

The BIG Questions
“Why did Jesus die?”

Second Sunday of Easter, Part One (A look at past answers)

April 8, 2018

1) Why are we thinking about the death of Jesus? It's after Easter!

Precisely because of Easter: we need to take a second look at the cross.

Without Easter we would never look at the cross again. Just consider this:

Historians estimate that in Israel-Palestine under Roman occupation an average of about a thousand people were crucified every year.

The empire used this method of a cruel and prolonged death on the riffraff of society: thieves, slaves, the poor, people advocating revolt against Rome-it was a death sentence that was more costly and labour intensive for Rome than dispatching someone with the sword, but because it was so gruesome, it was a good deterrent.

It was Easter, and the experience of an empty tomb, and the many different ways the disciples meet our Lord as alive that caused them to question like this:

If God acted so powerfully in Jesus, then why did this most gruesome execution have to happen to Jesus of Nazareth? Was it planned? If so, who planned it and for what purpose? Who died on the cross? Did a human person by the name of Jesus of Nazareth die? And if so, where was God? Did God die?...we could go on and on with the questions. Someone from ST. G&A wrote on the little blue question sheet:

“I find it difficult to believe that God sent his son to earth with the purpose of having him die on the cross. I can understand why he would “let” it happen, but not, that it was the “goal”. I wonder if the Old Testament “predictions” were re-written slightly in hindsight?”

The disciples of Jesus had quite similar questions when they were so baffled by the Resurrection experiences.

We get a glimpse of their helplessness in today's gospel:

Two on the way home from the city where the execution happened. They are confused...**Luke 24:vs3** Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles^[a] from Jerusalem. **14** They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. **15** As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; **16** but they were kept from recognizing him.

17 He asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?”

They stood still, their faces downcast. 18 One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

“About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. 20 The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; 21 but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. 22 In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning 23 but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. 24 Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.”

The Risen One, (who looks here like a fellow traveller and apparently not like the Jesus they knew) then proceeds to interpret this death from the Jewish sacred scriptures (what we call the Old Testament). **Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?”** 27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

This story reflects how slowly it dawned on the disciples: As they were shaken to the core by experiences that Jesus was alive in a different dimension now - that the tomb did not hold him like it held the thousands of others who were never heard from since ...that he equipped them with a mission and a task- it dawned on them, that their preconceived notion of the Messiah was perhaps not the only one possible. Perhaps the Messiah was not meant to set up a new political state and free the Jews from foreign oppression and everyone would live happily ever after.

Perhaps his kingdom was of another world? (*Did he not say something like that to us when he was still living among us?*) And perhaps his death was not the total failure we thought it was- perhaps it has meaning? (*Did he not hint at that?! But we did not “get it” then!!*)

Slowly it dawned on them: It had to happen and it happened for us. They knew their Holy writings and they interpreted what they found in places like: Isaiah 53, the book of Jeremiah and other suffering prophets, Psalm 22, as: the Messiah too must suffer!

They interpreted their Holy Hebrew Scriptures (which we now call the “Old Testament”) as to that the Messiah must suffer and rise to bring all people to God. They understood powerfully and clearly that death and resurrection were the key to something absolutely unique tied to human salvation.

2) What was and is the Christian church thinking in relation to why Jesus died?

This is a HUGE topic, and I must limit myself to some incredibly brief sketches about four ways of interpretation:

Paul, The Mysteries, Anselm and Abelard

Paul:

Apostle Paul who had never met Jesus in the “flesh” is the one who put forth the most sophisticated reflections about the meaning of the death of the Christ, or Messiah. Yet he did not create it all: 15-20 years after Easter he quotes a very early affirmation of faith that was circulating in the earliest Christian communities: 1st Cor. 15^{“3} For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴ and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

So here you have a very early (developed in the first 5-10 years after Easter) statement of what the first Christians believed and preached: that he died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.

So the realization is: he died FOR US. For our sins There was something “FOR US” in this death and resurrection, that the earliest church is beginning to discover. Now we need to be careful not to read that with all the connotations about what we think today that “dying for our sins” may mean. Let us hear the statement in its original simplicity.

Mystery cult and the power of experience:

How do you explain the significance of such an event to people?

Paul explained it in Jewish terms to the Jews; in pagan terms to the pagans. In the New Testament we find language that sounds like the pagan ceremonies in the mystery cults that were especially popular among Roman soldiers. This is where the image of “Dying and Rising with Christ” in baptism comes from. and being transformed. This approach to explaining Jesus' death helps us connect our own life experience with his, beginning with the dying (submersion) in the waters of baptism, and leading to the rising (being pulled out of the waters of baptism) to new life – a changed life in Christ. But we

may also recognize the pattern of Jesus' death in our own life, illness, persecution, suffering etc. And affirm our hope in resurrection here and beyond.

Sin offering and Anselm:

For Jesus' own people, the Jews in Israel/Palestine, the idea of sacrificial offerings was central to their religion. The “old covenant” allowed for animal sacrifices to be made at the temple, so that the sinners' relationship with God would be reconciled and rectified. Jesus was already critical of this practice in his lifetime. Paul says then that Jesus' death means that he died as the last sin offering, once and for all. In him we are reconciled with God. Never again another sacrifice will be needed.

The most famous contributor to making a sacrificial death theory popular for today, was Anselm of Canterbury's in the 11th century. His book “Why did God become man?” spells out an interpretation of the death of Jesus that has become so familiar to us: Jesus death was a substitutionary sacrifice. He died the death that we all deserve so that God' could both serve us from eternal punishment and God's honour could be restored.

In his time in the feudal system in England a Lord' honour was sacred, and if a serf did something that offended the honour of the Lord, this serf was put to death. So he explains Christ's death in this way: God's honor has been injured by human sin. God could satisfy His honor by punishing the sinner or by accepting a suitable substitute. Being a God of love and mercy, God provided through His Son the satisfaction that was required.

The substitutionary sacrifice is one God effects in himself.

Many evangelical Christians see this as the essential gospel. They would argue that they only repeat what the New Testament says. But the NT interpretations of Jesus death are much more varied and complicated. You see, Anselm also only used the language of his own culture to bring the idea of the “FOR US” of death and resurrection to his people. This idea is called the idea of the “atonement”; the idea that someone else had to pay the price for sin for God to save us all from eternal damnation.

Someone else wrote on the blue sheet: *“I don't understand/accept the idea that Jesus died for our sins and that through his death we are forgiven.”*

In fact, you are not alone with this.

Abelard:

There was another medieval scholar who went to school around the same time as Anselm, and his Name was Peter Abelard. He is famous for his legendary love affair with Heloise, but he was also a great theologian and he also had problems with Anselm's interpretation of what God did for us in the Cross of Jesus.

He starts with the premise that God does not necessarily require the death of Christ as an expiation for sin.

Instead, God has chosen the cross of Jesus to manifest his love and to show fellowship with humans in their sufferings. The death of Christ therefore primarily demonstrates the love of God in such a way as to win sinners to Himself. The death of Christ does not constitute a satisfaction of divine law, but rather demonstrates the loving heart of God which will freely pardon sinners.

His point of view has had much support in modern theology and has still influence in our mainline churches.

You can see now how there have always been differences in the understanding of the cross among Christians, since the very beginning. We all read the same bible and scriptures verses but we do not have the same sensibilities and understandings at all.

3)What are the strengths and difficulties with each?**Anselm:**

Pro: The substitutionary satisfaction model is easy to explain.

It is powerful.

It uses NT language

However

Its a horrible distortion of Anselm to imagine that he means to say that an angry God sends his child to die a cruel death, so that he does not have to punish the rest of humanity with eternal hell; however that is how it can be (and often as been) misunderstood.

Like many today I have great difficulty with the whole idea that someone or

something in God needs to die to restore his honour or to effect justice.

Abelard's approach: Pro: It is still attractive today. And it is used in many variations.

Con: It does have a harder time making sense of New Testament language of sacrifice, dying for sinners etc.

It does not say how something essential for salvation of the world happened in the cross and resurrection,

Mystery Cult language:

Pro: Bodily experience, less intellectual, Baptismal language

Con: Our culture has changed too much to understand it well

4) How are these explanations still with us today?

In Hymns:

O sacred head, sore wounded...

(Voices United 145) see vs 2: We can now identify as “substitutionary atonement”, as put forward by Anselm.

More recently, we have sung: “Where you there?” (VU 144) this is the language focused on experience, of the Mystery Cult.

The lovely “My song is love unknown” (VU 143)

states the “For me” - it leaves it open as to what exactly happened, and focuses on rejection of Jesus by many and the offer of friendship on the other side, much more like Abelard would have said.

In the “Conservative Evangelical/vs. Liberal Progressive” tension in the church:

Remember a few years ago, when Mel Gibson made the film “The Passion of the Christ”? The conservative and evangelical churches trucked people by

the busload to the film theatres.

Mel Gibson is a conservative Christian who subscribes to the substitutionary atonement theory: God is a righteous God and the mess humankind is making of themselves and the world deserves punishment. Because God is loving and wants to save humans from the eternal damnation they deserve, he puts the punishment for the crime on an innocent, who is Jesus. Jesus voluntarily takes this punishment on himself. The punishment must be so harsh, because it must be appropriate to the immensity of human sin so that justice is done and our salvation is truly secured. This is why many evangelicals like to stress just how much Jesus suffered, physically and emotionally. Only extremely harsh punishment can secure our salvation in this view. Gibsons film was several hours long, full of extreme violence.

My friends and I boycotted the film. Like many in the mainline churches I had no interest in a production full of violence and anti Jewish sentiment destined to bring the big dollars in.

I personally think its wrong to interpret the New Testament language only from this punitive perspective. Our Philippians reading for example, stated the death of Jesus as a “humbling” and that we should follow his example. Much more like Peter Abelards theory!

5) What remains to be done:

I remember Good Friday services in my childhood very well.

Long, dark, knees hurting from kneeling.

As young child, these services helped me realize two things:

How cruel people can be towards other people and,

somehow, how God loved us so much. The key message this 9 year old took home was: Jesus suffering happened for me and for all of us to show God's love for us.

These essential insights still do matter to me so many years later.

I find the bodily reality of this day easier to grasp than the theology.

The theology of this day is difficult, but without an understanding of Good Friday and Easter that moves us our faith becomes lame and irrelevant. So, next time I will try to show you some ways in which contemporary

Christians (who are not stuck in Anselm,s atonement theory) have found new ways to interpret the NT language, and share with you approaches to the cross that I find most helpful and moving.

Rev. Elisabeth Bachem-Jennings, St. George and St. Andrew United Church
Annapolis Royal, NS