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Atoning Sacrifice (1 Corinthians 1. 18-25)

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We proclaim Christ crucified. A stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. As it is for many in our culture, many of us.

As you know, this Lent at Benedictus, we're exploring the theme of atonement – the New Testament's rich and mysterious conviction that somehow, because of the cross, a new kind of communion has become possible between human and divine life, between human beings and the whole created order. So far, we've touched on the first disciples' testimony that the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection opened access for them to what St Paul called 'justifying grace'. This was a profound experience of knowing themselves accepted, forgiven and rightly related, and thus enabled us to see themselves and each other through new eyes. No longer rivals for a place in the world, for a goodness or righteousness of their own; no longer competing for status or identity, but simply 'one in Christ'. All equally loved, equally wanted and called to be, regardless of where they had come from and what they had done or suffered. This was the impact of the events of Easter in their human experience.

But (to put it crudely) what was the mechanism? How is the death, the blood, the crucifixion of Jesus, supposedly necessary for all this to have come about? Couldn't they have just *decided* (perhaps with a bit of therapy) to be less hard on themselves and nicer to each other? Well – this is our question for today! And I warn you, it will take a couple of weeks fully to unpack.

I want to start with the idea of sacrifice, since this is one of the key notions used to account for Jesus' death and its meaning. In the Hebrew Scriptures, sacrifice is 'the gift that makes peace with God'. In ancient Israel, 'when you are alienated from God because of moral or ritual irregularity, you have to ask what you need to

give in order to restore relationship – recognising that the giving will be costly'.¹ In this tradition, sacrifice applies to a range of actions. It can mean the ritual slaughter of an animal as an offering to God, but it can also mean the offering of the first fruits of the harvest (Numbers 18.13) or refer to a disposition of the human person. Psalm 51 speaks of the sacrifice of a contrite heart, and other texts of the sacrifice of obedience. And just as 'sacrifice' applies to a range of offerings, so it's seen as having a variety of effects from propitiating or compensating for sin to purifying uncleanness, from ratifying a covenant to expressing thankfulness for God's goodness and provision. All these resonances can be discerned in the New Testament's language about the meaning of Christ's death.

So for example, there are passages that speak of Christ propitiating sin 'by his blood' and of 'the new covenant in his blood' (1 Corinthians 11.25; Hebrews 9. 23-28); there are others describing him as the 'first fruits' of those who have died (1 Corinthians 15.20) and his life as a sacrifice of obedience (Philippians 2.8). We don't need to get too fixated on any one way of conceiving this, as if any of these are some final 'explanation' for why Jesus had to die. The key point, as already noted, is that in the biblical imagination, sacrifice is always ultimately to do with enacting and enabling harmony between divine and human life. It's about 'making peace', ensuring at-one-ment. And that's the essential point of the use of this *metaphor* of sacrifice as a way of speaking about the meaning of the cross.

But still – how does it work? What is it about this costly offering of Jesus' life, his 'sacrifice even to death', that is supposed to make such a difference? To start to get at this question, I want to draw out two seemingly contradictory ways the New Testament speaks about how Jesus dies. The first puts the stress on his innocence. From the centurion in Luke's gospel exclaiming at the moment of his death, 'Certainly, this man was innocent' (Luke 23.47) to the claim in the Letter to the Hebrews that 'he was tempted in every way as we are, yet he did not sin' (Hebrews 4.15), the sense of Jesus as an innocent victim is key in the tradition. This focus on

¹ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p.87.

Jesus' innocence offers a particular way of seeing how his self-offering might be redemptive.

The basic insight is that Jesus is a human being profoundly free of the seemingly unavoidable traits of self-interest and self-defence that lead the rest of us into rivalry and threatenedness – in a word 'sin'. His is a life that from beginning to end is purely and simply given. Given in the sense that he does not grasp an identity apart from God, *and* in the sense that he gives himself wholly for the life of the world. He incarnates what Rowan Williams has called 'an economy of gift'.² Thus he is innocent, not primarily in the sense that he's kept his hands clean, but in the sense that he has no part in the cycles of threat and violence that shape so much of our identities, our relationships, our world. This is part of what gives rise to the language of Jesus being divine. Into a world 'tissued and structured by sin' (as our gathering prayer put it), comes someone who is completely un-determined by those dynamics because he is completely saturated with the life of God.³

Of course, the problem is that such a life, such liberty, is always going to be threatening to those whose power is sourced in deploying fear and threat, rivalry and domination. Such a life will unsettle the patterns and identities we all know how to negotiate, and so attract suspicion if not the outright enmity of 'the rulers of this world'. From this perspective, the killing of Jesus is the fairly predictable outcome of the challenge he posed to the status quo. What is redemptive about it is not his death *per se*, but the fact that he enters knowingly, willingly and lovingly into the maelstrom so as to make known to us that it has no ultimate power, and is nothing to do with God (no matter how religiously sanctioned it might claim to be). By his entering the heart of the world's darkness and returning to his friends alive and proclaiming peace, he makes it possible for us to live freely in the midst.

This is a sense in which Jesus can be said to bear the sin of the world; he suffers its impact, absorbs its force, so as to break its power over human life from within. St Paul writes of the sense of unwarranted, unlooked for gift in all this, in his

² Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, p.82.

³ Cf. Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, p.83.

letter to the Romans: 'rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us' (Rom.5.7-8). Interestingly, although this passage goes on to speak of Christ saving us from 'the wrath of God', the Greek text speaks only of being saved 'from the wrath'. And 'wrath', suggests James Alison, is a way of speaking about human violence, not God's.⁴ Jesus is the innocent victim who suffers our wrath to liberate us from it. 'Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1. 29).

But there is a second strand in the New Testament's language about all this. Alongside the notion that Jesus goes to his death an 'innocent' man, there is also a sense in which Jesus is said to have become a transgressor. St Paul again: 'For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Cor. 5.21). And again: 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us' (Gal. 3.13).

How might we understand this? Williams interprets the notion of Jesus 'becoming sin' as to do with his total embodiment of sin's impact in human life. When he faces the violent rejection of the religious and political powers of his day, he embodies the loving purposes and free gift of God. But he also embodies 'the effects of the self-destructiveness of human beings'. He suffers in his own experience the *impact* of sin in human life. Williams writes: 'What is happening to Jesus [on the cross] – his dreadful physical suffering, his mental and spiritual torment as he cries to God asking why he has been forsaken – is a sort of picture of our ultimate fate' to the extent that humanity persists in unreality, 'cut off from what is true'.⁵

Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests something similar, saying that Jesus does not just take on the 'cause of human beings', but he takes on 'humanity bodily'.⁶ But for Bonhoeffer it seems this means not just suffering the *impact* of sin, showing us

⁴ James Alison, 'Wrath and the gay question' in *Broken Hearts & New Creations: Intimations of a Great Reversal* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010), p.39.

⁵ Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, p.86.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6, ed. Clifford J.Green (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2009), p.84.

where we are headed when we reject God's goodness and truth. It's more that by becoming fully human, encompassing our worst as well as our best, some kind of reconciliation is effected in his body itself. It is accomplished. 'In Christ the reconciliation of the world with God took place'⁷ – and for Bonhoeffer this has to do with Christ being truly our brother, being one of us, and so bringing the whole of our humanity, including our suffering, aggression, fear and guilt, into the abyss of God's love where it is embraced and thereby its power extinguished. 'God takes on responsibility for godlessness, love for hate, the holy one for the sinner'.⁸ There is no dimension in human being, nowhere we can go and no one we can become, that is henceforth inaccessible to God. 'Now there is no more godlessness, hate, or sin that God has not taken upon himself, suffered and atoned. Now there is no longer any reality, any world, that is not reconciled with God and at peace'.⁹

We began with the question of what it is about the crucifixion of Jesus, his being put to death, that is necessary to effect atonement. I've focused on the New Testament's exploration of this mystery in terms both of Jesus' innocence and his solidarity in sin. I've tried to show how each of these ways of seeing him offers a perspective on how his death might have been experienced by those who knew him, not just as another murder of a righteous man, but as a deliberate offering, a *sacrifice* that opened up a new set of possibilities for human being.

The imagery, the theology, the felt sense of mystery expressed in the texts about all this is varied, and impossible to pin into a system. But notice that whether the emphasis falls on Jesus' 'innocence' or his 'becoming sin for us', in neither case do they require the idea that Jesus' self-offering was necessary to appease an angry deity. Much more do they reflect the sense that Jesus has come from God, in and with the power of God's Spirit, to liberate us from the spiral of human violence and to unbind energy tied up in futility. And for more on how we undergo this atonement and make his liberation our own – stay tuned for next week!

⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p.82.

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