

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Good Friday

15th April 2022

All Saints' Marseille

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What just happened? Words soon run out when we try to name it. At the end of the Passion Gospel reading on Palm Sunday we stood in silence. In many ways, that's all one can do in contemplating Christ's death on the Cross.

Yet, ever since those events of the first Good Friday, Christians have tried to articulate what it meant, what it means and why it matters. Towards the end of my time at theological college, one of the tutors wanted to check whether we would leave with an awareness of the breadth of the Anglican tradition and its theology. He asked, without warning: 'So why did Jesus have to die?' Two students replied at the same time. One said: 'Because he was a threat to the religious and political authorities.' The other said: 'To save us from our sins.'

Both are true. The worldwide church has never come up with a single definition of what is known as the 'work of Christ', or in theological language a single model of the 'atonement' – what it means to say that Christ died 'for our sins'. It is not in the Creeds. Yet all strands of the church's tradition acknowledge that there is a cosmic dimension to 'what just happened' – or, if you prefer, that Jesus's death on the Cross reveals a profound truth about the way things are, that it has a significance that is ultimate.

Today is not the day to go into the detail of the different models of the 'atonement' – literally, the 'at-one-ment' – how Christ's death brought us back to being 'at one' with God. Some models look at Jesus's life and see his each of his experiences as redeeming our own. Other approaches look at Jesus's death, taking the view that his sufferings are the most important thing and that they somehow atone for our sinfulness. One approach goes so far as to say that the Fall and our sinfulness were so bad that they required a sacrifice, a death, and that Jesus dies in our place – this is the theory known as penal substitution. And then there's an approach that looks at the resurrection as the key moment - that it was Jesus's conquering death that mattered most – the vision of Christ victorious over evil and death, *Christus Victor*. As we read the New Testament, we see the writers of the Epistles grappling with the beginnings of these ideas. Later scholars have added their own, and still do.

I actually believe all the models of the atonement are useful, for there is some truth in all of them, though none on its own is enough. When you are looking glumly at pictures of the streets of Bucha or Mariupol, there is comfort in the notion of *Christus Victor* – the faith that the rule of Christ will ultimately prevail over human brutality and all that flows from it. There is encouragement in the trust that, when all is said and done, goodness is stronger than evil, love stronger than hate. We have to hold on to that, however desperate the times.

So far as the model of 'penal substitution' goes, it is fashionable in some parts of the church to criticise it as being too transactional, too legalistic, when there is no real evidence from the Gospels that Jesus thought he was sacrificing himself to save the human race from the wrath of God. It was a concept that was developed around the time of the Reformation. The 'penal substitution'

model upsets a lot of people, who find it difficult to square with the notion of a God who is 'pure, unbounded love'.

And yet, when we know we have done something terrible and we don't know how we will ever find our way back from it, there is reassurance to be found in the so-called 'comfortable words' in the Letter of St John, which are read in the traditional version of the Holy Communion service: 'Hear also what St John says: if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the propitiation for our sins'. (He died for our sins, wiping the slate clean.) The next words in the service are: 'Lift up your hearts.'

So what did just happen on the Cross? Or did it in fact 'just happen'? Not part of a cosmic plan, but a death that resulted from the interaction of the characters of all the people involved and the events they were caught up in – the betrayer, the abandoners, the fearful authorities wanting control, those who wanted a quick fix because there was a holiday coming. It is sometimes said that when an event occurs that puts people under pressure, people simply become a more extreme version of their normal selves: the kind become kinder, the selfish more selfish, and the cruel crueller. That certainly went on in the Gospel story. But there's something else about this story that brings us back to the foot of the Cross, again and again. Paradoxically, an instrument of torture reserved for the worst of criminals is also the central symbol of our faith, offering comfort in distress and hope in dark times. What is it that we find there?

However much we contemplate it, it is a story that we will never fully understand this side of heaven. But it is a story that claims us, calls us, saves us in ways we barely discern. It gives us life, hope, and faith that the future will be better than the past. It alerts us to human folly, inspires us to stand with the

dispossessed, and assures of God's forgiveness and love for us. For the Cross is where we see God most clearly revealed. Reassuring us that in our dying God will be with us too, for his love will never let us go. 'At-one-ment' – the restored intimacy with God which Jesus had throughout his life. The man for others, because he was supremely the man for God.

One summary which I believe expresses all this well is by Michael Mayne, the late Dean of Westminster, who wrote this:

'God – and there is no greater mystery than this – is the one who suffers and died in Jesus and who himself experiences all our bewildered agony where all our questions hang and no explanation satisfies. He doesn't answer those questions. Somehow, in the Word made flesh, he enters into the heart of them himself. On the cross we see what it truly means to be human and what it truly means to be God: it means self-giving love. ... Can there be a more hopeful, life-enhancing message than this: that the man on the Cross is the embodiment of God's love; that, through an act of sheer, undeserved grace we are reconciled to the God who not only creates but redeems us, and that out of this terrible death came a new quality of life, a new relationship with all who wish to claim it? And from Calvary the healing power of God still flows within our sick and broken world. That is why, of all the possible words the Church could have used to describe this day of Christ's death, the word they settled on was 'good'.'

Amen.