

## ***Centrality of the cross of Christ***

*Disclaimer (repeat): 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 desperately 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.*

Thank you to those of you who have already begun to enter into discussion with me. The trouble is that although I said that my last missive would be my final one, those discussions have rekindled my thoughts. When I tried to have my quiet time this morning, I just couldn't stop thinking about what Christ achieved by his death and resurrection – the atonement.

In the past two years the cross has become, for me, much more important – absolutely central to my faith. I'm pleased that more than half the services I attend at my local Anglican church are Communion services, so that I'm constantly reminded of Jesus' sacrificial death for me.

Now, in trying to explain and appreciate something as wonderful and multifaceted as the atonement, we need to employ metaphors, and the New Testament has a number of different illustrations for what Christ achieved – it's like looking at a diamond from different directions.

Many years ago, when I went to Kenya to teach physics, I found that many of the illustrations that I had used in the UK were outside the experience of my pupils, so I had to think up new illustrations that they could relate to – otherwise I was going to fail to communicate.

What I have been reading has echoed my thinking that, in 21st century Britain, penal substitution really isn't the most helpful of the New Testament pictures, so how can we put the atonement across to people in a way that they can relate to?

Frankly, I have to admit that I'm a bit out of my depth here, so all I can do is share what I think is important and if any of you are more theological, perhaps you can help to put some flesh on the bones.

I've already said what I think is, for me, non-negotiable:

- 1) The central problem is human sin – broken relationships.
- 2) Our loving God has a plan to sort that problem.
- 3) The solution (salvation) centres on the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.
- 4) We need to respond in order to appropriate that salvation.

So what does this salvation look like? For me it has **got** to be relational. If it's not about building a relationship with a loving God, I don't want to know – this is where I'm at having “discovered” the Trinity. And surely this is what we have to be modelling in our churches! If we're a loving, forgiving, welcoming community, that has **got** to have a powerful effect on a shattered and broken world where loneliness is one of the biggest sources of unhappiness and ill health, both mental and physical.

(See my article in *The Magazine*, the Norwich Diocesan magazine. Reference on my web page.)

Secondly, I think what Jesus was trying to get across to us (think woman caught in adultery, woman at the well, prodigal son) was that God wants to deal with sin in terms of restoring relationships, so let's talk about "restorative justice".

Sorry to go on about it, but this is why I think penal substitution is so unhelpful because it's all about "retributive justice" and it can so easily be misunderstood by those outside the church – it appears to present God as a wrathful individual who needs someone to suffer for our sins. And that's clearly *not* the God portrayed by Jesus.

As an illustration of that sort of misunderstanding: a friend who, despite having been brought up a churchgoer now doesn't see any need for "religion", wrote: "*As I said, I had not previously met this idea of penal substitution [I had tried to explain it to him], and find it rather repellent. How can punishing an innocent person achieve anything but blatant injustice?*"

So to get back to the question I've been posing, and will happily spend any amount of time talking to anyone about, is to work out what *other* ways we can use to communicate God's love to those around us in the 21st century. How can we explain? What model can we use? What illustrations will make it clear to them (and it might be different for different people – certainly so for different cultures). They need to see that Jesus' death and resurrection is the very, very best news, ever!

We need to talk about this, PLEASE!

(I have a book that appears to offer some help, and have read it twice, but it's a bit heavy and theological for me. I'll read it again, make some notes, and see if I can share it in words of fewer syllables.)

I'll put something on the website as and when I have anything (hopefully) helpful to offer.

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