, God was going to make him a progenitor of many nations (Gen. 15:3-6). He apparently rationalised the problem by believing God was capable of raising his son from the dead (Heb. 11:18). This is why Abraham said to the two servants, "they" – i.e. Abraham and his son – would return. This happened when God sacrificed His Son the Lord Jesus.

Isaac carried the wood on which he was to be sacrificed just as Jesus carried His own cross (Jn. 19:17). While climbing the mountain, Isaac asked a logical question, ***"Where is the lamb to be sacrificed?"*** (Gen. 22:7). Abraham made that very great prophetic statement, ***"God Himself will provide a lamb for sacrifice"*** (Gen. 22:8).

People around Abraham sacrificed their children in order to appease their gods. Abraham knew that the sacrifice of his son would never be sufficient to appease God's wrath over sin and that God had a solution to this predicament. Abraham was justified by his faith in God's solution (Rom. 4:2-3). We too are justified before God when we believe in the sacrifice of God's Son for us (Rom. 4:24-25; Gal. 3:6-9). The lamb isn't meant for people, but **for God**.

From Abraham's day until John the Baptist, the question was, 'Where is the Lamb of God?' until, of course, John the Baptist said, ***"Behold the Lamb of God"***. But as a foretaste of that God provided a ram for Abraham as a substitute for his son and the ram died in his place.

2. The Passover and its parallels

God was going to judge all the people of Egypt and their gods by killing all firstborn people and animals. But God was prepared to save every family who killed a lamb. The conditions were:

- The lamb should die in a proscribed way
- One lamb per family – as in the Eid
- It must be healthy and without defects – typifying the Lord Jesus (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 1:19) – as in the Eid

- It should be male (Acts 2:22) – as in the Eid
- It must be adult – at least one year old in the prime of life – as was Jesus (Lk. 3:23) also true of the Eid

On the 10th day of the month they had to choose the lamb and keep it until the 14th day in their house/yard. So the family became attached to it by looking after it – the same as in Eid. In Israel the sheep was killed between the 9th hour and the 12th hour. (Jesus died at the 9th hour – Lk. 23:44-46) In the Eid the sheep is killed in the morning.

The blood of the lamb was to be caught and put on the doorposts and above the door. When the Lord saw the blood He passed over. (Heb. 9:22) In some parts of the Muslim World a hand is dipped in the blood and an imprint made on the door or on the wall above and beside the door in order to keep jinn and other evil spirits out.

In the Passover the meat had to be prepared and eaten that same night (Ex. 12:8-10). It was to be roasted on a fire and it should not be cut up – i.e. the bones were not broken. This is reminiscent of the Lord Jesus as He went through the fire of the wrath of God. In the Eid the meat is also roasted and eaten, although the 'qdid' may last the year.

The Passover is a great story to tell to explain the sacrifice of Jesus. The only drawback, in the Arab World at least, is that freeing the Jews from Egypt and the invasion of Palestine (~ 3350 years ago) quickly gets into the Palestinian Issue today – a considerable side track!

3. The Day of Atonement

As Christians we don't celebrate this day except indirectly on Good Friday, but Jews take it very seriously still. There are several parallels between the pilgrimage to Mecca and the Day of Atonement. (Lev. 16)

Aaron had to purify himself before he was allowed to exercise this rite. He had to do this for himself and his family. (Lev. 16:3-6) He had to make one sacrifice for himself and **another** for the whole people. This was an atonement for himself and for the whole people. A goat was taken and all the sins of the people were symbolically placed on the head of the animal (Lev. 16:21). This goat was then sent into the desert to die. So the sins of the people were **forgiven** and **taken away**.

When a Muslim goes to Mecca he also purifies himself and receives complete atonement for all his sins until that point in his life. On the day he leaves Mecca God will start a new record of his/her sins. It is a great thing if you die during the pilgrimage for then you go straight to heaven. In killing a sheep (the more perfect/expensive, the better) there is some atonement for sin. It is not complete, but any sacrifice counts. Before the sheep gets killed, the whole family purifies themselves (a shower/bath etc.).

The person killing the sheep especially purifies himself. He goes to the mosque; does the required washings and is cleansed by prayer. Muslims are not usually aware that the sheep is some kind of sin offering, but often the idea is there in the background and so it is worth asking about.

4. Redemption

According to Exodus, everything that comes first from the womb must be dedicated to God. This was for all mammals including man. Firstborn males (man and animals) were to be sacrificed to God. Unclean animals were to be killed. A donkey typifies all unclean animals (Num. 18:15). Clean animals were to be ritually sacrificed on the altar in the Tabernacle area or in the Temple.

Unclean animals **could** be redeemed. A male son **must be** redeemed. The Hebrew word is *'padah'* translated as 'to redeem', 'to ransom', 'to save' or 'to be set free'. In Exodus 13 redeeming is done by taking a lamb as **a substitute** for the animal or son to be killed. A clean

lamb is sacrificed instead of an unclean animal. By the criteria used for 'clean', man is 'unclean' (Rom. 3:10-19). So the 'unclean' should either be killed or substituted by a clean lamb.

Jesus, the Lamb of God, was sacrificed in our place as our substitute. He was 'clean' for He was sinless (Is. 53:5-7). The moment we believe in the Lord Jesus as our substitute we are "born again" from above. Now we are clean – i.e. a second birth – and blameless before God (Heb. 10:14; Jn. 1:12-13). Jesus is our substitute Lamb:

- He was mute – Is. 53:7; Mt. 27:12
- He was ritually clean – Lev. 11:3; 1 Pet. 2:22, 1:19
- He was conscious as He died – Mt. 27:34

All are true of the Al-Adha sacrifice.

The Lord Jesus is our Redeemer. We have no need of any other. So Christians don't sacrifice animals any more (Heb. 9:22-28; 10:18). We deserve death because of our sins, but we have been redeemed!

5. The Last/Lord's Supper

The Lord Jesus instituted this. As the Passover looked forward to the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus so the Last Supper looked back to this perfect sacrifice before God. The Lord Jesus took the bread as a symbol of His body that would be sacrificed and the wine as a symbol of His blood to be shed. The Lord Jesus commands us to remember His sacrifice by having this 'Feast' regularly as a family of believers. The most profound way we can incorporate something into our lives is to eat and digest it. Symbolically, by eating the bread and drinking the wine we are inviting Jesus into all the deepest corners of our existence – see Jn. 6.

By this purification and renewing of our entire being, we are allowed to enter boldly into God's presence to meet Him personally in spirit (Heb 10:19-22). In the past, this 'supper' was taken as part of a large 'family' meal - the 'family' being all the local believers in the Lord Jesus. It is still celebrated with great rejoicing. (Ex. 12:14 and Acts 2:46)

Should we take part in Eid al-Adha?

Most of our colleagues do! But some don't! It is perhaps true that the average urbanised Muslim no longer attaches a spiritual value to the rituals observed and sees it rather as a cultural tradition – like Good Friday/Easter.

What is tradition? One definition is that tradition is the transference of a spiritual heritage and cultural norms/worldview from person to person, and from generation to generation. It may be aural or written or in image through ceremonies and re-enactments. Tradition ensures continuity of culture.

God uses tradition – see Ex. 12; Deut. 6; Lk. 22; Josh. 4:6-8; 1 Cor.11:24ff. But as believers in the Lord Jesus, we need to challenge all traditions. Even Christian ones could become mere dead ritual. But they may be full of God's Spirit – good, living and full of meaning. What of Eid al-Adha? The source of the tradition is clearly Abraham – God's command to sacrifice Isaac and God providing a substitute. (Gen. 22) This source is developed in the Old and New Testaments to point clearly to the Lord Jesus. But in the history of Islam it has developed otherwise. Eid al-Adha is celebrated during the pilgrimage. The Ka'aba – the focus of the pilgrimage – is full of pre-Islamic rituals.

In Peter Wagner's book, **Breaking Strongholds**, Cindy Jacobs writes:

"The sins of a nation can produce national (spiritual) strongholds. These affect many aspects of the culture of the people who live in the nation. These sins can also give the "powers" 'legal' rights to demonise their culture."

So the argument goes that spiritual darkness increasingly comes to a nation and this brings the nation into bondage. Perhaps this bondage is transferred through tradition – aural, written and during religious festivals, ceremonies and pilgrimages. So it is "tradition" that gives the demonic powers their ability to control.

So God uses "tradition" for salvation! Satan uses "tradition" to keep people in deep bondage! So we need to do some careful 'contextualisation'. Here are some thoughts:

1. According to 1 Cor. 8:6 eating al-Adha meat will do us no harm because to us there is only one God. So most of us eat with a neighbour family or the neighbour family presents the meat to us as a gift.
2. In some parts of the Muslim World the sacrificed meat is also offered to a 'departed saint' (sidi) in the hope that the prayer for recovery from sickness or good luck for the future will be honoured – i.e. the sacrifice will enhance the chance of success. Some of us – i.e. our colleagues – don't eat this meat when they know it has been sacrificed to a sidi and they explain why – because it is a form of idolatry. This may also happen at similar feasts – circumcision, engagement or wedding feasts where meat might be offered to a sidi.

According to Paul, in 1 Cor. 8, we are allowed to eat Eid al-Adha meat, but there is one precondition: the reason to eat must not be knowledge (whether offered to a sidi or not), but **love**! Our relationship to God and our neighbours has priority over knowledge that sacrificial meat may do us harm.

But it is worth trying to find out what our neighbours think about us participating in their sacrificial feast. Is it a good feast of a superior religion? This is an issue with Believers from a Muslim Background. I think it is helpful to explain as best as you can that you really appreciate them being good neighbours and that you enjoy eating their meat for the reason of friendship – i.e. love and because it reminds you of the Bible stories of Abraham – the Exodus, Redemption, the Day of Atonement and the Lord's Supper – in fact ***"The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"*** and that really blesses you!

If for some reason you don't want to eat the meat your neighbour gives to you, you can give it away to the poor, but usually your generous giver will ask if you enjoyed the meal. What are you going to say? The fact is that you were given the meat as a token that you 'belong' in the neighbourhood! You should answer in as friendly a way as possible that you really appreciate the gift of meat and the symbol of what it means, but explain that you actually gave it away to the poor.

May the Holy Spirit help us to be able to explain the true meaning of the Feast of Sacrifice to our Muslim friends at this special time.