



Sermon: - 25th March 2018

What does Atonement mean?

Mark 15: 1 – 39

‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord.

Today, I’ve done something that I have never done in my life before. I began my sermon with a verse that is not in the reading. It’s a common practice with some preachers but I never saw sense of it before today. The reason I did this today is so that we can have at the front of our minds this significant fact. Our thoughts are not his thoughts, our ways are not his ways, and isn’t it the height of arrogance to imagine that we can understand the ways of God. All revelation is simply an imperfect reflection of God’s truth. We cannot know everything, we cannot perfectly understand anything, and full revelation will only be ours after death.

That was the introduction. Now to the nub of the question, raised by the passage we read from the gospel. The passage that describes the crucifixion of Jesus, his death so that we might have life. This truth, that by his death we are saved, is known by theologians as the Atonement, and so the question is, “what does Atonement mean?” A number of years ago a fierce debate broke out in the Christian community. It centred around comments made by Steve Chalke, the Christian writer and broadcaster. He said that the way some Christians describe the atonement, that the death of Jesus, God’s son, was required by God because someone had to die to pay the price for our sin amounted to “cosmic child abuse.” He was accused of blasphemy and basically shunned by those whom he had previously counted friends and colleagues. It was indeed a very inflammatory phrase. But I think it highlights the fact that there is a lot of misunderstanding around the death of Jesus on the cross and the way in which it achieves our salvation.

This morning I thought I would give some consideration to the various explanations that theologians throughout the centuries given to this central event in the Christian story. There are many different explanations and each of them highlights a different aspect of the atonement. None of them, in and of itself, gives the full picture. Thinking back to the text we opened with, we cannot have the full picture this side of eternity.

There are many different views, and different denominations of the Christian church, and even different branches within the denominations tend to favour one view over another. However, they

can all basically be reduced to about seven theories and I will outline each of them ... very briefly and, I hope, very simply! It's important to note that each of them is based on strands that can be found in Scripture. I have noted with each theory a single verse of Scripture but in fact each theory is based on many verses and strands within scripture.

The first view I want to consider is the ransom

theory. Mark 10: 45 For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

This theory suggests that when humanity fell from grace, Adam and Eve effectively sold us to Satan. As a result, justice requires that God pay a ransom to set us free. He offered his own son. The Devil accepted this without realising that Christ, being sinless, could not be held by death. And so, once Satan accepted Christ's death as ransom, justice was satisfied, and we were set free. St Augustine explains it like this, "by shedding the blood of Jesus, who was not in his debt, Satan was forced to release his debtors." For the first thousand years of Christian history this was the main understanding of the atonement.

The second theory is called Christus Victor. We read in 1 Corinthians 15:54: When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'

In this we are told that Christ's death defeated the powers of evil which had held us in captivity. It is like the ransom theory, but not quite the same, as it does not have the same sense of buying back, but is simply about Christ, in his resurrection from death, defeating the powers of evil.

The third theory is the moral influence theory. John 13:34: 'A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.'

The point of this theory is that Jesus' purpose in coming to earth was to show us how to live properly. He gave us a moral example through his teachings and the way he lived his life. The movement that he founded, Christianity, and the inspiring effect of his death and resurrection lead us to want to live better lives. This is one of the oldest views of the atonement in the history of the church, as far back as the second and third centuries. In this theory, Christ's life teaches us how we should live and Christ's death teaches us how much God loves us.

The fourth theory is the satisfaction theory. Romans 6:23: For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Satisfaction in this sense means mending what was broken or paying back what was taken. Because our God is a just God, anything that goes against that justice has to be paid for. It's a legal transaction. In this theory Jesus was crucified, paying back the debt that we had incurred through our sin. He was a substitute for us, satisfying God's just wrath against us.

The fifth theory is the recapitulation theory. Ephesians 1:9-10

he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment – to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

In this line of thought Christ is the second Adam who succeeded where Adam failed. Christ undoes the wrong that Adam did and because he is human, as well as divine, he reads us back to the hope of eternal life which we lost when Adam sinned. Through the sin of the human race in the beginning the course of our development went wrong. It was impossible for any human person to change the direction in which we were heading and so Christ came, to live a perfect life set us on the right path once again. In Christ, we regained what we had lost in Adam, to live according to the image and likeness of God.

The sixth theory is the scapegoat theory. Leviticus 16: 10 'the goat chosen ... as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the LORD to be used for making atonement by sending it into the wilderness as a scapegoat.'

In the Old Testament, the scapegoat was the animal on which the sins of the community were ritually placed. It was then driven away into the desert. This is seen as prefiguring the death of Christ on the cross, Christ becomes our scapegoat, all our sins are laid on him, and taken away.

The final theory I want to outline this morning is the penal substitution theory. 1 Peter 2:24 'He himself bore our sins' in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; 'by his wounds you have been healed.' In this theory, Christ by his own sacrificial choice was punished in place of sinners. In this way he satisfied the demands of justice so that God can justly forgive the sins of humanity. This theory comes from the idea that divine forgiveness must satisfy divine justice. That is God is neither willing nor able to forgive sin without first exacting punishment for it. In this view, God, in Jesus, took on himself the punishment rather than putting it on someone else.

You might also have heard the term substitutionary atonement. In a sense this is an umbrella term for some of the theories we have already considered: the ransom theory, Christus Victor, penal

substitution. Therefore, it is not a single theory in its own right but shorthand for a number of theories. One interesting thing about this is that for some reason in certain strands of Christianity this term has been used as if it is the only explanation. However, it is still only part of the truth.

The significance of all of this is, to come back to the point at which I started, that we cannot understand exactly how Christ's death reconciles us to God. Millions of words, and I don't exaggerate, have been written and spoken in an attempt to understand this mystery. All of these different theories cast a little light on the mystery. In a sense, it is like sun shining through a stained-glass window. We need all the different colours to make up the full picture. I don't know what you believe about the crucifixion and the death of Jesus, but I believe that each of these theories has something to teach us. For me, there is no single theory that is more important than any of the others because, in the end of the day, they are all just theories.

For me, the important thing is that, in ways we cannot understand, Jesus, who is God, in being born as a human being, living among us, dying on the cross, and rising to life, repaired the breach between us and God and gave us back the hope of life eternal. As we enter this Holy Week we are presented once again with the miracle of our salvation. We hear once again the story of the love of Jesus, for us, although we are ungrateful, selfish, self-centred, sinful. The love that led him to an unimaginable act of self-sacrifice. As he was lifted up on the cross, humanity was united in its most depraved act, the murder of God. We could sink no lower; we had done our worst, yet still he cries out, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do!" That knowledge, that experience of the incomprehensible love of God, his capacity to forgive our worst sin, draws us back to him in repentance and love in return. In the end, although we do not yet see it, Jesus will draw all people, and all things into his loving embrace. Having been united in an act of extreme wickedness, humanity, finally, will be united, through the grace of God, in the extreme blessing of a new creation. Holy Week is the week in which we remember his final days. Days which are of such immense significance to us as Christians. We can never fully understand what it meant for Jesus to die. But we can take time to remember that he did, to remember that it was for us, and to respond to that in love.