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Why make things complicated?

+Ian, OSJ

You might try asking people what ‘the Gospel’ (the good news) is. It is educational to say the least, and as part of the answer you will no doubt get several quotations from the bible and perhaps even an honest ‘no idea’ or a simplistic ‘Jesus died for us’ kind of answer.

You may even get some complicated version of ‘atonement theory’ (covered a few issues ago) that a sinless Jesus who was God but not God the Father or God the Holy Spirit, (as there is only One God), emptied himself of all God’s power and glory to come as a man to die so he could pay the price of our sin and consequent separation from God by His death, and once He was crucified and resurrected we could be restored to a full relationship with God, but only if we believed in him, Jesus..... Maybe just a bit too much to take in one go!

Do any of these kinds of responses reflect the essence of what the Gospel is about accurately or are they just convenient throw away ‘sound-bytes’?

Do they demonstrate a real biblical understanding in a relevant and clear way?

What we are taught is often a limited reflection of a particular theologically biased strand and is based on selective biblical texts and sources.

Sometimes we end up using a composite but unintelligible shorthand that is more like an advertising slogan which sounds great but is actually quite meaningless.

It also seems that much of what we are taught is based on St Paul's teachings rather than Jesus' own teaching or that which is based in other scriptural sources.

Take a simple example, 'Jesus died that I/we might be forgiven'. Have you ever really thought about what it actually means or implies in the sub-text?

Even before Jesus graced us with his earthly presence, people were being forgiven their sins and they walked with God. The Psalms are full of examples. The Old Testament stories and the Prophets are full of examples too.

Are we saying that all those people who lived and died before Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection could not really be have been forgiven of their sins, or were somehow put in some kind of spiritual storage in trust until his death?

And what of the tradition* of Jesus preaching to the dead during the days between his death and resurrection? Was that dependent on Jesus dying such a horrible and cruel death? Or was it just a 'comforting myth'?

**According to 1 Peter 3:18-20, after Jesus died, his spirit was alive and he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits - to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.*

This implies that the spirit of Jesus went to Hades and made various proclamations to those imprisoned there.

Luke 23:43. When Jesus was crucified next to two other criminals, one speaks to Him, and the Bible tells us, "Jesus answered him, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise'".

As a result, it is believed by many that Jesus went to Heaven immediately after He died, and so for at least some time between the cross and resurrection He was with His Father in heaven.

So where does this idea of Jesus needing to die for our sins come from?

It was certainly an idea sponsored by Paul in his various letters but since Paul never met Jesus, it (atonement theory) may be little more than a theological contrivance based on the Temple sacrificial system to solve some of the unanswered questions about the nature of Jesus God and Jesus the man.

It is also possible that Paul was seeking recognition from the early church and this idea was to show he had 'secret knowledge' (Gnosis) or some kind of special understanding that made him better than the apostles or at least their equal.

Bearing in mind he did much to undermine the authority of the Jerusalem church, James, Mary (mother of Jesus), and Mary Magdalene, to boost and secure his own position, Paul's motivation remains 'highly questionable' in my mind, but his legacy continues and he still influences theological thinking.

I hope you will step beyond these things and seek a better and more sustainable truth based on Old Testament teaching and the testimony of the apostles themselves aside of Paul's influence.

Remember, Paul at first persecuted those first believers in Christ and tried to destroy the emerging church. Can he be, should he completely be trusted?

Because of these things, I am anxious that we should not look at Paul's words alone (some are indisputably 'of God' but some are just his 'opinion').

So Paul having introduced the basics of 'atonement theory' in his writings found supporters who would build upon it and it exists in several forms to our present times.

But the key question we should be asking is, is 'atonement theory' consistent with the Gospel that Jesus and the writings of the Old Testament and that of the apostles proclaimed (rather than Paul)?

I want to float some ideas past you to say it wasn't, it isn't, and it never should have been, not that my opinions matter in any way or are of consequence, and of course I may be completely wrong. It wouldn't be the first time.

The first premise is, if 'forgiveness' is possible, then so logically is 'salvation'.

'Atonement theory' states that 'forgiveness' and therefore 'salvation' is solely dependent on the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In fact scripture speaks against this idea.

We can read in the accounts of the Gospel writers that Jesus forgave people of their sins in his ministry on earth even before his crucifixion and death on the cross.

The bible makes it quite clear that forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration were already being enacted** by God prior to and during Jesus' ministry on Earth.

****Examples of enacted forgiveness in the Old Testament:**

“The Lord then passed in front of him [Moses] and called out, ‘I, the Lord, am a God who is full of compassion [mercy] and pity who is not easily angered and who shows great love and faithfulness. I keep my promise for thousands of generations and forgive evil and sin’ ”

Exodus 34:6, 7,

“But God was merciful to his people. He forgave their sin and did not destroy them. Many times he held back his anger and restrained his fury [anger]”

Psalms 78:38

¹⁶ You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

¹⁷ My sacrifice, O God, is^l a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.

Psalms 51:16-17;

⁹ The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him;

Daniel 9:9;

¹⁰ All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful
toward those who keep the demands of his covenant.

¹¹ For the sake of your name, LORD,
forgive my iniquity, though it is great.

¹⁸ Look on my affliction and my distress
and take away all my sins.

Psalms 25:18;

1 Blessed is the one
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.

2 Blessed is the one
whose sin the LORD does not count against them
and in whose spirit is no deceit....

5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.

I said, "I will confess
my transgressions to the LORD."

And you forgave
the guilt of my sin.

Psalms 32:1.

In this way the priest will make atonement for them for the sin they have committed, and they will be forgiven.

Leviticus 4:26/31/35;

10 The priest shall then offer the other as a burnt offering in the prescribed way and make atonement for them for the sin they have committed, and they will be forgiven.

Leviticus 5:10/13/16/18;

4 Bring joy to your servant, Lord,
for I put my trust in you.

5 You, Lord, are forgiving and good,
abounding in love to all who call to you.

Psalms 86:5;

34 No longer will they teach their neighbour,
or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,'
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,"
declares the Lord.

"For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more."

Jeremiah 31:34

"Happy are those [people] whose sins are forgiven, whose wrongs are
pardoned"

Psalms 32:1, 2

One of the problems we have with 'atonement theory' is how does 'forgiveness' in the Old Testament or even in Jesus' own life time pre-crucifixion work when 'atonement theory' clearly states forgiveness and salvation only comes through Christ's sacrificial death, not before?

But the Gospels state Jesus forgave many people their sins. Are we saying it was a different kind of 'forgiveness'?

And regarding 'salvation', what about Jesus' promise to the penitent thief that he would be with him in paradise?

Luke 23 v 39-43

³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

⁴³ Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

A bit of a premature promise under 'atonement theory' thinking perhaps.

'Forgiveness' is 'forgiveness' and 'salvation' is 'salvation'. They don't come in different grades from what I understand of Holy Scripture. For both to make sense they both need to be consistent in principle, context and practice, both biblically and spiritually.

Proponents of 'atonement theory' often try to get around these kind of anomalies by speaking of a Christ who was at work prior to His life and death on the earth but again there is little or no scriptural evidence, just theorizing.

It is not uncommon to hear them say for example, 'We believe that the God presented in Exodus 32:1-14 is Jesus of Nazareth,' as an explanation, but how does this logically make sense before the work on the cross is completed?

Unless Jesus some kind of post-resurrectional Time Lord?

Either:

1. forgiveness is non-dependent on the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus (in which case 'forgiveness' in the Old Testament holds good based on various text sources using the words 'are forgiven' rather than 'will be forgiven')
2. or 'forgiveness' is dependent on Jesus' death and resurrection, in which case 'forgiveness' is null and void until His death and resurrection.

You can't have it both ways or make stuff up to make them work.

And if it does depend on Jesus' death and resurrection then what became of all the departed souls of this world prior to this event believing they were forgiven and walked with God in all fullness?

Are they put into some kind of spiritual stasis until after Jesus is crucified and/or resurrected? (See 1 Peter 3, 18-20.)

If there was 'forgiveness' in the Old Testament/pre-crucifixion then why did Jesus need to die to save us all?

Or is it a fabrication sponsored by 'the church'/religious authorities to make us take on the personal and corporate guilt of Christ's suffering and be ever obedient and grateful, because 'Jesus died for us', and it's our fault He had to die.

The basis of good old Catholic guilt perhaps.

The evidence is that Jesus forgave people their sins prior to his crucifixion, particularly in respect of, but not restricted to, the healing miracles.

Examples of Jesus enacting forgiveness in the Gospels

Matthew 9:2

Some men brought to him a paralyzed man, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven."

Matthew 9:5

Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'?

Mark 2:5

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Mark 2:9

Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'?

Luke 5:20

When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

Luke 5:23

Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'?

Luke 7:48

Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

This raises an important question.

Ask yourself, if 'forgiveness' was already operational and on-line in both the Old and New Testament pre-crucifixion times, then what kind of God would continue to demand the brutally painful and torturously traumatic death of an innocent and sinless one for the sake of the guilty?

Was that pain and suffering on the cross really necessary and part of a loving God's plan, or are we giving this a wrong interpretation - was it just a vengeful humanity venting its anger at God?

This kind of theology doesn't hang comfortably, especially when we think about 'God being love'. Either 'God is Love', or 'He isn't', and some of these things we have covered seem in respect of this to deny credibility.

What are we missing? Is there another explanation?

What have we got wrong? What are we not seeing?

There is a possible answer but you might find it uncomfortable. Maybe God did not ask Jesus to die on the cross as the final, innocent and bloody sacrifice.

We get a clue from Psalms. We already know from the time of the Psalmists that God was not interested in the sacrifice of animals but instead 'a broken and contrite heart' (see Psalm 51, 16-17 for example).

Surely this already speaks against the need for the sacrificial, atoning death of His own Son. So what was the purpose of Jesus' coming to live amongst us?

So maybe something far less complex.

Supposing Jesus' coming was simply so God could be with us in person, to show us the way to grow into a full relationship with Him, and show us it can be done by absolutely anyone, anywhere, anytime.

No more a distant, terrifying and judgemental God somewhere in the far reaches of Heaven, demanding the death of His Son because we screwed up, but instead God in human form stood right next to us as one of us.

Someone we can touch, see, listen to, speak to, really communicate with.

Someone ordinary just like me or you or us.

Someone who understood our needs, us, and more besides, someone who doesn't want to turn us away but draw us into His love..

God with us. Emmanuel. With you, with me, with all of us whoever we are.

I love the idea that God so loved us that He came to walk amongst us and to experience first-hand what it was like to be human, and to put us straight about lots of things we got wrong or misunderstood.

So now we are getting nearer to the 'why Jesus died'. Taking on human form is not without its own problems though. Great in theory, not so good in practice.

I do enough funerals to know that we die bodily and that death is inevitable. It is something we have to accept and we cannot change. We are time limited, fragile creatures, and our bodies wear out, fail, get ill and get broken.

So in taking on human form to walk with us, God was taking on death as a consequence. No half measures here, and no excuses or get out clauses.

In human form God had to be born, live and then die, just as we as humankind are born, we live, we die. That was all accepted as part of the plan.

If God was to submit to life in all its fullness in human form and 'be relevant' in terms of human experience, then it meant starting from scratch and opening Himself up to the possibilities of both the best and worst human kind. Only that way could God say 'I know what it is like and I truly understand.'

God in the form of man had no option but to die if He was to demonstrate how serious He was. It was all or nothing, and once begun there was no going back to being God until death had been faced in all of its fullness and overcome.

So how was God in the form of man to die when the time came?

Jesus, in his journey and ministry on earth made a lot of friends but he also made a huge number of enemies.

That is the trouble when one tells the truth in a world of lies, deceptions and deceits, where power and authority matter much more than people and where one deliberately chooses to rock the boat and confront evil and injustice in all its subtle and pervasive forms.

The ironic thing about this is it came from within, from the very people who were entrusted to and were supposed to represent God and guide His people.

Organised religion had become big business, it had great power and authority and it enjoyed exercising both in the communities it served and at a state level.

It didn't always represent God's interests or those of its people, and Jesus was certainly unafraid to let them know.

They were certainly not happy that Jesus taught something 'different' to them, something they felt they had owned rather than been entrusted with from the very beginning that required the subjugation and compliance of its people, and he was considered a threat of the greatest kind.

He needed to be dealt with, made an example of and the problem fixed.

Jesus was popular, a great teacher, amusing and engaging, controversial, charismatic, a miracle worker and spoke the truth simply and as it was. He had the people's ear and he was not under their or anyone else's control.

Statements like, 'the (written) law brings judgement, condemnation and death, but I came to set you free...', and his comments condemning the behaviour and duplicity of the religious officials of his time made Jesus a marked man.

So did actions like the overturning of the stalls of the money changers in the temple precinct and the cry of 'You have made my house into a den of thieves'. Right on their own doorsteps, that must have really damaged and hurt the religious leaders and teachers of the law very badly, and they wouldn't forget in a hurry. Jesus in their eyes was 'asking for it'!

Jesus knew he would become a target and that death of the worst kind was coming as a consequence. But still he continued.

Simple, straightforward, unrelenting love drove him on. If only one more person can truly come to know God.

We know what happened next all too well. False accusations. A show trial or two. Mass media exposure. Judgement but not justice. Outcome guaranteed.

Jesus was crucified in spite of the truth, in spite of the love.

He was made an example of.

This is what happens when you take on corrupt and vengeful organised religion/authorities.

It was a cruel and terrible death designed to maximise pain and humiliation and make plain that the power of the priests should not be challenged.

Even in death Jesus refused to condemn his accusers. Instead, 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.'

His death was not so much the proposed symbolic final sacrifice instituted by God to end the sacrificial system as 'atonement theory' proclaims.

It was instead an act of submitting to the evil in the world, the consequences of an unshakable love of God and of His people, and a refusal to back down in the face of overwhelming odds. 'Love' simply refusing to be defeated or bow down to anything other than God.

This is something quite different.

And then on the third day, when everyone thought it was all over, Jesus rather unexpectedly appeared to his disciples.

For a short while the door between life and death remained open - simple, straight forward love had succeeded when people thought that death would silence and crush it. It gave them all time they needed to sort out their

confused minds and make sense of what had just happened and to get ready for God knows what.

All of this of course is the enactment of the Two great Commandments, 'love God' and 'love your neighbour....'.

Let's take a step back and focus on them for a little while.

These commandments are not things based on the fear of failure and punishment as 'the church' or those in authority sometimes project (that behaviour is about power and control) but instead about enabling and making possible.

This can be seen in the ministry of Jesus – importantly, Jesus proclaimed 'I came to set you free***'.

***** John 8 v 31-36:**

³¹ To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

³³ They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"

³⁴ Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵ Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

So 'free' from what?

In terms of 'organised religion' - from the burden of the letter of the law instead of the principles of love behind 'the Law' primarily.

In other words, being able to 'love God' and 'love one's neighbour' as God originally intended, hopefully without the intervention of narrow minded, overly prescriptive interference of the professional religious who made things so complicated that life becomes impossible and filled with failure and despair.

This simply drives people from God rather than drawing them to Him, and that is not the purpose of 'the Law'.

(In this respect we importantly need to learn the difference between 'faith' and 'religion'. Our 'faith' will save us, our 'religion' will not.)

It's no longer just about 'the rules' or man's interpretation of them or those who decide what God really meant to say, but about their individual and deeply personal relationship with God Himself and one's neighbours.

This puts 'the rules' in a very different context.

It's about 'love' not 'duty', putting it into practice because it's all you can conceive of doing for the sheer joy of it rather than it being something you 'have to do' whether out of a forced sense of obligation or fear or because you feel you don't have a choice.

‘The rules’ still matter, but don’t misunderstand me, instead of being multi-layered and increasingly prescriptive ordinances of failure and condemnation they instead become intuitive, open ended, aspirational acts of love and service.

They become more about the ‘why’ and less about ‘how’ they are applied.

So no complex theoretical doctrine or legalistic catechism of application of religion required. Instead we have undefined, uncontained love, and the freedom to do what is appropriate, required and necessary.

All well in theory, but what about the practice?

How can we be sure we know whether we have got our own understanding of ‘the rules’ right or whether we are just deceiving ourselves?

We are already prepared but we do need to be uncompromisingly honest with ourselves, and try to see ourselves as God sees us.

Our personal, hopes, aspirations and needs are secondary to those of the Great Commandments and those we serve, simply for no other reason than we love them.

Our given principles of discernment:

1. We know what the bible says about what is acceptable and not acceptable in the eyes of God through His written word,

2. We have our own God given consciences,
3. We have the teachings and the promptings of the Holy Spirit,
4. We have something called 'gut feeling', when we know something is right or not right even if we can't explain it or put it into words,
5. The needs of others take precedence over our own needs and we should never end up as the main beneficiary of our own actions, choices or decisions.
6. We are never forced or bullied into taking a course of action.
7. We have 'free will' which is the ability to freely choose between doing right and wrong. We can do what is obviously right or do what is clearly wrong. It's our choice, and we take responsibility for our own actions.
8. We should always consider the global consequences of our actions, not just to us, but to the others and our church communities before we act.

If we get 'it' wrong and walk away from God and our God given responsibilities, we leave behind all that is God's, everything that is good, everlasting, permanent.

We cannot hide what we have done and there is no point in trying to hide it or deny it. The truth will always be made visible but the longer it takes the more damage is done.

Spiritually this is a more than dangerous place to find ourselves and we need to put things right before things get seriously out of hand. (In this case an honest admission and genuine repentance is enough to put things straight with God.)

God does not want unthinking automatons who are programmed to do His Will unquestioningly, but welcomes an unreliable and unpredictable people who make their own choices to love Him, not because they have to but because they want to, even if they get things wrong occasionally and make a hash of things.

A willing desire to serve which is driven by a simple love rather than a reluctant obedience, even driven by fear or duty, is a great and worthy love indeed.

And indeed this is the kind of love displayed in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Jesus has been there before us and knows what it is like to be human.

The 'I walked amongst you, I walked with you, I have been there, done that, experienced everything you experienced, shared in your joys and sorrows, suffered as you did, grew old with you, and I showed you that you were never alone, abandoned or un-loved..... I showed you the way and made what you thought was impossible possible.'

So, if this makes sense, I call for a simpler, more meaningful and thoughtful Gospel to be preached, one that comes from the heart and genuine understanding rather than from a text book or theological throw-away, one we understand that holds up under biblical scrutiny.

We can't preach or live out what we do not know or cannot express simply or even put our faith in.

Knowing and being able to express the Gospel is just as important for us as for other people.

If we can share the Gospel in a simple and straightforward way that any small child can understand, we have probably done all that can possibly be required.

And if a child can understand our words, then there is a good chance that adults will too. The converse is not so true or so convenient.

Sometimes we may only have a few seconds to say to passers-by in our own way, in our own words, 'Have you met Jesus yet? Do you know Him?'

Those few seconds might be the only chance they and we get to change a life for the better.

-oOo-

ADDRESS:

+David, OSJ (Wales)

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son **+**and God the Holy Spirit

‘He shares in our humanity so we can share the life of His divinity.’

This Christmas, as with every Christmas, we’ve probably sung lots of carols. And quite a few carols can be quite long as they all try to tell the full story of Christmas. That’s not a bad thing. But a very concise summary of the Christmas story is found in our Collect prayer for today.

‘...grant that, as he came to share in our humanity, so we may share the life of his divinity...’

Many of the Collects we have are based on those written by Thomas Cranmer around the 1550’s – so they’ve stood the test of time! Cranmer was an Archbishop of Canterbury and a leading figure in the reformation. The one we use today appeared in the Alternative Service Book for the Sunday after Christmas Day, Year One.

Each Collect generally follows a similar format:

- Introduction often with a specific address to God
 - Almighty God...
- Acknowledgement of what has happened, our state, and the reason for our prayer
 - who wonderfully created us in your own image and yet more wonderfully restored us through your Son Jesus Christ...
- Request (sometimes known as a petition)
 - grant that, as he came to share in our humanity...
- Hope and expectation (often using the word ‘that’ and is expressed in the plural ‘we’, God’s people)
 - so we may share the life of his divinity...

- Basis for request and acknowledgement of God's omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence
 - who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Today's collect contains many if not all of these elements.

...Grant that as he came to share in our humanity so we may share in His divinity...

We often sing and speak of Jesus coming to share in our humanity as Immanuel, God with us – but what does it mean for us to share in His divinity as we look at Christ's birth in the stable or a barn?

It would seem that there are at least three elements we share.

Firstly, as we share in His divinity we share in His vulnerability. You might have thought with the importance of the mission He was on, God might have chosen somewhere more secure for Mary to have her child. Not only had she had to endure a long journey on the back of a donkey she was reduced to having her child in an stable / barn which was normally used for animals.

Sometimes we can wonder why what is happening to us is happening. We find ourselves in places where we feel vulnerable and under prepared. Like Mary, perhaps thinking that things shouldn't be happening this way.

To share in Christ's divinity also means sharing in His vulnerability and uncertainty. God is in control, but that doesn't always mean things working out the way we expect. Neither we, nor God or Jesus are machines, computers that can be programmed with predictable outcomes.

Mary must have wondered at times what was happening, it had been some time since she had heard from the angel. She shared in Christ's vulnerability so that God's will

could be done. Things were very uncertain and unclear. When she acknowledged what was happening to her when the Holy Spirit came on her, she had no idea what that might mean and where it might lead, apart from the obvious, rather significant, short term implications.

Part of sharing in Christ's vulnerability is to share in the fact that we may not know quite where that might lead. It can be uncertain and not as secure in worldly terms as we would like. God invites us to share in this vulnerability nonetheless.

As we see through the rest of Mary's life, it's not as if she had a hotline to God through the angels. Part of that vulnerability was just getting on with life and being open to God as to where that might lead and what that might mean.

Living with the uncertainty but doing her best to live out a life to the best of her ability with the understanding of God and what was happening.

Secondly, as we share the life of Christ's divinity we also share in His mission for the world, often shown as His care and concern for the world and all who live in it.

Perhaps it's not surprising that it was shepherds that were the first to come to visit the stable. A symbol of care and an image that would be used of Christ so often in His life and death. As we share in Christ's divinity so we are called to share in His ministry and mission.

If we don't then part of that divinity which is in us is denied. We are called to reach out to others so that they can know more fully the Christ who comes at Christmas.

Mary was still quite to work out all that the shepherds were saying. Luke tells us that all who heard what had happened wondered what was going on. But Mary '...treasured these things up in her heart...', or, '...she kept these things safe as she (pondered) threw them around in her heart...' She might not know what was happening but she knew who did. The shepherds coming and the story they told was

confirmation to her of what she already knew and had lived in vulnerability for the last nine months.

Sometimes, our vulnerability is not without its confirmations that God is with us even if we sometimes doubt. Thirdly, as we share in the life of Christ's divinity, so we share in His authority, rule Kingship, Kingdom and eternity.

As we reach out in God's love, sharing in His mission, however vulnerable and uncertain we might feel, we do so sharing in Christ's authority and Kingdom. We are not powerless in our vulnerability and in our desire to share in Christ's mission for the world. God gives His Holy Spirit which empowers our words and actions, words and actions which are sometimes misunderstood or belittled by the world as they struggle to understand them, and the divinity which is in each of them.

If it's not surprising the shepherds came to visit Jesus, perhaps we should not be surprised that Kings came to visit Him too. For born into the world was the King of the Cosmos, ruler of all. Kings came and knelt before Him, knelt before His authority. They knew as no others that here was the true authority in the world, before whom all others knelt in adoration and worship.

Here was one whose authority above all others and who's Kingdom was eternal. Whatever was to happen in Christ's lifetime, it was only a foretaste of the eternal to come. As we share in Christ's divinity, so we share in the eternal hope which He brings. On this earth we may feel uncertain and vulnerable, like Mary, it might seem a while since God last spoke to us, but we are called to be part of His work on earth, which is a foretaste of what He has for us in eternity. For as we share in His divinity, so we share in His eternity.

...as He came to share in our humanity, so may we share the life of His divinity

✝Praise be to Thee O Christ. AMEN.

As a student, training for teaching but also wondering if training for ordination was a leading I should heed, I explored and valued the writing of theologian and thinker, Paul Tillich. This is an appropriate piece for this time of the year and for our various newsletters, from his 'The Shaking of the Foundations, which for a Baptist boy studying in Birmingham and discovering a different world, certainly happened to me. Fr Ed Elsey

Waiting By Paul Tillich

I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait, and in his word do I hope.

My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning:

I say, more than they that watch for the morning.

Let Israel hope in the Lord:

for with the Lord There is mercy,

and with him is plenteous redemption. Psalm 130:5-7.

For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it. Romans 8:24-25.

Both the Old and the New Testaments describe our existence in relation to God as one of waiting. In the psalmist there is an anxious waiting; in the apostle there is a patient waiting. Waiting means not having and having at the same time. For we have not what we wait for; or, as the apostle says, if we hope for what we do not see, we then wait for it. The condition of man's relation to God is first of all one of not having, not seeing, not knowing, and not grasping. A religion in which that is forgotten, no matter how ecstatic or active or reasonable, replaces God by its own creation of an image of God. Our religious life is characterized more by that kind of creation than anything else. I think of

the theologian who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed within a doctrine. I think of the Biblical student who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed in a book. I think of the churchman who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed in an institution. I think of the believer who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed within his own experience. It is not easy to endure this not having God, this waiting for God. It is not easy to preach Sunday after Sunday without convincing ourselves and others that we have God and can dispose of Him. It is not easy to proclaim God to children and pagans, to skeptics and secularists, and at the same time to make clear to them that we ourselves do not possess God, that we too wait for Him. I am convinced that much of the rebellion against Christianity is due to the overt or veiled claim of the Christians to possess God, and therefore, also, to the loss of this element of waiting, so decisive for the prophets and the apostles. Let us not be deluded into thinking that, because they speak of waiting, they waited merely for the end, the judgment and fulfillment of all things, and not for God Who was to bring that end. They did not possess God; they waited for Him. For how can God be possessed? Is God a thing that can be grasped and known among other things? Is God less than a human person? We always have to wait for a human being. Even in the most intimate communion among human beings, there is an element of not having and not knowing, and of waiting. Therefore, since God is infinitely hidden, free, and incalculable, we must wait for Him in the most absolute and radical way. He is God for us just in so far as we do not possess Him. The psalmist says that his whole being waits for the Lord, indicating that waiting for God is not merely a part of our relation

to God, but rather the condition of that relation as a whole. We have God though not having Him.

But, although waiting is not having, it is also having. The fact that we wait for something shows that in some way we already possess it. Waiting anticipates that which is not yet real. If we wait in hope and patience, the power of that for which we wait is already effective within us. He who waits in an ultimate sense is not far from that for which he waits. He who waits in absolute seriousness is already grasped by that for which he waits. He who waits in patience has already received the power of that for which he waits. He who waits passionately is already an active power himself, the greatest power of transformation in personal and historical life. We are stronger when we wait than when we possess. When we possess God, we reduce Him to that small thing we knew and grasped of Him; and we make it an idol. Only in idol worship can one believe in the possession of God. There is much of this idolatry among Christians.

But if we know that we do not know Him, and if we wait for Him to make Himself known to us, we then really know something of Him, we then are grasped and known and possessed by Him. It is then that we are believers in our unbelief, and that we are accepted by Him in spite of our separation from Him.

Let us not forget, however, that waiting is a tremendous tension. It precludes all complacency about having nothing, indifference or cynical contempt towards those who have something, and indulgence in doubt

and despair. Let us not make our pride in possessing nothing a new possession. That is one of the great temptations of our time, for there are few things left which we can claim as possessions. And we surrender to the same temptation when we boast, in our attempt to possess God, that we do not possess Him. The divine answer to such an attempt is utter emptiness. Waiting is not despair. It is the acceptance of our not having, in the power of that which we already have.

Our time is a time of waiting; waiting is its special destiny. And every time is a time of waiting, waiting for the breaking in of eternity. All time runs forward. All time, both in history and in personal life, is expectation. Time itself is waiting, waiting not for another time, but for that which is eternal.

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John The Baptist – ‘Are you the one?’

+David OSJ (Wales)

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son **✝**and God the Holy Spirit.
Amen

In the Gospel we hear the stirring words of John the Baptist at the Jordan River concerning the one who is to come. The Messiah, he said, will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire, and he will exercise judgment. In the fashion of a swashbuckler, his coming will be dramatic, to say the least.

But Jesus does not really fit the mould. He comes on the scene as one who proclaims the kingdom of God, calls upon people to trust in God, heals the sick, and befriends tax collectors and persons labelled “sinners.”

It is little wonder that John, now sitting in prison with time to think, questions whether Jesus is the one to come or not. Jesus fits neither John's expectations nor those of Jewish messianism in general. John's question in 11:3 is therefore totally understandable: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

The question of John and the response of Jesus in 11:2-6 are actually relayed by disciples of John the Baptist. (That John had disciples is attested not only here and in its parallel at Luke 7:18-23, but also in John 1:35; 3:25.) John is now not certain whether Jesus is the "coming one," an expression which refers to the Messiah as the one to come (Matthew 21:9, Mark 11:9, Luke 19:38, John 12:13, Heb 10:37), based on Old Testament imagery (Psalm 118:26).

The reply of Jesus is to give neither a yes nor a no to the question. It is typical of the Synoptic Gospels that Jesus does not declare openly that he is the Messiah. He does not proclaim himself; he proclaims the kingdom of God. And look what is happening.

The kingdom is breaking in upon the world.

That which Isaiah envisioned in his prophetic oracles (26:19; 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1) is now taking place. Whoever perceives the connections and concludes that Jesus does the work of the coming one is blessed (11:6).

Following that declaration, the subject is changed. Jesus asks the crowds three questions about John (11:7-9). The point of the three questions is to drive home the fact that the people went out to see a prophet (11:9). Indeed, John is "more than a prophet" in that he had a superior role. He was to be the herald of the Messiah's coming, preparing his way.

He is the messenger promised by the last of the prophets (Malachi 3:1 is quoted), even Elijah who is to come (11:14, alluding to Malachi 4:5). John is extolled as the greatest of human beings (11:11).

Yet there are persons even greater (11:11)! They are greater in the sense that, while John stood before the coming of the kingdom, the disciples of Jesus (even the least of them) stand within it. The response of Jesus to John's question is to portray messiahship in a new way.

The prevailing view in both the Old Testament and other ancient Jewish sources was that the Messiah would be a powerful ruler, one whose reign would usher in a new era of peace. But that does not mean that Jesus creates a picture of the Messiah unrelated to the sources, for the words of 11:5 are straight out of the Scriptures of Israel.

They speak of the blessings of the messianic age, which include both healing and good news to the poor. One finds both connections and fractures in the Scriptures. God is not bound to his own best (or even canonical) witnesses in all details, and that is most evident in regard to the profile of the Messiah. Many people, not just John, found Jesus to be an enigma. Many do today. A sermon on this passage from Matthew's Gospel could focus on the way that Jesus speaks of himself and about us, his disciples. Particularly in 11:5 Jesus speaks of his mission in one of the clearest statements in the gospels about it: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (11:5).

These words speak of the Messiah in a striking way. Jesus did not come to gain earthly power. He came among the people to serve them, bringing life. Instead of casting away those persons who are at the margins of society — persons that many would want to send away and out of sight — it is precisely to those people that the Messiah came to restore and save.

We live in a world where people are often divided into two categories. They are either well to do, popular, well-connected, and valuable — or they are those who are down and out for one reason or another and are not valued.

But the Season of Advent intrudes into the history of the world and especially into the lives of Christians. The mood, the hymns, and the prayers of this season seek to open us up to new ways of thinking and acting.

It is a time of expectation. It is a time of waiting for the coming of the Savior into the world. And what happens when he comes? He comes among us in his Word and through the Spirit to stir us up to get involved in his ministry among those who are left out, on the margins of society, and who are in need.

Another verse of particular importance, and which speaks more directly about us, is 11:11 where Jesus declares that “the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than [John the Baptist].”

John did not live to see the ministry of Jesus unfold; he was executed by Herod during the time of Jesus’ ministry (14:1-12). But we — even we, as ordinary Christians, who are “the least in the kingdom” in comparison to the great saints of Scripture and history — have seen the ministry of Jesus come to its completion, followed by his death and resurrection and the birth of the church.

We are blessed and fortunate to be living on this side of Jesus’ resurrection and to be a part of his body, the church. We are not people adrift in the world with uncertainty about who we are, how we should live, or where we are going.

We belong to his community of believers, dedicated to him, instructed by him, and carrying out his ministry. As his disciples, and with mutual support, we align ourselves with his ministry in our witness to the gospel and in our works of mercy and our care for the world.

✝Praise be to Thee O Christ

AMEN