

21<sup>st</sup> October 2012 – *Pentecost + 21*  
Is 53:7-12, Ps 35:18-29, Heb 4:14-16, Mark 10:35-45  
07:30 & 09:30 Grahamstown Cathedral

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He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter... Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief... (Isaiah 53:7&10 ESV)

These words are familiar to us... I'm sure there are very few of us who do not think of Jesus when we hear them read. They were not originally applied to Jesus, but the fit seems good.

After all Jesus is the 'lamb' who was sacrificed in place of us. God is rightly angered by our sin and we essentially deserve death for our wrongdoing. On the cross Jesus took on all our sin and God poured out his wrath upon Christ that we might be set free. In other words, Jesus dies in our place, right?

Steve Chalke challenges this assumption in his book, *The Lost Message of Jesus*:

The fact is that the cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse – a vengeful Father punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, people inside and outside of the church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith... If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God toward humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to pay evil with evil. The truth is, the cross is a symbol of love. It is a demonstration of just how far God as father and Jesus as Son are prepared to go to prove that love.

The title of Chalke's book is well chosen, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, for it seems that humanity 'loves' the vengeful and threatening God who demands sacrifice and scape-goating far more than the God revealed in Christ who is love, and displays infinite mercy. Our supposedly civilized culture no longer practices human sacrifice like our ancestors, but 'scape-goating' is alive and well even today if we have the eyes to see.

I remember well the friendship dynamics that I witnessed at school. There was always one guy in a group who was victimized. In my group of friends it was the typical guy with thick glasses, very little coordination and different social skills, we shall call him John. Whenever there were tensions in the group, we would tease John mercilessly and ridicule him. The strange thing is that it 'worked'. The tension in the group was eased and the rest of us were unified in our mutual disgust for John. He became our scape-goat, which restored the peace of the group.

Jesus is not some supreme scape-goat in this way. Rather, the story of the cross is told from the perspective of the scape-goat in order to reveal the evil of scape-goating. For the first time in history it is the Johns of the world who have their story told from their perspective. The cross breaks open our inherent human capacity for victimizing others and forces us to confront this in ourselves. We are the ones who kill Jesus, not God the father. If our theology has painted Jesus as the hero and the Father as a Nero figure then we have misunderstood the cross.

So then how should we understand the cross?

Two of the church's earliest theologians have given us alternative images which highlight that Jesus' death is not the work of God but the product of an evil process, which God dramatically subverts for her saving purpose.

According to the author of Mark's Gospel, it is Jesus himself who refers to his death as a 'ransom for many'. Irenaeus popularized this idea that Jesus death is a kind of ransom, paid to Satan for the release of captive humanity. Some have found this idea offence to the omnipotence of God, but this image does make it clear that God redeems humanity by non-violent means. God pays the ransom to avoid shedding the blood of others, including the perpetrators. God's refusal to take vengeance collapses the cycle of violence and brings an end to sacrifice.

The second idea is that Jesus' death was a trick, a clever ruse by which evil powers themselves are led to lose their dominion over humanity. Gregory of Nyssa explains the cross in a striking image. He asserted that the cross is like a fishing lure in which the hook of deity is hidden under the 'bait' of an apparently human Jesus. He goes on to explain that when Satan exacted the death of Jesus, who is truly innocent, Satan lost his ability to enforce death on those who are sinners, and were therefore under his control.

These patristic writers were aware that to fight violence with violence only fuels the mechanisms of destructive power. They also recognized that to simply submit to suffering, however nobly, does nothing to hinder systemic violence. For Ireneaus and Gregory the stunning wonder of the cross is God's solution to this dilemma – As Jesus moves inexorably toward the cross, Satan assumes it is business as usual and takes 'the bait' only to be thwarted and exposed!

This is a picture of God that is very different from a wrathful and indignant tyrant who solves problems by domination and violent demand. Yet this demanding, vengeful God is the picture which many people have grown up with and has been reinforced by the liturgies of the reformation and continues to be augmented by our South African Prayer Book. The problem is that if God is dominating and violent then we can be too. Richard Rhor writes poignantly about the consequences of such belief:

Grace, mercy and eternal generosity are no longer the very shape of God, as the Trinitarian nature of God seemed to say. Free will, grace and love become less admirable than some theoretical cosmic justice, law and blind obedience. We ended up making God very small, and drew the Godhead into our own need for retribution and punishment. Exactly what Jesus came to undo! If God can forgive then God can forgive!

Rhor reminds us of the God who forgives and if we take some time to think about our own experience of forgiveness we may deepen our understanding of God. If you have ever been wronged by someone then you will know that even if you 'forgive' them, the hurts and pain and scars still remain. Just as when we hurt others – if they choose to forgive us the effects of what we have done still remain... sometimes for years.

In this way we can understand forgiveness as an agreement not to forget what has been done, but to suspend judgement on the past. At this point in the forgiveness process the wronged person may say: "I know exactly what you are and what you have done, but I will say no more about it." For many of us, this is about as much forgiveness as we are able to muster. We do our Christian duty, say the words, then build a wall between ourselves and the one who has hurt us so that we can 'protect' ourselves from further hurt.

If you have offered or been offered this kind of forgiveness you will know that it is not truly redemptive and life giving. As Rowan Williams says, "the occasions when we feel genuinely forgiven are the moments when we feel, not that someone doesn't care what we do, but that someone does care what we do because he or she loves us and that love is strong enough to cope with and survive the hurt we have done. Forgiveness of that sort is creative because it reveals new dimensions to a relationship, new depths, new possibilities."

This is precisely the kind of forgiveness which God offers us through Jesus, our great high priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. The cross represents our human rejection of love, not the wrath of God poured out on the Son. Our sins need not destroy our relationship with God, rather the reverse is true. God cares what we do because he suffers what we do. He is forever wounded, but forever loving. The saints, we are told, rejoice in their sins because each one affords them the opportunity to understand more intimately the height and length and breadth and depth of God's enduring love!

As we acknowledge our sin, may God grant us the courage to identify with the perpetrators of the crucifixion. May we see our culpability and renounce our allegiance to the powers of domination and violence, so that we might align ourselves with the crucified one. May God strengthen us against the temptation of thinking that Jesus died so that we don't have to. Rather, help us to acknowledge that Jesus calls us to die with him, so that we might rise with him! Lord Jesus, grant us the grace to receive the words which you spoke to James and John: "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized..."

Amen