

The Death of Jesus: Requirement or Consequence?

Greg Elsdon — speaking notes

There's no escaping it. At the very centre of Christian faith sits the scandalous, perhaps even offensive proclamation that something of ultimate importance is revealed about the nature of God in the rejection, torture and public execution of a man who selflessly lived his life for others?

There is an interesting story told about a meeting between Marco Polo and Genghis Khan. Marco Polo, the great adventurer and explorer, tells the story of Jesus of Nazareth to the great warrior and despot of the East. He tells him of his mysterious birth, his baptism and temptation, his miracles and his acts of compassion, his parables and his teaching concerning the Reign of God. Finally, he told him of the events of the suffering and passion of Jesus - the betrayal, the trial, the beatings and the crucifixion. When Marco Polo pronounced the words, "he bowed his head and surrendered his spirit", Genghis Khan could contain himself no longer. He thumped his fist on the table and shouted, "What did the Christians' God do then?"

What sort of a God **allows**, or in the thoughts of some, **demands**, that this man Jesus be treated so badly, so unjustly? What sort of God are we talking about as being 'revealed' in the crucifixion of this man Jesus?

The word 'crucifixion,' and the reality it represents, belongs to that select category of words reserved for what is depraved and obscene - for the demonic, perhaps. 'Crucifixion' belongs together with such words as Auschwitz, Hiroshima and Holocaust. So obscene was crucifixion that it was not even to be mentioned in decent Roman society. But it was frequently heard in the lurid curses of the Roman dockworkers - *I in malam maximam crucem!* (roughly translated "Go and get crucified!").

Not too many years after the event we have been reading about this morning, the Apostle Paul wrote: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified - a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Corinthians 1:22-24)

How is it that such a profane, distasteful and violent act can be identified with the 'power and wisdom' of God?

Already in the various writings of the New Testament we see the earliest Christian communities wrestling with this thorny dilemma. Precisely **how** is God involved in Jesus' death? And throughout history Christians have busied themselves constructing doctrinal positions and theological propositions explaining **precisely** how **they think** Jesus crucifixion is to be understood as an expression of God's love.

Yes, a colourful array of ‘atonement theories’ have *shaped* and *misshaped* our understanding of Jesus’ death, and as a consequence *shaped* and *misshaped* our understanding of God and our experience of God.

For example:

Ransom: Jesus paid the **ransom** necessary for God to buy us back from the devil.

Sacrifice: Jesus was the **sacrifice** required by a holy and righteous God if humanity was to be forgiven for their sinfulness.

Satisfaction: Like a medieval lord, God’s honour has been affronted - and someone has to pay the price and Jesus death is understood as a payment of ‘satisfaction’

Substitution [Penal Substitution]: God’s law has been broken – and God is not happy! Someone has to be punished for humankind’s disobedience. And so, Jesus dies ‘in our place’ and the wrath of God is appeased.

In reality these four theories [as well as others] are usually so intertwined in our thinking and speaking that we fail to notice the internal contradictions and moral dilemmas in our God-talk and our hymns.

What sort of God do these doctrines leave us with? What sort of a God do we encounter in these attempts to explain the significance of God’s involvement in the death of Jesus? I suggest that what we see is a **vengeful** gOD, a **judgemental** gOD, an **angry** gOD quick to blame – and at worst, a threatening and fearful picture of an **abusive** gOD who is so angry with people like us that he requires the execution of his son so that he might feel more kindly disposed towards us.

But what if God is not like that? What if God is not like that at all? What if God is actually just as Jesus taught – gracious, and desirous of intimacy with human beings. Not requiring restitution or demanding satisfaction – but willingly and graciously seeking relationship with us.

We need to remember that all of these theories of atonement are precisely that – **theories** – both helpful and unhelpful in their original contexts – but essentially flawed and time bound. And if extracted from their historical contexts - where they perhaps made more sense - and proclaimed today as somehow being objective ‘truth’ leave us with an image and understanding of God which **ought to cause us much consternation** – if for no other reason than that it stands in **blatant contradiction** to what Jesus had to say about the character of the God he addressed as Father/Parent.

What if God, who can only ever be talked about in metaphor and imagery, is indeed **as depicted** by Jesus in his well-known but all-too-often ignored parable about the grieving father, anxiously awaiting the return of his profligate son? We know the story so well. When the father saw his son returning from his wayward life he runs to meet him – and

unashamedly embraces him, and weeps, and welcomes him home and throws a party to celebrate his return. And yet, so much of the teaching of the church has left people like us imagining that this parable does not tell the whole story and that the father really said to the son, *“Listen son, you have done terribly by me, my honour has been shamed in our village. I might be open to the possibility of eventually forgiving you, but my goodness there are going to be some hoops for you to jump through before there is any party for your return. Someone is going to have to pay for the evil you have done to me!”*

What if our ‘God’ is NOT like some cruel vengeful ‘mountain god’ requiring the punishment – demanding reparation or insisting on sacrifices?

Uniting Church biblical scholar and theological Bill Loader, reflecting on the way pagan, ‘non-Jesus’ understandings of God’s involvement in the death of Jesus have permeated our understanding and appreciation of Easter, writes;

“What if God is not like that? What if God is not trapped by the rules of honour and punishment? **What if God just loves and is free to forgive without having to punish us or someone else in our place?** What if God is like the father in the parable who ran to embrace his son and didn’t have to beat him or anyone else in his stead before doing so? What if God isn’t the mountain god who needs appeasing but by his [sic] nature wants to love, to create, to renew, to restore? What if Jesus **embodies** that love and shows it willing to endure even to the end? What if it is God whom we see in Jesus willing to love to the end? **What if God is not the killer but the killed?”** [Loader”

The death of Jesus which we remember today can never be captured or contained by doctrines or theological confessions. **Jesus died as a consequence of his faithfulness to his understanding of God as loving parent, and his opposition to any form of religion which proclaimed otherwise, or which sought to control the life and destiny of others with fear and judgement.**

May this ‘**Good** Friday’ be for you precisely that; a **good** day. A solemn day for remembering with gratitude the faithfulness, the ‘go[o]dness’ of Jesus who gave his life for others – not as an atoning sacrifice required by a vengeful God, but as a consequence of his belief in the unconditional love of God – and his faithfulness **even unto death.**

From Malcolm Guite’s, *Good Friday: the Stations of the Cross*

See, as they strip the robe from off his back
And spread his arms and nail them to the cross,
The dark nails pierce him and the sky turns black,

And love is firmly fastened onto loss.
But here a pure change happens. On this tree
Loss becomes gain, death opens into birth.
Here wounding heals and fastening makes free
Earth breathes in heaven, heaven roots in earth.
And here we see the length, the breadth, the height
Where love and hatred meet and love stays true
Where sin meets grace and darkness turns to light
We see what love can bear and be and do,
And here our saviour calls us to his side
His love is free, his arms are open wide.

“The deeper our faith, the more doubt we must endure; the deeper our hope, the more prone we are to despair; the deeper our love, the more pain its loss will bring: these are a few of the paradoxes we must hold as human beings. If we refuse to hold them in the hope of living without doubt, despair and pain, we also find ourselves living without faith, hope and love.” [Parker J Palmer]

