

16 June 2019 Trinity Sunday St Thomas

I have this sneaking suspicion that if you did a poll of Parish Priests about which Sunday they would like to get a guest speaker in, then Trinity Sunday would be at or near the top of the list. I didn't used to worry. I had a sermon for the occasion that was reworked and it was fine as far as I was concerned until I went back to University to do some Post-Grad work in Theology. It made me think again as I found I'd been preaching the heresy of modalism for years.

I remember being interviewed by Canon Henry Richmond, Warden of what was going to be my Theological college and him asking what I wanted to achieve in my three years. I muttered something about studying scriptures and he seemed OK with that. In a moment of desperation for something to say that sounded as if it came from an ordinand, I then said, "...And I'd like to understand the Trinity". He didn't actually laugh out loud but years later, I am beginning to understand the look he gave me and the wry smile.

So rather than speak of perichoretic dances of the three persons in the one God head, and how Aquinas saw the leap of faith as being belief in the Trinity (after all belief in God was a given for most people then) I want to step round the subject and broach a matter that is seen as essential to some and almost heretical to others.

If asked what Jesus came to do and how he did it, most contemporary Western Christians would automatically say something like, "Jesus took the punishment from God that I deserved." This is what's usually called the "Penal Substitution" view of the atonement, for it emphasizes that Jesus was punished by God in our place. His sacrifice appeased the Father's wrath towards us and thus allows us to be saved.

This view has been the dominant view in western Christianity since the Reformation period, but I have a number of unsettling questions about the idea that God had to vent his wrath on Jesus in order to forgive us. Here's a few of them:

Does God really need to appease his wrath with a blood sacrifice in order to forgive us? I went to hear Billy Graham preach at Cambridge many years

ago. He spoke powerfully, but his main theme was to demonstrate from OT scripture that the shedding of blood was necessary for forgiveness. Even then I was asking, 'But what are we to make of all the instances in the Bible where God forgives people without demanding a sacrifice. Jesus never mentions such a thing and his constant theme is one of love overcoming evil and he never speaks of a 'necessary sacrifice in the way some would have us believe'.

If Jesus' death allows God the Father to accept us, wouldn't it be more accurate to say that Jesus reconciles God to us than it is to say Jesus reconciles us to God? And if we study the scriptures, the New Testament claims the latter and never the former. In fact, if God loves sinners and yet can't accept sinners without a sacrifice, wouldn't it be even more accurate to say that God reconciles God to himself than to say he reconciles us to God? But this is clearly an odd logic that makes no sense.

I like how Greg Boyd puts it: "If God the father needs someone to "pay the price" for sin, does the Father ever really forgive anyone? Think about it. If you owe me a hundred dollars and I hold you to it unless someone pays me the owed sum, did I really forgive your debt? It seems not, especially since the very concept of forgiveness is about releasing a debt — not collecting it from someone else."

Chuck Queen – an American Baptist pastor argues (and gets into trouble with many conservative evangelicals): Are sin and guilt the sorts of things that can be literally transferred from one party to another? Related to this, how are we to conceive of the Father being angry towards Jesus and justly punishing him when he of course knew Jesus never did anything wrong? If the main thing Jesus came to do was to appease the Father's wrath by being slain by him for our sin, couldn't this have been accomplished just as easily when (say) Jesus was a one-year-old boy as when he was a thirty-three-year-old man? Were Jesus' life, teachings, healing and deliverance ministry merely a prelude to the one really important thing he did – namely, die? It doesn't seem to me that the Gospels divide up and prioritize the various aspects of Jesus' life in this way.

Surely everything Jesus did was about one thing – overcoming evil with love. Hence, every aspect of Jesus was centred on atonement — that is, reconciling us to God.

And if I'm looking nervous as I stand here six feet above contradiction, it's because I know that the penal substitution model of atonement appeals so deeply to our human psyche. Atonement is a minefield where feelings run high because penal substitution appeals so strongly to our human sense of justice and payment or retribution for crimes committed.

But for all our human temptations to embrace this retribitional God who rescues us with his own son's sacrifice, I also suggest we have to be very careful about how we talk about atonement to ensure it's not at odds with orthodox trinitarian theology because Jesus and the father would not be one in essence and agreement.

And if you are struggling to follow this, let me put it in one sentence. How are we to understand one member of the Trinity (the Father) being wrathful towards another member of the Trinity (the Son), when they are, along with the Holy Spirit, one and the same God? Can God be truly angry with God? Can God actually punish God?

As Chuck Queen says, "All religious language is symbolical language. ...when Paul says explicitly or implicitly that Christ's death brings redemption Paul is not suggesting that Jesus' death was the literal price paid to God. ...Paul is simply saying that Christ's death is the means of deliverance/redemption, but he does not explain or elaborate how it works. This is why theologians and biblical interpreters talk about "theories" of atonement; the biblical writers use images and metaphors that are left loose and hanging.

And on this Trinity Sunday, before anyone starts writing to the paper or the Bishop about alleged heretical teaching from the pulpit in The Bourne, let me say that I have no problem in saying Christ died for us. And I also rejoice that the power of God's love and forgiveness was revealed on the third day when Christ rose again. It's this power we experience in our lives and see in the lives of others as God's spirit moves. It's in that faith and hope that I stand and no matter how inadequate our understanding of atonement is, I still preach that Jesus is Lord.