

Week 6 –The Cross

We begin this final session by returning to consider the part played by Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 in the New Testament interpretation of the passion of Jesus of Nazareth.

Isaiah 53 :1 - 10

¹Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed?

²For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.

³**He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.**

⁴**Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.**

⁵**But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.**

⁶**All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.**

⁷He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.

⁸He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken.

⁹And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.

¹⁰**Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.**

Psalm 22 (1 – 18)

¹**My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?**

²O my God, I cry in the day time, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent.

³But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel.

⁴Our fathers trusted in thee: they trusted, and thou didst deliver them.

⁵They cried unto thee, and were delivered: they trusted in thee, and were not confounded.

⁶But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people.

⁷All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying,

⁸He trusted on the LORD that he would deliver him: let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him.

⁹But thou art he that took me out of the womb: thou didst make me hope when I was upon my mother's breasts.

¹⁰I was cast upon thee from the womb: thou art my God from my mother's belly.

¹¹Be not far from me; for trouble is near; for there is none to help.

¹²Many bulls have compassed me: strong bulls of Bashan have beset me round.

¹³They gaped upon me with their mouths, as a ravening and a roaring lion.

¹⁴I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels.

¹⁵My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death.

¹⁶For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet.

¹⁷I may tell all my bones: they look and stare upon me.

¹⁸They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture.

One of the first pastoral visits which I made early in my ministry was to a lady who was suffering from spinal cancer. She was in considerable pain most of the time. As I sat with her with little to say, she asked me why God was punishing her. "What have I done to deserve this?" she asked. I tried my best to assure her that God was not a punishing God, but a loving God. Whether that was any comfort to her I shall never know. What I did know was

that I had a firm conviction that God loved her and that therefore the idea of punishment from God was a contradiction.

Many years later, as I stood on the viewing platform at Ground Zero in New York, I heard the same cry from the lips of many Americans standing nearby. “What have we done to deserve this?” “Why is God punishing his people?” It was a just a few weeks after the planes had demolished the twin towers and the smell of smoke and death was still in the air. I wondered at that time why so many people seemed to have the same response to tragedy.

It was in 586 B.C. that the first Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. It is difficult for us to imagine what a tragedy this was for the people of Israel. This proud nation, convinced of their role in history as the people of God, believed that the Holy God Himself was present in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. But the Temple was in ruins, the people massacred and survivors carried off as slaves to Babylon. This was a severe crisis of faith. “How could God do this to us?” Jerusalem has fallen, the nation is in exile in Babylon. However, in the year 539 B.C. Cyrus, the head of the Persian confederation, conquered Babylon and issued an edict for the return of the Jewish community to Judah and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 1: 1 – 6). It is in this context that the spiritual genius, poet and prophet known as second Isaiah writes ‘Comfort ye, comfort ye my people’ (ch. 42 – 53). Embedded in this section of the book of Isaiah are four poems known as the ‘servant songs’ in which the prophet depicts Israel as the perfect servant of God; this servant proclaims the true faith and suffers to atone for the sins of his people. Hence God exalts him at the end.

‘Surely, surely, he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows’..... ‘But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.’ (Isa. 53 : 4ff)

It is probable that psalm 22 also originated during the exile, which was a period of suffering and despair for the people of Israel. To the tormented mind of the psalmist the suffering of Israel is proof that the Lord has forsaken his people. With gestures of derision the psalmist’s enemies mock his confidence and faith in an almighty God. Hence he begins with those poignant words “*My God, why hast thou forsaken me?*”

In all this the Christian tradition has seen the foreshadowing of the suffering and death of Jesus of Nazareth. It would be quite wrong however to suggest that both 2nd Isaiah and the writer of the Psalm 22 had foresight of the events which happened 500 years later at the death of Jesus Christ. Such a magic mentality is not acceptable to people in this day and age. What they wrote, they wrote for the people of their generation. Prophets are men of insight not foresight. However there can be no doubt that in the struggle to find words adequate to describe the devastation felt by the followers of Jesus at the time of his execution, the new testament writers, themselves steeped in the culture and traditions of Judaism, should turn to these Old Testament texts to find imagery and language which seemed to ideally fit the enormity of the events of the passion and death of Jesus. The idea that God should pour out his wrath upon Jesus in order to make him ‘pay the price of sin’ is however as crude and unreasonable as telling the lady who was suffering with the agony of spinal cancer that God was similarly angry with her or that the people who were slaughtered at 9/11 were being punished for their sins.

It may not be appropriate for us in the 21st century to interpret the passion of Jesus in terms of metaphors and poetry from 600 years before the events which took place. But one thing is surely certain; there must have been something about this Jesus that was so powerful that it seemed appropriate for his disciples to portray him in terms of the sacred symbols of their worship, and the myths of their messianic hopes, magnified to supernatural proportions. There was something about him that caused them to conclude that the God in whom they believed was present in and with the Jesus they had known.

Many years ago as a young teacher of mathematics I was interrupted by a student who put to me this question: “ Mr. Eveleigh, if you are a Christian why are you not a Moslem?” On the surface the questions appears to be nonsensical but I asked the young man to meet me after the lesson. This he did gladly. I explained that I believed that Jesus had died for my sins. He responded; “Do you then believe in human sacrifice?” He then explained to me how he had understood that the ancient story in which God commands Abraham to offer his only son Isaac as a sacrifice, meant that God did no longer desire human sacrifice. (Gen. 22: 1- 14)

From that moment I began to realize that some change was required in my understanding of the sacrifice of Jesus. Did we really have to interpret the passion of our Lord in terms of the thought forms of first century Scribes and Pharisees? Could we not simply see the crucifixion of Jesus as an inevitable consequence of his challenge to the accepted dogmas of a corrupt religious system or his refusal to bow to Ceasar.

According to Christian tradition mankind, through the sin of Adam, is born in a state of enmity with God. This separation from God means that each human being stands in need of redemption from the power of sin and liberation into a state of oneness with God. This process of oneness with God is described in traditional Christian doctrine as ‘Atonement’. Such a state of grace is not achieved by any merit on the part of the sinner but is won by and through the death of Christ. This doctrine is summed up in the teaching of St. Paul in his letter to the Romans (Romans 3: 23 – 26).

‘...everyone has sinned and is far away from God’s saving presence. But by the free gift of God’s grace all are put right with him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free. God offered him, so that by his death he should become the means by which people’s sins are forgiven through their faith in him. ...’

The phrase ‘God offered him’ implies that Jesus is understood as being a sacrifice for sin in the Old Testament sense. St. Paul continues to stress this in 5;18 where he asserts

‘So then, as the one sin condemned all mankind, in the same way the one righteous act sets all mankind free and gives them life.’

It is not surprising that the death of Jesus should have been interpreted in this way in 1st century Palestine. St. Paul himself no doubt believed that Jesus was the Messiah of the people of Israel and as a pious Pharisee would naturally have described the doctrine of the cross in terms familiar to his fellow Jews. Did not Isaiah himself prophesy that the Messiah would save his people from their iniquity by his own suffering?

‘But he endured the suffering that should have been ours, the pain that we should have borne. All the while we thought that his suffering was punishment sent by God but because of

our sins he was wounded, beaten because of the evil we did. We are healed by the punishment he suffered, made whole by the blows he received..’ (Isa 53:4f).

So the sacrificial ritual of the Temple, which had become so deeply ingrained in the psyche of the Jewish nation, became the theological paradigm for the Christian interpretation of the crucifixion of Jesus. This had many serious consequences for Christians for many centuries to come.

The often quoted story of the Catholic priest who was held captive at a Nazi Concentration Camp is deeply moving and speaks of his personal sacrifice in no uncertain terms. A young Jew was chosen from among the prisoners to be shot as a punishment for some misdemeanour which had been committed by one of the inmates. The Priest pleaded on behalf of the innocent victim, saying that the Jew had a wife and children whereas he, the Priest, had no one to grieve for him. So the priest offered himself as a substitute victim. He was then executed in place of the young Jew. The priest had ‘paid the price’ for the crime committed; a heroic sacrifice.

Such a sacrifice would have been offered by many brave Jews in the first century when the Romans ruled by terror as did the Nazis in the second world war. Many who rebelled against the Roman occupation of Palestine in those days would have been crucified and their emaciated bodies would have remained on the cross as a warning to any who would refuse to acknowledge the primacy of the Roman Emperor.

When in the time of the Emperor Constantine when Christianity became the official religion of the Empire, the Church took on the shape of an empire and also ruled by fear. Heretics were persecuted and the ‘faithful’ lived in fear. The sacrifice of Jesus then became a warning to any who would question the authority of the Pope. The sacrifice of Jesus became interpreted once again as the means of propitiation for the sins of the world. God became a person who demanded satisfaction and the Eucharist became a sacrificial offering to appease the angry God. This distortion in the doctrine of the Christian Church continues today in the liturgy and in the hymnody. In the Book of Common Prayer service of holy communion we have, for example, the words of the prayer of consecration ‘Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who of thy tender mercy didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption; who made there by his one oblation of himself once offered a full perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world: and did institute “. Also in the ‘comfortable words’ which precede the Sursum Corda, a quotation from the first epistle of St. John; ‘If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins.’ A further example of the penal substitution theory of atonement is provided by the well loved hymn sung at most churches throughout the world; ‘He died that we might be forgiven, he died to make us good, that we might go at last to heaven saved by his precious blood. (There is a green hill far away...).

So what can we do about this apparent obsession with the idea of sacrifice? Perhaps we should start with the idea that God created mankind in his own image and inherently good. In this event there is no need for a propitiation of sin and there is no need of appeasing an angry God. Perhaps the failures of human beings to reach their full potential as children of God are best dealt with by love. Did not the author of the first letter of St. John proclaim that ‘God is love and those who live in love live in God and God lives in them?’ (1 John 4:16) Surely the central message of Jesus of Nazareth must be about this self-giving love which so

characterised the life of Jesus that people were prepared to give themselves in his service even to the extent of taking up the cross to follow him.

During the last hundred years enormous advances have been made in the understanding of human beings; how they behave and how they interact with each other. Man's impressive scientific advances in the awareness of the infinitude of space as well as the infinitude of sub-atomic particles seems most likely to lead to the total destruction of our world unless we can make some advances in the understanding of interpersonal and inter-group tensions. We have succeeded in bridging the enormous distance between the moon and the planet earth but still fail abominably to bridge the chasm between Palestine and Israel; to mention but one inter-group tension. There is an urgent need for Christian ministers to explore the findings of psychotherapists and counsellors of the calibre of Carl Rogers who is known as the originator of 'client centred therapy'. In these chaotic times the need for such people is evident for they are more flexible in human relationships, more creative, and considerably less judgemental in their appraisal of human nature, than are their Christian counterparts. (see 'On Becoming a Person' by Carl Rogers).

Traditional atonement theories have been concerned primarily with restoring at-oneness with God who is pictured as above and beyond our sinful being. Restoring at-oneness with our neighbour ought to be central in our theology of atonement in this day and age. First to restore harmony within oneself and secondly to seek ways of breaking down the barriers which separate one nation from another, male from female, rich from poor and black from white. "You have heard that it was said 'love your friends, hate your enemies.' But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may become the sons of your father in heaven." (Matt.5:43f Good News Bible)

So, please continue to practise the Christian Faith, with its liturgy, its hymns and its sacraments. But in so doing please remember that the Holy Spirit did not cease in his/her activity at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, but continues to enlighten and inspire the Church of God even to this day, bringing new ideas and new insights and new questions for us to delight in. 'When the Spirit comes, who reveals the truth about God he will lead you into all the truth.' (John 16: 13 Good News Bible.)

<Questions for discussion>

- 1 Is 'Saviour' a proper word to use to describe Christ in the 21st century?
- 2 Should sacramental confession be replaced by non-directive counselling?
- 3 Place these in order of importance:
 - a) The teaching of Jesus.
 - b) The Birth of Jesus.
 - c) The Resurrection of Jesus.
 - d) The miracles of Jesus.
 - e) The Cross.
