

Dear Friends:

For the first Christians, the biggest stumbling block in the Easter story was not the resurrection (which is what we might expect), but rather, the crucifixion. How could someone anointed by God be condemned to the most dishonourable death possible? How could someone who had so clearly failed in his mission, and so obviously been defeated by the powers of darkness, be the chosen emissary of God? Hadn't the Book of Deuteronomy (21.23) said, "Anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse"?

I want to suggest that in our own day, the crucifixion of Jesus - or at least, our *interpretation* of the crucifixion of Jesus - poses a different kind of problem.

For approximately half the history of the Church one particular theory of the passion and death of Jesus has enjoyed pride of place. It is known as the "substitutionary theory of the atonement." In a nutshell, we are taught that Jesus died *in our place* so that we could be reconciled to God, and saved from the eternal punishments we so richly deserve. This theory is so deeply ingrained in our theology, our spirituality and our praying, that it is hard to believe it did not come into full flower until the 12th century, or that there might be other faithful interpretations of the work of Christ on the Cross.

The idea of substitutionary atonement continues to "work" for many Christians. Some others, however, find it a deeply troubling account of God's relationship with humankind, painting God as a vengeful deity who will have his pound of flesh, no matter what. Yet others - especially those who reject the existence of "hell" or damnation - find the whole theory unbelievable, because (if there is no judgment) it is *unnecessary*. One way or the other, many Christians these days are rethinking the atonement.

Anglican bishop N. T. Wright explores an interesting spin in his book *The Crown and the Fire*. We are used to saying that Jesus "took on our sins." But think of this as meaning "Jesus identified with us in every way." He spent his time with the sick, the hungry, the lost. He chose tax collectors, sinners, and women of ill repute as his friends. But - and here is the point - not only did Jesus *identify* with this rabble. In due course, he *was identified* with them. He became known by - and *as* - the company he kept. It is one thing to put in your shift serving clients at the local soup kitchen. It is another thing entirely to be considered by others - especially your "equals" - one of the clients. Jesus doesn't care if people think he is one of the rabble. He doesn't distance himself from them as soon as he finds himself in politer company. He is so willing to *be identified* with us, that who we are will "get on him," and he will be vilified, excoriated, and executed.

This, I think, is the true stuff of redemption and reconciliation. Note that we have said nothing about paying for sins, or satisfying a debt to God. By this reading, to take up one's cross (for see, this is something *we can all do*, not just Jesus) is to come alongside those most in need of our friendship - and to allow ourselves to be known by the company we keep. It is to ditch our pride, relinquish our precious reputations, and to let the pain of the world "get on us," come what may. This is atonement.

With every blessing as we follow Christ into work of redemption,


Rector & Dean

Alleluia!
Christ, the Lord, is risen today!

