

I preached here on this Sunday last year, about doubt and faith which is the obvious subject suggested by the customary Gospel reading for the Sunday after Easter (John 20.19-31). However when I was looking at the readings for this Sunday something else struck me and that was the reference to the phrase in the Epistle (1 John 1.1-2.2) 'He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins' and to the wounds of Christ in the Gospel passage.

If you count up you might be surprised to discover how many references there are to blood and sacrifice in the hymns and prayers we use in church. Sacrifice, of course, was a central part of the religious faith and practice of the Jews at the time of our Lord. It was a complicated system for dealing with the awareness of individual and community sins. To put it rather crudely, the sacrifices were an attempt to persuade God to let them off the punishment that he was entitled to inflict because of humankind's disobedience and wrongdoing. So it was natural when the early Christians wanted to say what Christ had done in his crucifixion that they put it in terms of sacrifice. 'He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins' as we read in the 1<sup>st</sup> Epistle of St. John or in Matt. 20. 28 'The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many'.

That word 'atoning' or the noun 'atonement' some people find difficult to understand. In Hebrew (Kippurim) it has the basic idea of covering – covering over sins so that God would

disregard them – and in Greek (hilasmos) that of propitiation - appeasement or conciliation. I find the easiest way to understand it is to say it as three syllables - at one ment – the process by which we are brought back into a loving relationship with God.

But how did it work? To explain that one needs to go back a bit.

The Jews explained the fact that everyone commits sins with a story about the very first people who lived on the earth, Adam and Eve, and their disobedience and consequent corruption and guilt which has been passed on through the generations to the present day. The New Testament writers saw the death of Jesus on the cross as a sacrifice which set humankind free from the punishment which God was thought to be entitled to inflict because of this. Later in the Christian Church it became the doctrine of the Fall, the idea that humankind had been created perfect but because of Adam's sin human nature is now corrupted and guilty. The remedy is to be baptized, to die with Christ spiritually and to be born again to a new creation 'of water and the Spirit', to use the N.T. phrase.

There are several difficulties or objections to these ideas. First of all we believe that moral responsibility and guilt depend on the free decision of the individual – we can't be blamed for something we haven't done or didn't choose to do. Secondly it

is very difficult to imagine a perfect state of humanity when palaeontology and anthropology show clearly that we, homo sapiens, have evolved over many hundreds of thousands of years, through many stages, from more primitive anthropoid apes and ultimately from animals. So I can't believe in a Fall of humankind from a state of perfection, which needs to be dealt with. Of course I can see that we all follow the example of Adam in the story and do in fact sin and do evil things and that needs to be dealt with. But how?

Let's go back to the word Atonement. The Church has never defined exactly how the Atonement works. Very briefly, there have been four theories of the Atonement throughout Christian history, but since this isn't a theological lecture I can't go into the first three, except to say that all three are inadequate or even wrong in some respects.

But then there is the fourth, that of the appeal of love and moral responsibility. Without going into the gruesome details of crucifixion and the appalling suffering and pain, both physical and mental, that it was intended to inflict on the victim, it is obvious that if someone were willing to go through that sort of suffering for the sake of someone else, then that person must have a great love for the other one.

What I am suggesting is that one of the ways in which the crucifixion of Jesus saves us from the power of evil is that it is

evidence of God's love for us, evidence of Jesus's willingness to suffer for us and that if we respond by trying to love him in return, then that puts us in a frame of mind and opens us up spiritually to receive the help of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, to deal with the temptations that continually come to us and thus to become the kind of people that God created us to be. In short I don't believe the crucifixion changed God's attitude to us – it has always been one of absolute love and I don't find in the teaching of Jesus much about God's justice and God's wrath. I do find the story of the Prodigal Son. The crucifixion does not change God; it can certainly change us.

Now let's turn to the wounds of Christ which are referred to in today's Gospel reading and which I am using as a symbol. What did Christ do on the cross? I'd like to finish with a true story from the Second World War about life and death in a Japanese P.O.W. camp.

It is about a soldier of the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders who was in a work party on the railway. When the day's work was over the tools were counted as usual. The guard shouted that a shovel was missing and accused the prisoners of stealing it to sell to the natives. He ranted and raved, denouncing them for their wickedness and ingratitude to the Emperor, demanding that the guilty person should step forward and be punished. Since no one moved he raised his rifle and putting it to his

shoulder he pointed it at the first man in the rank, shouting “All die! All die!”

Before he could fire one of the soldiers stepped forward and said “I did it”. The guard vented all his fury on the prisoner, kicking the man and beating him with his fists, whilst the soldier stood to attention in silence and the blood streamed down his face. This further infuriated the guard who seized his rifle by the barrel and swung it down on to the soldier’s head. He sank to the ground and lay still and, although obviously he was dead, the guard continued beating him until he was exhausted. The rest of the party picked up their comrade’s body and marched back to camp. The tools were counted again when they arrived ---there weren’t any shovels missing

Now, how do you think those other men in the work party felt when that soldier sacrificed his life for them? It would be difficult to describe, but surely it would have included gratitude, admiration, even love. And if after the war one or more of them discovered that that soldier had left a widow and young children, don’t you think they would have felt, not just obliged to do what they could to help that little family, but have wanted to do so and felt privileged to do so. Such love calls forth love and a commitment and moral responsibility which lasts.

I've offered you an alternative understanding of the Atonement. It is quite inadequate, of course, for we are discussing one of the mysteries within God and there are weaknesses in this interpretation, just as there are in each of the three other theories of the Atonement. It is still about blood, wounds and sacrifice but the offering isn't made to God or to the devil – it is made to us. It makes more sense to me after doing theology for 65 years and it is the one of which I have become convinced. What is certain is that humankind needs to be saved and can't save itself. How Christ has brought about the possibility of salvation is nothing like as important as that he has done so.