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**To Bring You to God (1 Peter 3. 8-18)**

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This week saw the beginning of the season of Lent, the season of our preparation for Easter. Traditionally, this is a time for radical truth-telling and penitence. In Lent, we're invited to become present to the parts of ourselves that are in some sense not wholly open to love; ways of being that diminish us and obstruct our reception and sharing of life's gift. These may include things we find painful to face in ourselves or our history; destructive or self-destructive habits of thought or behaviour; wounds we're protecting, defending, inflicting; and fears that bind us – fear of death, fear of failure, fear of rejection and shame. We're invited to recognise how these habits, fears and wounds affect not just ourselves but our world; how they can seed the futile and tragic cycles of violence in which so many families and communities are trapped, by which so many lives are thwarted and cut short. In other words, in Lent we're invited to acknowledge and own before God the whole of our human condition – our struggles and resentments, our broken-heartedness and self-centredness, our need and recalcitrance, our fragility and mortality.

Why? Because, so the church proclaims, something happened in the events we celebrate at Easter that decisively changes these realities and our relationship to them. Something happened over two thousand years ago and is happening still. There is given a way out of the cycle of violence, liberation from fear, healing of wounds, reconciliation of division, forgiveness of sin. Call it redemption, call it salvation, the gift of new life. Something happened. And every year we ready ourselves to receive the gift of that happening anew, to realise it more deeply.

But just what did happen? And how is it supposed to help? This is what I'd like us to explore over the next few weeks, perhaps more directly than we've ever done before at Benedictus. The theme I'm proposing for our Lenten reflections is

‘Atonement’. I want to explore Christianity’s strange and challenging insistence that we are enabled to be at one with God, reconciled with one another and ourselves – thus ‘saved’ – *because* of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. This proclamation is expressed again and again in the New Testament. The gospels present the whole narrative of Jesus’ life and teaching as culminating in the necessity of his suffering and death ‘for our sake’. Likewise, the New Testament letters labour to communicate the claim that ‘Christ was crucified for us’ or, as our text today put it, that ‘Christ ... suffered for sins once and for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God’.

This is not easy to understand, let alone accept. Much of the biblical language used to express this vision is from a completely different thought world to ours. Over the centuries, various understandings of the so-called ‘doctrine of the atonement’ have accumulated significant baggage. Indeed, versions of it have been wielded in truly destructive ways. For many of us, the whole notion ‘atonement’ has been a stumbling block to faith, at times seeming morally repugnant and spiritually nonsensical. Depending on our religious histories, the very idea can be triggering! So before we can really begin to explore this core proclamation, I think we need to clear some conceptual and emotional space. Today, I want to offer some ground-clearing remarks – four touchstones that will orient my approach to our theme.

Remark one: I don’t believe in the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement. Some of you (perhaps mercifully) won’t have a clue what this is! But for many Western Christians this is the default account of why Jesus had to die. James Alison offers a masterful summary of this theory, which goes something like this. God created the world and human beings, and it was all very good. Then there was a ‘fall’ caused by human disobedience and we lost our primal communion with God, with one another and the natural world. Because of this offence to God’s goodness, we became collectively deserving of punishment. God ‘would have been perfectly within his rights to have destroyed the whole of humanity’. But ‘God was merciful as well as just, and so he pondered what to do to sort out the mess. Could he have simply let

the matter by, in his infinite mercy? Well, maybe he would have liked to, but he was beholden to his infinite justice and honour as well. Only an infinite payment could do, something which humans couldn't come up with, but God could'.<sup>1</sup> This is where Jesus comes in. As God's beloved Son, he repays our debt to God (perhaps even taking the punishment we deserve), substituting himself for us and thus atoning for our transgressions. He gives himself (in the words of the 1928 Anglican Prayer Book) 'a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world'.<sup>2</sup>

Now, there are more and less subtle versions of this view, but at the core, it assumes something about God needing to be 'satisfied', if not 'placated' by a sacrificial death, which Jesus makes on our behalf. As I said, there are ways of understanding atonement that seem morally repugnant and spiritually nonsensical, and, for myself, I cannot take this version seriously. The good news is that, despite its default status in the Christian West since about the 11<sup>th</sup> century, we don't have to. As Alison reminds us: 'while it is a matter of faith that Christ worked our salvation, there is no fixed Christian understanding of how he worked our salvation. There have been many attempts to describe the "how", but none has ever commanded the status of immutable orthodoxy'.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, once this 'penal substitutionary theory of atonement' is the framework we're given, there's much in the language of the New Testament that seems to confirm it. But I'm hoping we'll discover over these weeks that there are richer and deeper understandings of this language are also possible.

And this brings me to my second orienting remark. Partly in reaction to this punitive vision of a God obsessed with prosecuting human sinfulness, many contemporary spiritual writers want to emphasise our original or foundational goodness. For many in our culture, the very word 'sin' is considered suspect,

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<sup>1</sup> James Alison, *On Being Liked* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003), pp.18-19.

<sup>2</sup> The Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion, *Book of Common Prayer (1928)*, [accessed <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1928/HC.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Alison, *On Being Liked*, p.17.

connected with a dangerously denigrating view of humanity. The whole idea that we are sinners, or that sin is something 'original' to the human condition and from which we need saving reflects (on this view) a morbid and controlling religiosity. And when you think about all those mediaeval paintings of the torments of hell, the suspicion of human sexuality, the self-loathing and neurotic scrupulosity of historically engendered by much Christian formation, there's clearly an important corrective and critique here.

At the same time, I'm wary of too glib an assurance that intrinsic human goodness is simply and steadily available to us. Think of the atrocities committed by ordinary folk in war, our daily struggle truly to see and to love one another, to dwell in truth and share the life of the earth. I think it's true that goodness and love are our real home, who we're made to be. But isn't it also true that we often find ourselves estranged from our true nature, unable to be and do and love as we would wish? It seems to me that taking seriously the reality of sin and suffering, and thus the need for 'atonement' is not about adopting a systematically negative view of human nature; it's about acknowledging our lived experience of distance from our true destiny, and our yearning for home.

The church proclaims the events of Easter overcome our estrangement, achieve our at-one-ment. And this brings me to my third orienting remark. In exploring the theme of atonement, we're not looking for a theory, a tidy, logical account that gives us a 'reason' for Jesus' suffering and death that will satisfy our theological curiosity. One we can 'grasp' and say we understand and approve of. Rather, we're seeking to enter into the experience of being reconciled, being liberated, which was so clearly undergone by the first Christian converts. This experience was articulated by them in a range of metaphors and images, and attested to by the transfigured shape of their lives. Atonement isn't first and foremost a doctrine, a theory, an idea. It's something you undergo, 'something that

*happens to and at you*'.<sup>4</sup> This means that to come to know what we think we're talking about, we need to be willing to open ourselves to the happening to which the doctrine points, willing to embark on the journey from which it springs.

Which brings us, fourth and finally, back to Lent and the extent of our willingness to undergo, to 'suffer', the events of Easter such that they may work in us to bring *us* to God. It returns us to the invitation to be present to the whole truth of our lives and the life of our world – not wallowing in self-hatred or calling ourselves nasty names – but simply acknowledging where we are in pain or alienated, where we are struggling and in need of help, being available to receive. In this way, in the words of James McAuley's Lenten hymn:

As we keep this Lent with prayer  
and from pleasures are withdrawn,  
minds and bodies we prepare  
for the joy of Easter dawn.

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<sup>4</sup> James Alison, *Undergoing God: Dispatches from the scene of a break-in* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2006), p.52.