

**NEAC 2003**  
**Saturday 20 September 4.30 pm**  
**The Atonement – the Heart of our Message**  
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**The Just God – good news, but do we want him?**

Here is some really good news: the Lord says, 'I will never acquit the guilty' (Ex 23:7). This means that the universe is not a morally chaotic jungle, where might is right and evil will triumph. There is one righteous God who rules over all things and, even though sin and evil may abound that is not going to be the final state of things: 'I will not acquit the guilty.' Here is a sentence full of hope and promise that God's good kingdom will come.

The fact that you are not exactly cheerful about this news shows that you have noted the catch. Good as it is to know that evil will not triumph, what if we are included amongst the guilty? In the light of God's known character and his known will for the human race, this seems more than certain. You do not need a God who never acquits the guilty. You need a God who acquits the ungodly. But what sort of God would that be?

**We dream of freedom – but we are in slavery**

Contemporary human beings dream of freedom: it is our great hope and our chief ambition. We want to be free of all outside influence; we want to be so free that we can do whatever we please. The Bible knows nothing of utterly free human beings. It only knows of men and women in bondage to their lords. Jesus himself said: 'Everyone who sins is a slave to sin' (John 8:34). That is, we have the status of a slave, unable to be free. The Bible says that we are enslaved by our fear of death, and with good reason. Death is not the natural end of life, an opening to the peace of oblivion. Death is the opening to judgement in which the law of God will condemn the sin of our hearts and tongues and lives: 'The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law' (1 Cor 15:56).

Death itself is God's judgement on our sinfulness, and the law of God reveals to our consciences, that beyond death there is a judgement with a God before whose justice we should quail. More, we are prey to the fashions of this world, mindlessly following the mob in its denial of God. More, we are spiritually captive, blinded by the god of this world, the prince of this world (Eph 2:1-3); and he holds the power of death (Heb 2:14). In the secularist west, unbelief is the great triumph of the evil one. The gospel that Jesus Christ is Lord, remains God's answer.

**The freedom of having a good Lord – Jesus Christ**

The freedom we need is the freedom of having a good Lord, one who will acquit the guilty because he is righteous. The essence of the Christian gospel is that Jesus Christ is that Lord. In a society which was so familiar with slavery, to preach Christ as Lord was to say that there was a new possibility open for human beings. The evil of slavery was compounded by having a bad master. The gospel offered all people a wonderful, kind and generous master; true freedom via slavery to the Lord. Your freedom was not, that you could

choose to do whatever you pleased, but that you were bound to a good master, who would choose what you should please. This Lord was Jesus Christ.

### **How did the Lord acquire you?**

How did this Lord acquire you? Following the metaphor of slavery, the apostolic preachers tell us that he acquired his slaves through purchase, through redemption, through ransom. Our release from deadly bondage to the world and sin and the evil one and the fear of death has been accomplished by a great Lord. We, therefore, owe him everything which both the rights of purchase, and thankful hearts can bring him. Furthermore, and it is here of course that the language of ransom breaks its own boundaries, he did not purchase us with money, but through his own death. Again and again in the New Testament we discover the truly crucial point, the pivotal moment in our salvation is the death of Jesus Christ. His incarnation, his resurrection, his ascension - all these and more are essential to his work. But it is his death which is the key. It is no accident that the gospels give so much attention to his death and that Paul can say: 'we preach Christ crucified' (1 Cor 1:23).

Up until now we were united to Adam, a real loser; we were members of a team doomed to relegation, to annihilation. By the power of his Spirit, Christ now unites us to himself, so that all the blessings of God are, and are to be, ours. Listen to five of these blessings.

### **Five blessings of Christ's redemption**

#### Release from bondage

First of all, we have been released from bondage to the evil one. We are now in Christ's kingdom, the kingdom of light. We were in the kingdom of darkness – the kingdom where Satan ruled by keeping us in the dark and unable to escape - but the Lord has raided the powers of darkness and has released us. His victory was for our benefit. How did he accomplish this? Was it by 'paying' Satan? Not so: our redemption is described as forgiveness. That is, the way in which Satan has been defeated and we have been freed, is by God forgiving us (Col 1:13-14), and becoming our Lord himself.

#### Release from adverse verdict of the law

Second, we have been set free from the law - not in the sense that we have no law, for we are under the law of Christ – but in the sense that we have been released from the condemning power of sin, which is the adverse verdict of the law. The Jews were under law in the sense that they knew this condemning verdict all too well. But we Gentiles were also under the law, in the sense that it was by the law that we were excluded from the people of God, alienated from God's promises and without God and without hope in the world. Now, because of the death of Jesus, the power of the law to divide people, and the power of the law to condemn people has been destroyed, 'He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code with its regulations, that was against to us, and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross' (Col 2:13-14). Now, through the death of Jesus Christ, both Jew and Gentile together in one body, have access to God on exactly the same terms, by grace (Eph 2: 11-22).

### Release from condemnation of judgment

Third, we have been set free from condemnation in the judgement. The Bible says that we have been justified: the judicial verdict of God over our sinful lives has been delivered and he has done the ungodlike thing of 'justifying the ungodly'; we already stand acquitted from the verdict of God's judgement, without any works to commend us to God. The result is that we have been reconciled to God: owing to our deep and persistent sinfulness, we were the enemies of God. Now, through what Christ has done by dying for us, we have peace with God, the pacification of our spiritual enemies, the end of enmity, reconciliation. Even more than that, we have now entered into a new covenant with the Lord, sealed with his blood; a covenant relationship which brings forgiveness through his death.

### The adopted children of God

Fourth, we have become the adopted children of God. He has purchased us out of misery and darkness, not because we have commended ourselves to him by our righteousness, but sheerly from his grace. On these grounds, the New Testament is able to give us the immense privilege of assurance of God's love. If it depended at all on us, there could be no assurance. But, as Paul says in Romans 5:5, love is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. He is speaking not of our love for God, but of the way in which through the Holy Spirit, God persuades us of his love for us.

The text of Romans 5:1-11 shows us the grounds of this assurance. It is not because of good works which we have done and which may give us a brief and vain-glorious boast in the presence of the Lord. Our peace with God comes because we have been justified by faith. Our assurance, our hope, persists despite the suffering which we may pass through. It persists, this utter persuasion that God loves us, because of the great objective fact of the gospel: 'at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly...But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.' (Rom 5:6-8).

### New creation in Christ

Fifth, we have become a new creation in Christ. You cannot acquire a master like Jesus Christ without transformation of your life. We are not transformed in order to be his; we are transformed as a result of being his. It transforms our attitude to the world; we may have been afraid of evil spirits, fearful of luck or chance; dubious about the future. But the Bible tells us that there is one God in charge of all things and the death of Jesus assures us of his special love towards us, and that we can never be separated from him. The defeat of evil spirits is the victory of the cross in securing our forgiveness, our justification and our adoption. In this way, we who were slaves 'to those who were by nature are not gods' (Gal 4:9), are now secure in the freedom of serving Christ as Lord.

Furthermore, because there is no longer any struggle to make God love us, or to prove worthy of God's love, we are set free to do the things which please him for the right reason. The faith that justifies, the repentant faith which puts

us under the Lordship of Christ, is filled with the love of Jesus. We now love him, for he first loved us. Out of this faith and shaped by this love comes obedience, and flowering of the good works which God has prepared for us to walk in. In particular, impelled by the love of Christ for us we find ourselves loving those whom the Lord has united with us in the church, because he has loved the church and has given himself for her. That was always his great intention: to save a particular people. He has not failed.

The life of the Christian is a cross-shaped life. Indeed, as Christians we can never graduate beyond the cross; our piety is cross-centred, or it is hardly Christian. As the master has walked, so do the slaves. He said: 'whoever wants to be the first, must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.' (Mk 10;44-45). We see in his love two matchless qualities which we are impelled (nonetheless) to imitate: First, a total self-giving, in which no price too high to pay for the good of the other. Second, a self-giving for those who are our enemies, who have nothing to commend them, who have no merits.

### **The how and why of redemption**

These are five blessings which come from the purchase of broken-down and miserable slaves by Jesus Christ, and their being united to him. I have talked mainly about the *what* of the redemption - that which has flowed from it: reconciliation, forgiveness, victory, transformation. But, *how* is it that the God of justice may achieve these things and still be true to his own character? Here we must turn to the language of atonement.

Some people become very nervous at this question. They believe that there is a danger that we may be too precise. They think that we can know little or nothing about how God has been righteous and saved people at the same time. They would prefer to leave the question of how in the sphere of theory and speculation if it is to be handled at all. About such people James Denney said: 'they profess to believe in the fact of the atonement, but they despair of finding any theory of it. There are even some who glory in this situation; it is not with despair, but with triumph, that they find in the very heart of the gospel a mystery which is simply insoluble, in the very focus of revelation a spot of pure impenetrable black.' (*idem* p 106).

Denny is right; our hesitation to be clear robs us of something important. I want to say that we may go as far as the Bible itself takes us. When we do, we have the joy and satisfaction of learning from the Lord himself something of how it is that the death of his Son has brought forgiveness and redemption; we cannot understand it all, but what he gives us illumines all the rest, and gives us a proper and an amazing and a joyous sense of satisfaction that he is both just, and at the same time the one who justifies the ungodly who have faith in Jesus (Rom 3:26). At the heart of the universe there is a just God – thank God for that!

### **They crucified the Lord of Glory**

First of all, let us remember who Jesus is. Paul says that the rulers of this age 'crucified the Lord of glory'; they put God to death. We know that the one they

crucified was the man Jesus Christ; but we know too that he was both God and man; that in his coming and in his life and in his death we do not see the falling apart of God, but the work of God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Lord who has saved us is the Prince of Peace, mighty to save. It is God himself who has taken this action. He has identified himself with us so absolutely that we see in him the revelation that God understands our sin-induced griefs from within: 'a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering...he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows' (Is 53:3,4) – even in the garbage dumps of Brazil.

### **The sacrifice of Jesus**

Then let us note that to describe what he has done, the scriptures use the category of sacrifice. The old sacrifices of bulls and goats could not take away sin, though they point with utmost clarity for the need that we have that our sins should be removed through blood-shedding. But now, 'Just as man is destined to die once, and after that face judgement, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people' (Heb 9:27). This was a sacrifice of himself; he made it by his choice; so great and all sufficient was it that it has never and can never be repeated, not even sacramentally; we cannot add to it or supplement it. Three great words help us to understand the significance of it.

### Substitution

In the first place it was as a *substitute* that he made it; he took the place of those whom he came to save. Certainly he acted on our behalf, as our representative in regard to sin; but his acting on our behalf is precisely because we are powerless to do it ourselves. In that case, to act on our behalf is to act as our substitute, to act in our place: 'Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man', says Paul, '...while we were still sinners, Christ died for us'. To die for another person must be to die in the place of that person; it is the only way my death for him or her can make sense. In our case, since the wages of sin is death, and since we are sinners, and since Christ has rescued us, it must in some way be by the exchanging of his death for ours: 'one died for all, and therefore all died...' (2 Cor 5:14).

### Punishment

Secondly it was a *punishment* which he endured by becoming this substitute for us. This of course, was prefigured in Isaiah 53: 'he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed'. The New Testament again and again connects the death of Christ to our sins. This is its great theme. And when it does, it means that God himself is one who actively punishes; it is not merely a matter of sin being its own reward. Thus the New Testament speaks of Christ 'bearing sin', of him 'becoming a curse', even of him 'becoming sin'. There is no doubt as to the significance of these expressions: you 'bear sin' by taking the penalty of sin, by paying the price of sin, by being punished for sin, by receiving in yourself the judgment on sin. 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree...by his wounds you have been healed' (1 Peter 2:24). It is useless hoping that there is no such thing as punishment in a just universe. It is useless hoping that you will not merit

punishment in a just universe. You can only hope that somehow, someone will lovingly bear your punishment and that the universe will still be just.

When Christ was handed over by his own people to the pagan occupying power, it was understood to be a mark of judgement. He fell under the curse of God, for when Israel went into exile, that is precisely what was happening. As the story unfolds, say in the gospel of Mark, there is every sign of the wrath of God being experienced: the betrayal, the abandonment of friends, the twofold negative judicial verdict by those who were the agents of God in justice, the darkness at noonday, the great cry of dereliction from the cross. It is important to see here not some heavenly Trinitarian transaction occurring out of our sight, but the actual, real, in the body acceptance of judgement, by a totally righteous man, for the sake of those who did deserve to be forsaken by God. 'In my place condemned he stood.'

### Propitiation

Thirdly, there is the word *propitiation*, a word which takes us back to Christ's death as a sacrifice. 'Propitiation' is a personal word: it means to turn aside anger or wrath. I expiate a sin; I propitiate a person. The scriptures speak of the wrath of God, his holy anger against sin and those who sin against him. His anger is just and thoroughly righteous; it is deserved by us. If there were no anger of God in this universe we would be living in an unjust and hopeless world. But the fact that we are the enemies of God means that we are by nature the children of wrath. It is this which John means when he writes: 'He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world' (1 John 2:2).

There is sometimes resistance to this way of talking about the death of Jesus. Such resistance is understandable if it is presented as it were as the loving Son being punished by the angry Father. But such is not the New Testament description. To quote Professor Thiselton, 'Propitiation leads to disastrous distortion, only if we fail to emphasize, that God himself is the *source* of the action, not that Christ "propitiates" an angry and reluctant God' (in The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 2000, p1191). It was the Lord of Glory who was crucified for us; unlike the pagan gods, he provided the propitiation himself, of himself. In the great words of James Denney, some say, 'God is love... and therefore he dispenses with propitiation; God is love, say the apostles, for he provides propitiation' (Studies in Theology, H &S, London, 1906).

Likewise people are sometimes troubled by penal substitution, asking how one person can be punished in place of another. Once again the answer is to be found in the Person of the substitute, for in God's way of ordering his universe, the actions of one can be made for another, as in the case of Adam; so, too, by his willing choice, the Lord of glory himself may sustain the cost to be paid by his own penalty, when he saves his own people, unites them with himself and exchanges his righteousness for their sin: 'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Cor 5:21).

However I believe that the difficulties with the doctrine I have set forth here arise from another source than those I have mentioned. The New Testament makes the connection between our sin and the death of Christ so frequent and so clear, that when the New Testament doctrine of the death of Christ is doubted, it is almost always because of a failure to perceive the seriousness of sin. We falter at accepting the sheer depth of sin, and its enslaving hold on the human heart; we falter at accepting the judgement of sin, the righteousness of that judgement and the seriousness with which the Lord regards iniquity. When Christians make less of sin and judgement than the Bible does, you may be sure that it will show itself first in the doctrine of the atonement and then in the doctrine of justification by faith.

The evangelical theology to which we adhere as members of the Church of England, is of a piece: it is a coherent whole. When we give up, modify, or distort one section, it has unforeseen consequences on the whole. I believe that we have been too little aware of this important point and too willing to trade away parts of our theological heritage. The doctrine of penal substitution is inherent to evangelical religion; it is part of the logic of it. That is why in days gone by evangelicals have been in the forefront of the fight to preserve it.

And that is why it is at the very centre of evangelical piety. Twice when Paul talked about the love of Christ he used a very significant past tense. We would say that Christ loves us; he said Christ loved us. He could not graduate beyond the cross of Jesus as the source and power of his religion; as the place at which he gained assurance; as the demonstration beyond any other need of proof, of the grace and love of God. The biblical doctrine of the atonement is a continual reminder of just where we stand with God; it puts us in exactly the right place with regard to him: as helpless sinners, saved ever and only by his grace; always in debt to him; always, only, able to boast because of him; the consideration of the cross fills us more and more with the knowledge of the length and height and depth and breadth of the love of God for us, and it makes us love the Lord more and more.

In my place, condemned he stood:  
Sealed my pardon with his blood:  
Allelulia