

What did Jesus do?

What I have written here is my interpretation of the theological books I've read. I'm not a theologian, so I've probably (undoubtedly) got bits of it wrong, so please bear with me because its import has transformed my whole view of life, and I hope it might be of help to others who are desparately struggling, as I was, to build a credible faith in a loving God, a faith that I can happily share with my friends and families.

As I explained yesterday, the chief model that the church uses to 'share the Gospel' is penal substitution, and I've come to believe that our whole church is run under its influence. This model was formulated a few hundred years after the church began, and it is based on the framework of justice that prevails in the Western world. Ironically, it wouldn't have been a very good model to use in the time of the early church because, for the Jews, the law was covenantal and relational – it was more about the relationship between God and his people than about the individual and their moral failure.

But the problem today seems to be that we're actually viewing the biblical texts through the lens of penal substitution (retributive justice), and while I'm not saying that penal substitution is wrong, as such, I do believe that, because it is so dominant, it colours our interpretation of the scriptures.

Anyway, to be positive, I've already written about how my life has been changed by seeing that God IS relationship – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – but the penny-drop moment that came to me this morning was that **sin is not primarily a moral problem but a relational problem**.

Remember the woman caught in adultery? The religious people saw it as a moral problem: this individual has sinned; she deserves to die! How did Jesus view her? He loved her. He could see that her sinning was damaging her and the people around her (sin is its own punishment). "Woman, where are they? Has no-one condemned you? ... Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin."

And what about the prodigal father? (I use that word advisedly: the OED says 'Prodigal – Having or giving something on a lavish scale'.) ITV's Judge Rinder would certainly have found in favour of the elder brother, but again, God's love is about relationship, not about 'rights'. I even think that Judge Rinder would have accused the father of attempting to pervert the course of justice.

But when we sin, is God somehow **forced** to reject us because he is holy? No! His first instinct is to forgive, not to condemn. God's into **restorative justice**, not retributive justice.

As one author said, "We have an image of God as someone who condemns. And we do our best to imitate him." Ouch! Am I really a 'younger brother' or am I, in truth, more like the elder brother?!

Again, when we sin, is God somehow forced to reject us because he is holy? No! He is God; he can do as he wishes, and who can argue; he wants to restore us, not to condemn us. We must NOT try to tell God what he can and can't do just because it gives us a neat, packaged way to 'share the Gospel'. (Sorry if I'm becoming intemperate, but I feel passionate about this!)

So, what about our friends and families? In what I wrote yesterday, I said that they know that the best thing in life is loving relationships, and the worst thing in life is when those relationships go wrong. They may not be able to relate to sin as moral failure, but they sure as hell can relate to sin as relationship breakdown.

Three times in the past 2/3 months a couple who live down the alleyway opposite us, and park their car in the laybay, have had a screaming, shouting, crying battle outside our house. **They** can relate to the need for reconciliation and restoration, and if God exists, might he not be able to offer them some help?!

We don't need to give people a course in theology to help them understand sin – they already **KNOW** what it is – betrayal, hatred, prejudice – relationship **HELL**. And that's what Jesus came to do – to restore broken relationships. That's what our friends and family can relate to right now, without explaining about a holy God not being able to tolerate sin, etc.

That's why the church I now attend is so wonderful: everyone is accepted as they are, unconditionally. If someone wants their baby to be baptised on a Monday afternoon, the vicar agrees to it. Sure, he explains about how baptism is about relationship with the God who loves them, and that the church is where people get together to share that relationship, but he doesn't preach at them and he doesn't tell them that they have to attend church to qualify. Ditto when they want to be married in our lovely medieval church.

In very stark contrast, a friend recently went to a family funeral the other end of the country where the vicar saw it as an ideal opportunity to explain to the mourners how they can avoid going to hell if they accept what Jesus has done for them on the cross. Words fail me!

Well, that's it, really. I now read my Bible (Old **and** New Testament) with a 'relationship' view rather than a 'propositional and transactional' view, and it's a very wonderful! OK, there are some difficult bits I have to wrestle with – it's not all easy answers and sweetness and light – but it's been transformational for me, and I now **WANT** to share (this) Gospel with anyone and everyone.

Thanks for listening, and if you're willing, let's talk about it and see what we can learn together.

Paul Bev, August 2018