

## Lent 4, CCSY, 22/03/09

*Num 21:4-9; Ps 107; Eph 2:1-10; John 3:14-21*

‘There is a green hill far away without a city wall, where the dear Lord was crucified, who died to save us all.’ As it may be for some of you, our Processional Hymn today is a childhood favourite of mine. I remember singing it naively in our School Chapel as a small boy, wondering why this particular green hill should be missing a city wall!

Last week we sang a different set of words to this tune for our Offertory Hymn, and several people commented outside afterwards how they could barely refrain from reverting to Cecil Alexander’s better known text. Indeed someone told me recently they only go to church when they know this hymn has been set. I know I’m not embarrassing anyone here, as I forgot to tell the person in question we were singing it today!

‘We may not know, we cannot tell, what pains he had to bear, but we believe it was for us he hung and suffered there.’ ‘For us’ . . . What spiritual freight might those two little words carry in the deep recesses of our hearts? By ‘for us’ do we understand ‘instead of’, or ‘in place of us’? The doctrine of so-called substitutionary atonement is alive and well in our churches and in the folk religion of popular culture, but what sort of God are we left worshipping if indeed ‘there was no other good enough to pay the price of sin’?

Sebastian Moore, for one, would argue that it is very much a god of our own making. In a 1977 publication aptly titled, *The Crucified is No Stranger*<sup>1</sup>, he traces the way that Paul’s idea of sin, as the fundamental refusal of God’s love in the myth of Adam, plays out in our being human. There’s an echo here of the divine lament in Hosea (11:1-8a):

When Israel was a child I loved him . . . [but] the more I called them the more they went from me . . . [even though] it was I who taught Ephraim to walk . . . My people are bent on turning away from me . . . [Yet] how can I hand you over, O Israel?

So what exactly is it that we are refusing, Moore asks?

[N]ot, directly at least, ‘obedience to God’, but some fullness of life to which God is impelling us and which our whole being dreads. Some unbearable personhood, identity, freedom, whose demands beat on our . . . choice of death.<sup>2</sup>

Or, as the Evangelist puts it bluntly in today’s gospel: ‘the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light’.

So yes, says Moore, Jesus is, in a very real sense, a victim of sin. One might even say with Cecil Alexander that he pays the price of sin. But not as an unsullied peace-offering to some wrathful deity in a brutal economy of exchange. It is we, rather, as St Paul reminds us in today’s epistle, who are ‘by nature children of wrath’. And this violent, transactional god, Moore suspects, is nothing more – or less – than a projection of our own fear at where taking hold of this fullness of life – this eternal life, as the fourth gospel also calls it – of where that might lead us; what it might ask of us.

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<sup>1</sup> London: DLT, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> *CNS*, x.

In just what sense, then, might we think of Jesus as victim?

What if Jesus were . . . the embodiment of this dreaded yet desired self of each of us, this destiny of being human . . . ? The crucifixion of Jesus then becomes the central drama of man's refusal of his true self.<sup>3</sup>

Instead of entering into this God-given identity, we crucify it; and in doing so we recognize ourselves not only as crucifier, but as crucified. It is in the willful destruction of that wholeness – both Jesus' and our own – which is, at root, our only sin – that we encounter the crucified as no stranger. As Moore reflects, 'I most deeply . . . discover Jesus as the man I never was, only when I realize that my not being wholly a man is what crucifies him . . . [and] in the heart of the crucified I [recognise] myself.'<sup>4</sup>

'He died that we might be forgiven, he died to make us good.' Perhaps this is the essential goodness that only the death of Jesus can accomplish for us, and for which he must be lifted up, in order that we might see God's refusal to abandon us to that evil? Certainly, if Jesus died to make us 'good' in any common or trivial sense of the word, that divine project has failed miserably. But if for 'goodness' we read 'wholeness' – wholly human – then the enigmatic phrase of St Paul from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians begins to make sense: '[God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, that we might become the righteousness of God in him' (5:21).

By embracing the tragedy of the human condition in its fundamental refusal of God – even though his own life was emblematically open to the One he called 'Father' – Jesus pays the price that we all pay as crucifiers of our own and others' wholeness, of that which makes for life. And as the Crucified he is neither surrogate, nor stranger, nor, ultimately, scapegoat, so much as companion in sin-bound flesh: he in us, and us in him.

The spear in his side is thus also a spear in our side, bursting the bubble of our stubborn refusal, collapsing the dreadful projection back onto ourselves. And in the blood and water which flow – those necessary materials of new birth – the possibility of our wholeness begins. Like the serpent in the wilderness, that which wounds us may also just heal us.

Here at this table, as nowhere else, the love of God stands ready to pierce our fear. In the blood and water of the chalice we may know both the terror and the promise of God's making us alive together with Christ, of being what God has made us in him, as the writer to the Ephesians would have it.

'O dearly, dearly he has loved, and we must love him too'; for in loving this all-too familiar Crucified One, we are pried open to the immeasurable riches of God's grace and may begin to love ourselves as we really are – a perfect freedom out of which we may love others as they really are.

What greater relief and release from the terminal restlessness and striving so named in today's Augustine-inspired Collect could we hope for on Refreshment Sunday – even if this Lent, as Simeon warned Blesséd Mary, a sword must pierce our own soul also?

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 21, emphasis added

God's cruciform Wisdom has laid her table and called her guests.  
The altar of our hearts is ready; our lamps burning;  
    and we as those who wait for their Lord.  
Come then our great High Priest and stand among us.  
Bear in us your maniple of humanity,  
    your stole of service, your chasuble of unity.  
Then carry us within the veil, and there celebrate your own sacrifice:  
your timeless, perfect, and divine sacrifice,  
    which transforms you into us, and us into you.  
Even so, come Lord Jesus. Amen.

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