

301 Advent: some serious questions

As I quoted last time,^[300] ‘Advent is a season for reflective preparation for ... Christ’s expected return in the Second Coming’. I still have questions about that.

Question: Is God ‘obliged’ to do anything? I ask because one highly respected theologian, ‘Arthur’, has written: ‘God was obliged ... to punish sin.’ If I ask Arthur why God was ‘obliged’, I’m sure he’ll give me a well-thought-out biblical explanation, but does the Bible have the right to say what God *must* do? Or am I being too simplistic?

I do understand there’s a real problem. Clearly, child abusers must be punished, and probably murderers in general, but what about stealing a loaf of bread to feed one’s family? Where does one draw the line? And who draws that line?

OK, so it’s Advent, and Jesus is coming back, bringing heaven to earth, totally restoring earth. We’ll be restored and we’ll all be rejoicing together.^[300] Wonderful! But will there be any child abusers among us? (Genuine question.)

Here’s what I was taught: God is obliged to punish sin, so Jesus says, ‘OK, punish me instead.’ So then God doesn’t *need* to punish us because (to quote a popular song), ‘On the cross when Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied.’ Again, I hope I’m not being too simplistic; I’m just stating the teachings I received (and promoted for 45 years).

We see all the evil that people do and we want to say, quite legitimately, ‘God should punish this sort of evil’ or ‘God should punish those sorts of evil people.’ This is how we see it, but is punishment God’s prime concern?

I think God’s prime attribute is love (God *is* love), so God’s concern is that people – all people – should be restored (although God’s will isn’t always done). So what does God do? Ask Hosea (a book worth reading, if you don’t know it): God forgives and forgives and forgives, in an effort to restore people. It’s called ‘grace’ – free forgiveness.

Sin has consequences, yes, and God wants to undo the damage we cause. God wants to (and will in the end) bring justice, but *restorative* justice, not *retributive* justice – well, that’s what I now think the Bible teaches.

If crime and punishment is high on your church’s agenda, I guess they’ll agree with the prodigal father’s elder son: it’s not FAIR to keep forgiving people. But Jesus made that parable a two-parter with good reason: he knows that we feel that non-fairness! And I’ve given^[272] my view that Paul has a similar two-parter in Romans: in chapter 1, we rightly get hot under the collar about what ‘they’ do, then in chapter 2, the three fingers of our pointing hand point back at us. Ouch!

Until the church repents of its view of God as crime-and-punishment-oriented, and instead sees God as the ever-forgiving prodigal father, we’re doomed to continue inoculating people against the Good News of the love of God in Jesus.