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Comment: has the Cof E leadership lost the plot?

I noted with great interest the following regarding weddings and marriage and found myself laughing with disbelief at the blatant double standards being applied by the CofE. It matters because it affects us all.

The report I received stated the following:-

The Church of England has warned the Government that plans to “commercialise” weddings by loosening the rules on where the ceremonies may take place risk undermining the dignity of marriage.

The Bishop of Durham, the Rt Rev Paul Butler, told the Church’s General Synod ([July Synod 2023](#) – in response to question 140) last week that Law Commission proposals to ‘modernise’ weddings would only really benefit businesses looking to conduct novelty services for profit.

He said Church of England officials have already met with the Ministry of Justice, which is considering the proposals, to make their opposition clear.

The Law Commission’s recommendations, published last year, propose that weddings in England and Wales should be regulated according to who conducts the service rather than where they take place.

This could mean weddings taking place anywhere, no matter how unbefitting the occasion. Locations of ‘unofficial ceremonies’ in Britain have ranged from S&M dungeons to underwater, and there’s a risk that the reforms could make such weddings possible.

It would also allow couples to have a religious ceremony not in a place of worship, while civil ceremonies would be allowed to include religious elements for the first time.

The bishop said the Church strongly objects to this move to “commercialise weddings”, as it is “likely to undermine the Christian understanding of marriage”.

The “fundamental problem”, he explained, is that the Law Commission “explicitly refuse to engage with the meaning of marriage”. As a consequence, its report was “seriously deficient, suggesting, for example, that a wedding must be ‘dignified’ without any notion of what that would mean or how it could be enforced”.

All this from a church that has demonstrated an almost complete lack of understanding of the basis of Christian marriage and a refusal to apply scriptural norms to the very basics of biblically based marriage. You only have to look at its stance on recognition of same sex marriage and gender issues to see they are in error.

It's not even as if these reforms are 'new' – they have worked beautifully in Scotland for many years now, and there hasn't been a word of criticism by either the CofE or the Church of Scotland.

Until now that is. I suspect this apparent outburst was more about the potential loss of revenue the law commission reforms will cause the CofE, although why, with the CofE having an estimated ten billion in reserve, it should cause them concern I do not know.

Strange that when money is involved the CofE can become unbelievably sanctimonious and self-righteous, especially when they are increasing parish quotas, reducing salaried clergy and putting those in post under heavier burdens of taking on other or extra parishes. They are spreading the jam so thin it is almost tasteless.

One must question where their belief that only the CofE can excel at doing what they say they only can do, and that all other alternative service providers will automatically produce something that is both lacking and lesser no matter how well trained or intentioned.

The truth is the CofE is a small part of the world-wide Christian church and it over-rates its importance, especially when they themselves are so blatantly turning away from Holy Scripture in the way that they are doing.

As for the reference to 'dignified' when it comes to wedding services, I wonder if they really mean dull, boring and totally under their direction rather than making the service a genuine and joyful one that the couple feel they own and speaks for them.

What the CofE offers instead is 'take it or leave it, this is what it is and that is an end of it' rather than have anything that offers real choices for the bride and groom and best reflects their hopes and aspirations in marriage.

Not exactly inspiring and perhaps one of the reasons why marriage in church is fast falling out of favour with the masses, especially when the CofE can't decide what 'marriage' is now that they have turned their backs on the traditional scriptural definition and understanding of what marriage is.

Re Dr Ian Paul sums this up nicely: "there's no wriggle room" when it comes to upholding the C of E's teaching on marriage."

The essence of the problem, he agrees, is that the theological foundations are being treated as something secondary to the push by an increasingly non-biblically and Christian based society for change, which directly affects trust, credibility and confidence in the Bishops.

"How can Bishops say they want to see change in doctrine when they took public vows to uphold the doctrine of the church?" he asks.

So as an organisation, who does the CofE serve?

Does it serve its members or does it serve its own needs?

Does it even serve God?

It isn't the latter as the CofE has totally ignored scripture regarding same sex marriage and same sex relationships that involve sexual activity. In essence this is blatant disobedience and makes the assumption that God doesn't know what He is doing.

And if the CofE isn't serving God then it isn't serving its members, something that every faithful member of the CofE has a basic right of expectation to and a desire for in their walk of faith with God and their fellow Christian.

It seems that it is not the sheep that have the problem, but the shepherds, and if the shepherds cannot be trusted then what hope is there for the sheep?

The views of the bishops seem to be becoming increasingly out of touch with the faith they represent and I know that there are concerns being voiced by the laity.

As I tidied up after one service, I was approached by a more elderly pair of friends dropping by to visit the church. One was a Methodist and the other CofE.

Both were quick to engage me in conversation, particularly about their bishops'/clergy's willingness to teach/allow that which was not scriptural regarding Christian marriage.

Their bewilderment was to be noted. What were my thoughts they asked?

I was quick to set their minds at rest that this was not something I could personally support or would be involved in.

And then later, at a wedding rehearsal I was questioned by the young bride and groom regarding my willingness to condone or take part in same sex weddings. They were relieved to know I would not take part in such an unscriptural act.

Their reasoning, it would have taken away from the sanctity and integrity of their own marriage and devalued their own hopes and aspirations as a heterosexual couples.

An important point when considering the views of heterosexual couples, and they form the bulk of all couples getting married. What thoughts, feelings and understandings of marriage of theirs are taken into consideration in this rush to disobey God for the sake of a small and largely un-Christian but vocally demanding minority?

It's not as if such minorities would come to support the church if the boot was on the other foot either.

And it is not just the CofE who have fallen foul of this trend to accept, condone and celebrate same sex marriage. The Methodist church is equally to blame along with some parts of the Quaker and more evangelical churches.

With such a deliberate turning away from Holy Scripture, one has even to question whether these organisations can be considered basically 'Christian' in nature and intent.

Surely an unwavering belief and trust in the words of Holy Scripture would be a founding principle of any faith?

I admit I am angry towards the main stream church leaderships for falling for this willingness to accept social teaching over the Word of God.

So do these churches actually represent the feelings and spiritual sensibilities of their members?

Currently, I doubt it. But do my views matter? No, but the views of others do.

It is obvious that these churches no longer have the total confidence of their members from the conversations I have been having with many visitors to the church buildings I have been serving at.

Take the issue of 'Our Father', the prayer Jesus taught his disciples and followers when asked 'teach us to pray'. That seems to be simple enough to understand and follow, but trust the CofE to make it more difficult in its somewhat obvious application.

During a meeting of the General Synod, Archbishop of York Stephen Cottrell suggested that the words of the "Our Father," Christianity's most prominent prayer, may be "problematic". ([Link to original article](#))

The Synod's commentary on the Lord's Prayer came months after the Church of England opened a "[project on gendered language](#)" used in prayer and in Scripture. The announcement suggested that church authority consider whether to do away with gendered "He," "Him" pronouns referring to God.

(The Archbishop's comment caused sufficient backlash amongst the more conservative clergy and members of the CofE for him to make a partial retraction, but the damage was done, much to the delight of the feminist wing of the CofE who accused the Archbishop of not going far enough.)

How are the bums on the pew seats supposed to react to this kind of statement whilst the bible and 2000 years of Christian tradition make the issue quite clear?

Or are church leaders saying God has lost the plot and His Word can no longer be trusted?

It is very obvious that these genuine people of faith are beginning to feel largely abandoned by their clergy, their leaders, their churches, and their voices unheard, their needs unmet.

A few example from the last two weeks.

I was recently asked if I would do a pastoral visit to an elderly lady and her daughter because they had been abandoned by their own church, and they certainly did not want a woman priest to attend to their needs.

For some, a priest should be male, and only male, and not by intellectual or emotional choice but by physically and genetically determinate birth.

And yes, they have as much right to that view as those who believe in the joint or universal priesthood of women.

Since that moment we have established a regular home communion pattern.

I recently counselled a mixed denomination couple who had experienced rejection from their own churches because their marriage was outside of their own particular denomination. One participant was even illegally refused the reading of their bans in their own church.

The actions of one of the participant churches (CofE) were particularly un-Christian and bordered on punitive and vindictive.

I recently took confession from an elderly lady who had been lost in the pastoral system and who facing death in the oncoming future had no one to turn to.

I recently had to deal with the questioning of the validity of an ecumenical baptismal certificate because the baptism was not 'one of their own' even though the agreed ecumenical formula of words was used.

I recently had occasion to witness a very spiritual and gifted Christian friend all but destroyed by his church such was its jealousy, all because his ministry was clearly of God and it didn't sit well with the incumbent clergy.

It is the whole church who lost out and is denied for the sake of this particular petty and unchristian act.

This from a church that wants to re-write the bible to fit in with society's views.

This is not the kind of church I want to belong to or be associated with, where division and personal politics subsume and impoverish human compassion and genuine Christian understanding and service.

These man-made organisations are hiding behind a Christian façade which in reality indulge in personal power politics and control for no benefit of others other than their own.

These are not 'Christian' or God centred – they are simply what they are, the playgrounds of selfishness, envy, jealousy, deceit and evil.

The medieval stonemasons had it correct when they portrayed the faces of devils and the like inside churches, to remind those of us who inhabit the pews that evil is everywhere, even in church if we are not watchful.

In my prayers I can vouch for how pervasive evil is.

The words of the Lord's Prayer hold the greatest clarity of truth.

'Lead us not into temptation,

Deliver us from (all) evil.'

This translated as:

'Help us recognise the promises of temptation are never fulfilled and are little more than a deception, a promise of things that in reality fail to live up to expectation or deliver, and always leave us feeling cheated or misled.'

And,

‘Help protect us from and recognise the deceits of all evil without being ensnared by them.’

Our saving relationship is not with the church but lies solely with God.

The church cannot save us, only God can do that.

The church at best can be a means of fellowship, support and encouragement, but it should always point us towards God rather than to itself.

Even Jesus, when asked ‘teach us to pray Lord,’ directed people to God the Father, not to Himself. (Archbishop of York, please note.)

The church is a human organisation and is and will always be subsequently flawed.

It may think it speaks for God or on God’s behalf, but God it is not and it is no replacement for God.

On a last note, there is a sting in the tail when the proposed changes made by the Law Commission become law in August, 2024, if accepted.

*‘It would also allow couples to have a religious ceremony not in a place of worship, **while civil ceremonies would be allowed to include religious elements for the first time.**’*

In other words, the role of the priest is to be further undermined to the point it is no longer required. Yet still another attack on the church which looks as if it will slip past un-noticed and unchallenged.

However, and I say this with a heavy heart, it is deserved. It’s a basic spiritual principle that states clearly that which is given shall be taken away if misused, abused or not used.

Matthew 21, v 43,

Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.

and also Matthew 25, 14-28.

The writing is on the wall my friends and there is still much to do

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I recently had a few questions regarding Atonement Theory so have pulled together two eminently readable articles sourced from my internet archives.

My apologies if these are copyright – they have been printed in good faith and are purely for educational purposes.

Don't get hung up on these words – they are purely theories or possible explanations/interpretations and not 'gospel'.

There are better and more important things to spend time on, as can be read in the final words of the second article.

Seven Theories of the Atonement Summarized

The Moral Influence Theory

One of the earliest theories for the atonement is the Moral Influence theory, which simply taught that Jesus Christ came and died in order to bring about a positive change to humanity.

This moral change comes through the teachings of Jesus alongside His example and actions.

The most notable name here is that of Augustine from the 4th century, whose influence has almost single-handedly had the greatest impact upon Western Christianity. He affirmed the Moral Influence theory as the main theory of the Atonement (alongside the Ransom theory as well).

Within this theory the death of Christ is understood as a catalyst to reform society, inspiring men and women to follow His example and live good moral lives of love. In this theory, the Holy Spirit comes to help Christians produce this moral change. Logically, in this theory, the Eschatological development too becomes about morality, where it is taught that after death the human race will be judged by their conduct in life.

This in turn creates a strong emphasis on free will as the human response to follow Jesus' example. Although Augustine himself differs here in that he did not teach free will, but instead that human beings are incapable of changing themselves, and require God to radically alter their lives sovereignly through the Holy Spirit.

This theory focuses on not just the death of Jesus Christ, but on His entire life. This sees the saving work of Jesus not only in the event of the crucifixion, but also in all the words He has spoken, and the example He has set. In this theory, the cross is merely a ramification of the moral life of Jesus. He is crucified as a martyr due to the radical nature of His moral example. In this way, the Moral Influence theory emphasizes Jesus Christ as our teacher, our example, our founder and leader, and ultimately, as a result, our first martyr.

The Ransom Theory

The Ransom Theory of the Atonement is one of the first major theories for the Atonement. It is often held alongside the Moral Influence Theory, and usually deals more with the actual death of Jesus Christ, what it actually means and the effect it has upon humanity.

This theory finds its roots in the Early Church, particularly in Origen from the 3rd century. This theory essentially teaches that Jesus Christ died as a ransom sacrifice, paid either to Satan (the most dominant view) or to God the Father. Jesus' death then acts as a payment to satisfy the debt on the souls of the human race, the same debt we inherited from Adam's original sin.

The Ransom view could be summarized like this:

"Essentially, this theory claimed that Adam and Eve sold humanity over to the devil at the time of the Fall' hence, justice required that God pay the Devil a ransom, for the Devil did not realize that Christ could not be held in the bonds of death. Once the Devil accepted Christ's death as a ransom, this theory concluded, justice was satisfied and God was able to free us from Satan's grip."

Redemption in this theory means to buy back, and purchase the human race from the clutches of the Devil.

The main controversy here with this theory is the act of paying off the Devil.

Some have written that this is not a fair statement to say that all Ransom Theorists believe that the Devil is paid, but rather in this act of Ransom Christ frees humanity from the bondage of sin and death. In this way, Ransom relates the *Christus Victor* theory. But it's worth differentiating here because in one way these views are similar, but in another way, they are drastically different.

Christus Victor

Classically, the Christus Victor theory of Atonement is widely considered to be the dominant theory for most of the historical Christian Church. In this theory, Jesus Christ dies in order to defeat the powers of evil (such as sin, death, and the devil) in order to free mankind from their bondage.

This is related to the Ransom view with the difference being that there is no payment to the devil or to God. Within the *Christus Victor* framework, the cross did not pay off anyone but defeated evil thereby setting the human race free.

Gustaf Aulen argued that this theory of the Atonement is the most consistently held theory for church history, especially in the early church up until the 12th century before Anselm's satisfaction theory came along.

He writes that "the work of Christ is first and foremost a victory over the powers which hold mankind in bondage: sin, death, and the devil."

He calls this theory the "classic" theory of the Atonement.

While some will say that *Christus Victor* is compatible with other theories of the Atonement, others argue that it is not, though I have found that most theologians believe that *Christus Victor* is true, even if it is not for them the primary theory of Christ's death.

The Satisfaction Theory (Anselm)

In the 12th century, Anselm of Canterbury proposed a satisfaction theory for the Atonement. In this theory, Jesus Christ's death is understood as a death to satisfy the justice of God. Satisfaction here means restitution, the mending of what was broken, and the paying back of a debt. In this theory, Anselm emphasizes the justice of God and claims that sin is an injustice that must be balanced. Anselm's satisfaction theory says essentially that Jesus Christ died in order to pay back the injustice of human sin and to satisfy the justice of God.

This theory was developed in reaction to the historical dominance of the Ransom theory, that God paid the devil with Christ's death. Anselm saw that this theory was logically flawed, because what does God owe satan?

Therefore, in contrast with the Ransom theory, Anselm taught that it is humanity who owes a debt to God, not God to satan.

Our debt, in this theory, is that of injustice. Our injustices have stolen from the justice of God and therefore must be paid back. Satisfaction theory then postulates that Jesus Christ pays pack God in His death on the cross to God.

This is the first Atonement theory to bring up the notion that God is acted upon by the Atonement (i.e. that Jesus satisfies God).

The Penal Substitutionary Theory

Penal Substitutionary Atonement is a development of the Reformation.

The Reformers, Specifically Calvin and Luther, took Anselm's Satisfaction theory and modified it slightly. They added a more legal (or forensic) framework into this notion of the cross as satisfaction.

The result is that within Penal Substitution, Jesus Christ dies to satisfy God's wrath against human sin. Jesus is punished (penal) in the place of sinners (substitution) in order to satisfy the justice of God and the legal demand of God to punish sin. In the light of Jesus' death, God can now forgive the sinner because Jesus Christ has been punished in the place of the sinner, in this way meeting the retributive requirements of God's justice.

This legal balancing of the ledgers is at the heart of this theory, which claims that Jesus died for legal satisfaction. It's also worth mentioning that in this theory the notion of imputed righteousness is postulated.

This theory of the Atonement contrasts with Anselm's Satisfaction Theory in that God is not satisfied with a debt of justice being paid by Jesus, but that God is satisfied with punishing Jesus in the place of mankind.

The notion that the cross acts upon God, conditioning Him to forgiveness, originates from Anslems theory, but here in Penal Substitution the means are different.

This theory of the Atonement is perhaps the most dominant today, especially among the Reformed, and the evangelical.

The Governmental Theory

The Governmental Theory of the Atonement is a slight variation upon the Penal Substitutionary theory, which is notably held in Methodism.

The main difference here is the extent to which Christ suffered. In the Governmental Theory, Jesus Christ suffers the punishment of our sin and propitiates God's wrath. In this way, it is similar to Penal Substitution.

However, in the Governmental Theory, Jesus Christ does not take the exact punishment we deserve, He takes a punishment.

Jesus dies on the cross therefore to demonstrate the displeasure of God towards sin. He died to display God's wrath against sin and the high price which must be paid, but not to specifically satisfy that particular wrath.

The Governmental Theory also teaches that Jesus died only for the church, and if you by faith are part of the church, you can take part in God's salvation.

The church then acts as the sort of hiding place from God's punishment.

This view contrasts both the Penal and Satisfaction models but retains the fundamental belief that God cannot forgive if Jesus does not die a propitiating death.

The Scapegoat Theory

The Scapegoat Theory is a modern Atonement theory rooted in the philosophical concept of the Scapegoat. Here the key figures Rene Girard and James Allison.

Within this theory of the Atonement Jesus Christ dies as the Scapegoat of humanity.

This theory moves away from the idea that Jesus died in order to act upon God (as in PSA, Satisfaction, or Governmental), or as payment to the devil (as in Ransom).

Scapegoating therefore is considered to be a form of non-violent atonement, in that Jesus is not a sacrifice but a *victim*.

There are many Philosophical concepts that come up within this model, but in a general sense, we can say that Jesus Christ as the Scapegoat means the following.

- 1) Jesus is killed by a violent crowd.
- 2) The violent crowd kills Him believing that He is guilty.
- 3) Jesus is proven innocent, as the true Son of God.
- 4) The crowd is therefore deemed guilty.

James Allison summarizes the Scapegoating Theory like this, “Christianity is a priestly religion which understands that it is God’s overcoming of our violence by substituting himself for the victim of our typical sacrifices that opens up our being able to enjoy the fullness of creation as if death were not.”

Conclusions

Each theory presented here is dense and complex, but I hope you can learn from the overall focus of each. I personally believe that we need to move beyond some of these theories and progress into a more robust theory of atonement.

But thankfully, at the end of the day, we aren’t saved by theories. We’re saved by Jesus!

How that happens may be fun to discuss and theorized about, but only in the sight of the fact that it’s the *who* that matters far more!

What do you think of all these theories?

And finally, do they really matter?

In the end they are just theories.

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Confronting Atonement Theology:

ERIC FOLKERTH MARCH 25, 2013

The basic idea of Atonement Theology posits that Jesus' death was necessary in some tangible, cosmic way, as a "sacrifice" for the sins of humanity. Further, it suggests that this sacrifice, and this sacrifice alone, is the "salvific" work of Jesus; the moment that Jesus' earthly ministry is complete. (The moment that "salvation" happens...)

In its more radical forms, it suggests that without it, there is no point to Jesus' earthly ministry, or to belief in him (and by extension, belief in God...).

The idea of "blood sacrifice," of course, is deep in the tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The idea that animals should be sacrificed as some kind of "substitution" for human sin goes way, way back.

Skipping to the punch line, I am not a fan of atonement theology.

Frankly, almost all of it.

Here are some reasons why, and some things I believe instead...

God Has Always Been "Anti" Human Sacrifice

One of the things that set the Hebrew people apart from ancient tribes around them is that they and their God rejected human sacrifice.

In fact, the Hebrew Scriptures themselves give us one of the most compelling stories against human sacrifice ever told: the story of Abraham and Isaac.

One of the most chilling and mysterious stories in all of the Bible, God calls Abraham to travel to Mount Moriah and sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. In confusing silence, he and his son walk for three days to the chosen location.

Now, as I noted, this story is chilling and troubling on so many levels. You could spend a lot of time unpacking it, and questioning why in the world God would ask a parent to do this, and why in the world Abraham seems willing.

But, whatever the reasons, the chief "take aways" of this story have always been the following:

-- Ultimately, our God does not believe in human sacrifice of any kind. Human sacrifice is not required.

-- Animal sacrifice, it might be concluded, would still be practiced for eons.

-- But, ultimately, God is not a God who requires parents to sacrificially kill their children.

If It Was Good Enough for Abraham...

If this is so, then how in God's name did we get to a point where God would require a sacrifice of God's own child?!

Given the witness of scripture, it makes absolutely no sense whatsoever. Are we to believe that God is "kinder and gentler" to us than God is to God's own child?

And if Jesus is to be affirmed as the "Son of God" --or from a Trinitarian point of view, a part of God-- then how are we to understand this?

I mean, if Jesus is both God and human --if we really affirm the Orthodox view-- and if we really believe that the atoning sacrifice was somehow cosmically necessary, then isn't the logical conclusion that God wanted not only to kill God's own child, but even more horrifyingly, to kill God's self?!!

Jurgen Moltmann once wrote a book called "The Crucified God," which is a pretty decent defense of Atonement Theology. But assuming the Trinitarian view, isn't it more chillingly, "The Suicidal God?!!"

This clearly makes no sense.

Well-meaning Christians step up to this horror, wince a little, shrug their shoulders, and declare, "Well, it's just one of those 'mysteries' of faith too deep for us to understand."

But, no. No it isn't. In my view, it simply cannot be what God intended. It's not to say that Jesus does not "save," or that Jesus was not God's son.

But it is to say that it's not what God required of Jesus. It's not a cosmically necessary, or required of God (or Jesus) in order to effectively "save" human beings or the world.

So, How Does God Save?

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus himself answered the question in his first public appearance at his hometown. It wasn't a very popular answer that day, but he was pretty clear about it. Here's Jesus' own words about why he came into the world:

"He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.

The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus reads from Isaiah in his hometown synagogue. He basically puts forth a "mission statement" for his ministry. A few minutes later, though, the crowd goes from adoring to angry when he suggests that this mission will be to all people, not just the hometown crowd. They get so angry that they want to kill him!

But, miraculously, he slips away.

Again, like Abraham and Isaac's story, the story is instructive.

From the very beginning, Jesus is clear that his mission is to bring Good News to people. From the very beginning, it is clear this message might well get him killed. Not killed for some "cosmically necessary" reason, but because it was a threat to many other human beings who didn't like it.

"Gave" Means Gave. Period.

The Gospel of John repeats this powerful truth in a verse that everybody who watches sports knows by heart: John 3: 16

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

God gave God's son. Gave to the world. Gave as messenger of this incredible Good News (the same Good News of Luke Chapter 4). Gave to walk among us, "full of grace and truth."

Gave to minister... to heal... to teach... to preach... to "reconcile" the world to God.

But, please note what this verse does not say. It does not say:

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, **to be crucified and die,** so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."*

I obviously added the underlined part. But I added it because a lot of well-meaning Christians also add it. When they say this verse, they are thinking the line I've added in.

I call it "John 3: 16b." Except, it's not there. It's not a part of that verse. But many of us act like it is.

God gave Jesus to live for our sins, not die for them.

God gave Jesus to "reconcile and make new" the covenant between God and Jesus.

So What About All Those Scriptures That Point to a Sacrificial Death?

When someone dies --and especially when someone dies unexpectedly or tragically-- we search for meaning. We search for an indicator that there was a "reason" for their death....that their death will not be in "vain" or simply because of chance, human evil, or meaningless error.

I personally believe that following the events the original Holy Week, Jesus' followers added on verses that seem to indicate Jesus' foreknowledge of his eventual death. I believe they did so in order to make sense of a "scandalous" death that was a "stumbling block" to Jews and Greeks alike.

"How could 'God,' die?" they asked themselves.

"Well, it must have been necessary," they concluded. "It must have been a part of the plan."

It certainly might have felt that way, in 20/20 hindsight.

Was is likely that at some point Jesus got a pretty good idea he might be killed?

Yes, very likely.

Could he have known it was possible, even as he entered Jerusalem for the events of Holy Week?

Given that folks sought to kill him the very first time he opened his mouth, yes quite probably.

But does this mean it was a necessary death, or that it is all that is necessary for salvation?

No.

Now, I know that these last statements of belief on my part will be controversial. Especially to those who hold to a "literal" interpretation of scripture, or for whom Atonement Theology is a "stand or fall" component of our faith.

Some of this is a debate for another time, of course. Some will call it heretical, I am sure.

But if it is, then riddle me this final question:

If Atonement is All that is "Necessary," Then Why Do We Have Gospels?

Have you ever asked yourself that?

If the Holy Week story is all that's "necessary" for "salvation," then why bother with the rest of the story?

Why did anyone ever collect and publish the parables of Jesus?

Why do we have any stories about his healing work?

Why tell stories about his travels and ministry for three years?

Why study the parable of the Prodigal Son, or tell the story of the "Great Commandment?"

Let me tell you, it would sure would make it a lot easier for us preachers to not have to fool with all that stuff!!!

But we do have them. And I believe we have them because they too are important. They are important not just as "prologue" to the "real" story, but as stories about God's salvific acts already in progress through Jesus.

As Marcus Borg notes in the book "The Last Week,"

"...Jesus's passion for the kingdom of God led to what is often called his passion, namely, his suffering and death. But to restrict Jesus' passion to his suffering and death is to ignore the passion that brought him to Jerusalem. To think of Jesus's passion as simply what happened on Good Friday is to separate his death from the passion that animated his life."

Exactly.

Jesus' ministry was important. Jesus' life was important.

All those who encountered Jesus during his three-year ministry had the potential of experiencing a life-altering encounter with God's grace and power. It was not prologue. It was a part of the "already-happening" story of God's working in the world, "saving" the world.

So, If Not Atonement, Then What?

In his essay, "God Does Not Demand Blood," Daniel Bell unpacks this beautifully:

"...Christ's faithfulness even to the point of death on the cross marks not a divine demand for retribution, but a divine refusal to hold our rebellion against us. God offers us life and we reject it. God continues to offer it, in the form of love incarnate, and we crucify him.

Yet even now, God will not lash out against us but instead raises Jesus up and sends him back with the same offer of life.

Christ is God bearing offense, even the offense of the cross, without holding it against us, without giving up on us, without exacting compensation or inflicting retribution, instead continuing to extend the offer of communion.

Christ's work of atonement, including the cross, is nothing less than God refusing our refusal; Christ is God rejecting our rejection and instead continuing to offer us the gift of life and love. Even after we crucified him."

God was able to turn what human beings intended for evil into something Good. God turned that death into the ultimate symbol of God's triumph over human evil.

I personally believe that God and Jesus had something very different in mind for Jesus' earthly ministry. I believe it is wrapped up in the Palm Sunday story. God and Jesus intended that to be a grand entrance of Jesus into the seat of power...bringing that Good News into the very heart of political and religious authority.

But this was a threat to the "Powers That Be."

So, they had Jesus killed.

As John Dominic Crossan says in much of his writings, Jesus was crucified, not stoned. He pushed some sort of limit that made him a threat to Roman political power.

Crucifixion was something only the Romans did.

This could have been the end of the story. But it was not.

God's powerful message of Resurrection is that no matter what evil the world can dish out, God will respond in love.

Again, hear the Bell describe the beauty and the power of God's Good News:

"...God will not lash out against us but instead raises Jesus up and send him back with the same offer of life..."

"Christ's work of atonement, including the cross, is nothing less than God refusing our refusal; Christ is God rejecting our rejection..."

At-One-Ment

Previously during Lent here at Northaven, we used this play on this word, "Atonement" to remind ourselves of this truth: that atonement is about the act of being reconciled to God, not necessarily the act of blood sacrifice.

In his blog, "Ponderings on a Faith Journey," Bob Cornwall notes this:

"The definition of this word in the Westminster Dictionary of Theology (Westminster Press, 1983) begins:

The English word "atonement" originally signified the condition of being "at-one" after two parties had been estranged from one another. Soon a secondary meaning emerged: "atonement" denoted the means, an act or a payment, through which harmony was restored."

That is God's power at work...God's salvific power."

Note that the goal is being "at one" with God. It is only secondarily that the idea of an "act" or "payment" emerges, related to the word.

God seeks our "at-one-ment" with God. That is why Jesus came into the world. It was Jesus' consistent message throughout the Gospels, and from the very beginning of his ministry.

The message of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday do not stand in opposition to this, but in complete and total consistency with all that has come before.

God so loved the world that God sent Jesus into the world with a message of Good News, not so that Jesus would die, but so that all who believed would find life, wholeness, and love.

The events of Holy Week simply mean that God cannot be defeated by human evil.

Nothing, not even death, can stop God from saving the world.

-oOo-

Mark 6.30-34, 53-56

+David (OSJ Wales)

Imagine the day: it's hot, so hot, as hot as it's been for all of us over recent months, and certainly presently in European countries where temperatures it is alleged have soared to the dizzy heights of 49 / 50 degrees Celsius. Hot, dry and exhausting, sapping energy and preventing sleep.

Imagine the disciples: they're excited by their recent mission; they're tired, so tired, because giving yourself in the service of others is tiring, draining and seemingly never ending.

Now, Imagine the people: hot, tired, beleaguered people, fractious children, distracted parents and the smell of poverty and sickness – and excitement because they're excited by this Jesus who is teaching and healing and offering a new way of living.

Everyone needs something – a cure for an illness, healing for a sick child, hope and faith in a dark place of despair, comfort in mourning, forgiveness for sin and peace for a troubled mind. Everyone needs something. We all need something. So much need.

Imagine Jesus: he sees everything and everyone around him; he sees the crowd who look to him to meet their needs.

He sees the disciples. They need to rest and reflect on their experience of being sent by him to do his work of preaching and healing.

For now he can only minister to one group and that today has to be his disciples who need to recharge their batteries before going back to work.

Imagine the boat leaving the shore, the relief of the disciples as they pull away from the noise and smell and pushing and shoving and calling and crying.

They sail into the peace and tranquillity of the sea of Galilee on a hot sunny day. Imagine the landing: the shock, the wanting to go back to sea to get away from these people who need Jesus; these needy people who are prepared to rush along the shore of the lake in stifling heat and burning sun to get near to this man who attracts, fascinates, scares or worries people wherever he goes.

Imagine Jesus who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life for many. He came to give life in all its abundance, to draw people to him that they might become fully human and truly alive to God. He sees sheep, shepherdless sheep who are looking hopefully at him, wanting him to be their shepherd, to take care of them, to feed them, to lead them by still waters, to anoint their heads with oil and heal them, to make them stronger than their enemies and oppressors and to guard them when they sleep.

Jesus sees sheep and in his love and compassion he reaches out to them to teach them many things so that they may be fully human, not sheep any more. Imagine the day, the crowds of people, the disciples. Imagine Jesus. Let's see them in our minds' eye and then look for ourselves among them. We might be one of the many needing healing for ourselves or for someone we love, anxious to get close even if we can only touch his cloak.

We might need him to teach us how to live a better, fuller life because the one we've got is disappointing, unsatisfying, empty and going nowhere. Even on this hottest of days our need is so great that we somehow find the energy to push forward, to walk round the lake and push forward again to reach him. Imagine at last we stand before him and know that he knows our greatest need and wants to meet that need. That meeting, that moment, is sacred between God and us.

We might be among the disciples: tired, drained and worn out in the service of others and following the call of Jesus. He knows what it's like because he too is driven by his calling from God and gives himself all day every day to that calling.

He knows the relentless pressure, the constant demands, the draining of spiritual resources. He knows our need to find refreshment, encouragement and grace to carry on. He encourages us to find that space and to allow ourselves to be renewed and strengthened.

Wherever we stand, we stand in need of grace, forgiveness and healing and in his wisdom and compassion our Lord knows our needs better than we ourselves do and he wants what is best for us, what will bring us to fullness of life – his gift to us. Imagine being with such a Lord on such a day.

✝ Praise be to Thee O Christ

AMEN

PRAYERS

Let us pause for a short silence, and collect our thoughts together.

‘Let us give thanks to God’

Lord Jesus, when we are distressed, in danger or overwhelmed by life be with us to bring reassurance, hope and the faith to trust in your power to save.

Bring us to a calmer place where we can rest and gain strength to continue our journey with you. Amen.

Lord, open our eyes to your presence and our minds to your grace; open our lips to your praises and our hearts to your love; open our lives to your healing and be found among us, we pray.

For The Church of Christ

Lord, you have told us that we would not be seeking for you if we had not already found you. Look down on your Church and grant us your people the grace to desire you with our whole hearts; so that desiring you, we might seek and find you; and so finding you, might love you; and so loving you might turn away from all that separates us from your love. Keep us mindful that we cannot do everything with our own power, and help us to rest trustingly in your everlasting arms, so that we may renew our strength for the journey.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer

For Creation, human society, the Sovereign and those in authority

Lord, you have made us creatures of this earth, hungry, thirsty and needy, and you stand ready to satisfy our longings with your abundant love. Ready to satisfy the hunger of our bodies for food and shelter, health and human touch. Ready to satisfy the hunger of our spirits for fulfilment in loving and giving. Ready to satisfy the hunger of our minds to understand our world, the reasons for its pain and the ways we are connected to each other. Ready to satisfy the hunger of our hearts that all who share this loving earth with us might share our satisfaction. And ready to satisfy the hunger of our hands to help you make it so.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer

The local community

Lord, we pray for both the Marthas and the Marys, whether male or female, in our community. We know you will find room for all of us in this cosmic patchwork you are quilting. Give us grace to play our allotted roles, knowing that each member has value. Lord, find a place for us in your giant jigsaw and weave your wondrous tapestry until the warp and weft of our twisted, tangled threads form an image which

is beautiful in your sight.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer

For Those who suffer

Lord, we remember before you those who need to forget the God they do not believe in, and meet instead the God who believes in them.

We remember those who are waiting and hoping for a word which someone else must say. We remember all those who are in pain or distress, and ask you to comfort those who feel they can go no further. Lord, be with them all in your infinite love and pour into their hearts the gentle balm of your Spirit.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer

The communion of saints

Lord, we commend into your hands those whom we have loved. You gave them breath, and loved them through their lives. Receive them now in your infinite tenderness, and give them peace.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ.

THE BLESSING

May the grace and the peace of Christ give us the eyes of faith to reach out more urgently to those in need around us; and may the Blessing of God the Father, God the Son ✝ and God the Holy Spirit, be with us as we follow Him. Amen

FURTHER ARTICLES AND PRAYERS FOR MEDITATION

What Is Known of the Early Life of the Author of the Epistle of James?

Nothing authoritative. He was probably brought up with Jesus and the other children in the Nazareth home. It is believed that he did not become a follower of Christ until after the resurrection. Christ seems to have appeared specially to him, and as Paul mentions the fact (I Cor. 15:7) we may presume it was generally known, though it is not related in any of the Gospels. James was a strict Jew before becoming a Christian, and was highly esteemed among the Jews for his piety. It looks as though he never quite shook off his Jewish ideas (Gal. 2:12) and his epistle shows that he could not cordially endorse Paul's way of stating the Gospel.

SENSE OF HUMOUR

God loves a happy cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7).

I wish to pay my respects to the dear late Brother Bernard who served as a monk at Belmont Abbey (Hereford). After many visits there by Anne and myself he became one of our close friends. What I say now I mean in a most polite and respectful manner, he was to me and all that met him a real 'Friar Tuck'. We shared many humorous moments discussing that aspect over many of our conversations.

Indeed, the actor who played this character on TV was much like Brother Bernard in appearance. He was Alexander Gauge a British actor best known for playing that role in The Adventures of Robin Hood from 1955 to 1959. Alexander was born in a Methodist Mission station in Wenzhou in China, He was a well-known English character actor who in fact attended school in California before moving to England.

On my many visits Brother Bernard would be found sitting on a chair at the entrance, near to reception.

He had a most warm welcoming smile, always found time to share a conversation on any subject.. he was without doubt a very well and learned man. He was special because I do believe that he had discovered the elusive secret of life and happiness.

He was a sheer joy to be with. His peace and inner contentment flowed out to everyone he met, yet his lifestyle was simple and uncomplicated. He was the same to rich and poor, famous and faceless because he was 'himself'. Whether he was on the Altar saying Mass or trying to sort out some bitter feud, he was always at peace. His peace was within him, and how he needed it, because of the strife torn areas he had served at. He has known himself, and shared the heartaches of his people. He has witnessed violence in some of its worst forms at first hand level, and yet he has remained calm and cheerful. How did he do it?

One of his secrets was that he had a most wonderful sense of humour. There was no time in his day or life for bitterness or recrimination. He knew that if he took himself too seriously then he would become either depressed by what was going on around him, or fall into the trap of becoming sectarian and judgemental. Brother Bernard was always on God's side.

His love knew no boundaries or barriers. And he often laughed quite hilariously when I got him to talk about himself. 'God had a fantastic sense of humour,' he said, 'when he sent me here. And so I leave him to show me what I must do. We all pretend to be better than we are, but I know myself for what I am - a very ordinary person trying to help people to make sense of their lives. And so I laugh through my tears, and trust in God's wisdom and mercy. If he can use me, he can use anyone,'

One day a self-righteous woman confronted Brother Bernard in pharisaical (holier-than-thou) anger. 'I don't come to your church,' she said as she wagged a threatening fist in his face, 'because it is full of hypocrites.' 'Don't exaggerate my dear.' Replied Brother Bernard, tongue in cheek, 'it's not quite full. There's room for one more.'

It was his sense of humour that saw him through not only that little domestic encounter but through other situations when his life was in danger. I too agreed and could understand myself having myself encountered similar situations throughout my life. I expect that's why Brother Bernard entered a Religious Order. He lived one day at a time. He has left the past, and now entered the future with God. He can now cope with problems each day inevitably brings. He is his own man, living his life as best he can, not to please anyone else but God, whom he looks to as a Father. There were times when he had a good old tussle with God because he was always asking the question 'Why?'

Somehow, sometimes, I think he used to get the answer.

Brother Bernard has brought peace to so many that in his situation I think of the comforting words of Christ to his followers, 'You will be weeping and wailing while the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful but your sorrow will turn to joy.'

I think of Brother Bernard and his advice to everyone: "If you have nothing to smile about, then smile at yourself." So why not try it? It works. At least it did for Brother Bernard. Thank you for the times we shared together and I await the day we all will meet once more. R.I.P. Brother Bernard a true, loyal and faithful Servant for God.

Father, when you created the world you wanted us to live in true happiness and to deal sensitively with each other. Give me a heart full of gratitude to you for all you have given to me, and a serenity which nothing can disturb, so that my daily contact with others I may be to them a channel of your happiness, love, gentleness and joy.

+David

Grant O Lord

That none may love you less this day because of me,

That never a word or act of mine

May turn one soul from Thee.

And ever daring,

Yet one more grace

I Thee implore,

That many souls this day

Because of me may love Thee more.