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By His Wounds (Acts 8. 26-35)

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Some of you have commented that I've talked more about my own story in our Lenten series on atonement than I usually do. I've done so because I am trying to draw these theological reflections into conversation with lived experience and the reality of our world. In theological education, the doctrine of the atonement can often be discussed in abstract and systematic terms. This isn't all bad. Different so-called 'theories' of atonement can help clarify some of the questions we are asking, as well as the theological assumptions and commitments we bring. But these 'theories' can also have the effect of distancing us from the reality of which they speak. They can leave us with the biggest question unresolved. And that is, how does the supposed 'at-one-ment' achieved by the death and resurrection of Christ make a difference? How does it help us, help me, to live more freely and lovingly, in a world that seems still profoundly divided and alienated from its own good?

I began this series by asking what it was about the events of Easter that made this kind of difference to Jesus' disciples. According to their own account, they had failed in the most spectacular way. When their friend and teacher was arrested and condemned to death, they'd mostly run away, denied him and betrayed themselves. Jesus died a lonely death and their new lives in his company seemed over. But then something unexpected happened. He returned, somehow living on the other side of death, still offering his friendship, still calling them to life. And whatever exactly the nature of this experience, it showed them that their failure was forgivable. It made them realise that God was utterly on their side, despite everything they had done and failed to do.

It gave them a sense of profound belonging and security, of knowing themselves now wholly and indefeasibly loved, which is movingly celebrated in Paul's letter to the Romans: 'Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or

distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom. 8. 35, 37-39). This realisation is what Paul calls 'justification'. It's a profound experience of being newly oriented and rightly related to the whole. It is grace, because it arrives not as a reward for moral success or dessert but through the sheer gift of God who calls us to be. But how do we come to know this grace for ourselves? To feel it? To be changed by it?

Well, as for those first disciples, it requires us to face the whole truth of ourselves – our shadow as well as our light; it requires us to know our inability to love purely, out of our own resource. And though most of us are willing to acknowledge this in principle, sometimes we only really know it when we fail ... when our carefully constructed identities and good intentions fall apart, and we can't even try to put ourselves together again. Which is why it's often easier for the 'sinner', the failed and broken-hearted to find their way into the kingdom of God, than it is for the person who has always done the 'right' thing' and can sustain a sense of making it on their own. Think of the contrast between the prodigal son and his uptight older brother in Jesus' parable. For this reason, Julian of Norwich speaks of our 'sins become our glory' and the mediaeval church celebrated the 'happy fault', *felix culpa*, which becomes the occasion of our breakthrough into trusting dependence on God. Justification is a fruit of being humbled, of knowing yourself forgiven, accepted and in need of love. This was the gift to Jesus' broken-hearted disciples of his risen presence.

But this can make it sound as though Jesus' death is merely the occasion for his disciples' failure and thus their coming to know the liberation of being justified by grace. Is that it? Or is there something in his dying itself, in his undergoing suffering and mortality in a spirit of self-offering love that accomplishes something – that

releases grace in a new way, as a new kind of power? This brings us to the notion of Christ's 'sacrifice' which we began to explore last week.

From the earliest days of Christian proclamation, a key way of making sense of Jesus' death was in terms of the Suffering Servant passages in the prophet Isaiah. Writing in the 6th century before Christ, Isaiah speaks of one who 'was despised and rejected', 'a man of suffering and acquainted with grief', one who 'was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities' and by whose wounds 'we are healed' (Isaiah 53.3, 5). It's an image of the Messiah who will save his people by suffering on their behalf. And it's this text the Ethiopian eunuch, returning from the festival in Jerusalem, is reading when he is interrupted by Jesus' disciple Philip, running up to his chariot. 'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him' (Acts 8. 32-33). And Philip immediately connects this quotation from Isaiah to 'the good news about Jesus'.

Now of course this imagery of sacrifice, a lamb led to slaughter, an innocent victim 'stricken', wounded, crushed for our iniquities is highly problematic for most of us. Undoubtedly, it can play into a sub-Christian understanding of atonement; the idea that Jesus had to die to appease an angry God who needed to punish or be compensated for the sins of humankind. But we don't have to hear it this way. For me the sense is rather that Jesus, God's Son and our friend, has come deliberately to offer himself into the systems of injustice and violence that bedevil our life together, so as to dilute terror's power and 'draw the sting of death' (as St Paul puts it).

There is a psychological analogy that I think helps us get a sense of this. Think of the most wounding and painful of our life experiences. If we suffer the grief of losing a loved one, for example, we don't begin to heal and integrate the great chasm in our life by bypassing the pain or by avoiding the depth of our sorrow and loss. It's the same for the suffering of failure, shame, remorse, despair. We cannot stand outside the full impact of our pain and expect it just to go away. What is not taken up (not lived or incarnated or integrated) is not healed, wrote Gregory of

Nazianzus. Somehow the truth of our suffering must be undergone, but in such a way that it is reconciled, rather than simply leaving us broken and acting out of our pain.

The Christian proclamation is that this is not just a psychological truth, but an ontological one. There is a woundedness in human being itself – a tendency to become alienated in our relationship with God, with ourselves, one another and the whole created order. Rowan Williams writes: ‘In humanity’s history, the ingrained habit of turning inwards, turning in upon ourselves, is passed on. We learn how to be human only as we also learn the habits of self-absorption. We learn what we want ... by wanting someone else wanting it and competing with them for it’.¹ There are individuals we might identify as obviously destructive and even evil, but the chain of destruction doesn’t originate or terminate in any one person. The narcissism of a Trump, the cruelty of a Putin, the selfishness, distraction and greed that pushes away effective political engagement with modern day slavery, with the plight of asylum seekers, the destruction of the natural world – all these emerge from a larger web of distorted relations and unintegrated pain that have the effect of deforming psyches and cultures, wreaking destruction and blighting lives.

This is not the whole of reality or the whole truth about human beings. But it’s there. We are formed for life yet find ourselves enmeshed in systems and cultures that deal death; we’re formed for freedom and love, yet find ourselves too often trapped, threatened, diminished and afraid ... seemingly powerless to transform the whole. The gospel’s proclamation is that Christ has entered into this web. He has suffered its impact (he drinks the cup); he does not just psychologically bear his own suffering and sorrow, but somehow opens his being to the full horror of the world’s pain and frustration. undefended, with his arms extended wide, he undergoes it. In total transparency to God and in total solidarity with human woundedness, he becomes the point of connection, the mediator, the one who reconciles all things in his body.

¹ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p.82.

What is he doing? The New Testament describes it in various ways. He is entering the heart of darkness in the power of God's spirit; he is bringing the world's evil before the merciful and reconciling judgement of God; he is offering himself to redeem our transgressions. And in some mysterious way, so the gospel proclaims, because this has happened – because an actual, embodied human being bore our sorrows without reserve and without remainder, something has shifted, been reconciled. What has been taken up and integrated is healed at root. Yes, that shift awaits its full realisation in us personally and corporately. Yes, the power of 'no' to life's gift continues to affect our life in the world. But, the victory is won. And the particular has become the universal. 'For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as in Adam all die, so in Christ will all be made alive' (1 Corinthians 15.21-22).

Is this true? Do these images, this story, tell the truth about the world and our condition? Well, we can't know at the level of theory. But the testimony of our tradition is that the more we join ourselves to this energy of love, this consciousness of Christ, the more we find it reconciling us and the more we're able to participate in his ministry of reconciliation. And so Oscar Romero can face his assassins in solidarity with the poor, Etty Hillesum can go to her death in Auschwitz practising love for her guards, and Alexei Navalny can return to his oppressors for the sake of his people. And thousands of others whose names are unknown to us live in such a way as to bear God's freedom and peace in the midst of fractured communities and corrupt systems, knowing themselves sustained by more than their own commitments and values. They are tethered to a reality larger than they are; infused by its power and compassion, even as they suffer the impact of a world opposed.

Writes Martin Laird: 'God in Christ has taken into Himself the brokenness of the human condition. Hence, human woundedness, brokenness, death itself are transformed from dead ends to doorways into Life'.² May we know it to be so.

² Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.119.