

If we are honest with ourselves we have to admit that talk about the death of Christ is not very popular. It is in fact rather embarrassing. Many of us are secretly pleased that it is relegated to one rather lightly attended service a year.

We have stopped wrestling with the foundational question, "Why did Jesus have to die?" or "Why is the death of Christ significant." As a feminist theologian at a conference is quoted as saying not long ago, "I don't think we need a theory of atonement at all. I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff."

After all, it raises for us those uncomfortable parts of the Bible we have stopped listening to, like the passage known as the "Binding of Isaac" or in Hebrew the *Akedah*, which we read a moment ago. It appears to suggest if we read the story of the crucifixion of Jesus through its lens, that the God of Abraham sent his Son into the world to fulfill the act of sacrifice which he saved Abraham from. God, according to our liturgical tradition, can be said to have sacrificed his own Son. And such a God, our enlightened, liberal way of thinking tells us, is an abusive parent. Not someone who deserves our worship.

And yet it is the crucifixion that is at the heart of Christian faith and worship. St. Paul says that we were "baptized into his death," and that the reason we eat the Eucharistic meal is to "show forth his death." Our salvation is rooted and grounded not so much in our own faith, even less so in our good deeds or good intentions, but in nothing but the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is so that, Paul adds, none can boast. Our faith only makes operative, available or effective in our lives what Christ's death and resurrection accomplishes for us and for all humanity. As Lutheran theologian Mark Heim has put it, the "Belief that Christ's death has fundamentally changed the world seems so integral to the grammar of faith that its absence amounts to a debilitating speech defect. A church that falls silent about the cross has a hole where the gospel ought to be."

Perhaps another way to raise this is to reflect on the question a parent of one of our confirmation class asked in our adult commitment class: "Why is this day called Good Friday?" It is the question: "Is the cross a good thing or a bad thing? Is Judas a hero or a villain?" The recently published translation of the ancient "Gospel of Judas" goes to just this question. In it Jesus asks Judas to betray him to the authorities. Yet the canonical Gospels take the more traditional line: "The son of man goes as it is written of him," says Jesus in Mark's Gospel, "but woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed. It would have been better for that man if he had not been born" (Mk 14:21).

The good/bad tension of the Cross is present in a number of ways. Because of the frank and detailed description of the sacrificial, scapegoating violence that has existed and served an important role in social construction and consensus from the foundation of the world, we know that violence DOES save people (at least in the short run) from more

violence. Many of our institutions, institutions that may well be called "sacred," not because they are in any overt way religious, but because we universally grant them legitimacy—that is we unanimously believe in them—such institutions depend on violence or the threat of violence. We don't have to mention such obvious ones as capital punishment, police action, or diplomacy and limited war to make the point. Civilization depends upon these largely hidden and ritualized exercises of controlled violence. International relations depend on a definition of nation states as "monopolies of violence." Democratic electoral politics and legislative process inevitably involves demonizing and scapegoating, compromise and sellouts, that is, winners and losers.

While all that may be "good" and common to us, at the same time, we also know it is not okay for victims to be sacrificed. Our increasing sensitivity to injustice and oppression, that is to the likelihood that the poor and minorities are more likely to be sacrificed than the rich and the more powerful are, provides the other side of this paradox. It is a sensitivity and an awareness that grows out of the innocence of Jesus, revealed by his resurrection, who is sacrificed on the cross. Yet this tension reflects an honest description of our condition. We *must* exercise sacrificial violence for the sake of the peace and unity of society, and *yet* we can no longer avoid facing the cost of it in injustice and mendacity. This is the human condition.

James Alison has described this situation by recalling a universal myth in its particular Greek form and then applying it to Jesus: "And of course a *pharmacos* () in the ancient Greek world was also the town scapegoat, who was kept in considerable riches and splendor against the day when there was some sort of crisis or an earthquake, and they needed to sacrifice somebody. They would walk him through the streets in glad rags, people touching him, so that all the bad vibes would be transmitted to him, and then he would be taken to the top of the hill and encouraged to engage in (ahem!) *voluntary sacrificial activities*."

And this is the solution to the crisis of Jesus' dangerous popularity with the crowd that is offered by Caiaphas in John's Gospel: "You know nothing at all; you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish." It is a solution that is familiar and foundational to all human society. The violent mechanism of scapegoating and sacrifice is the homeopathic remedy to the threat of uncontrollable violence. It's just a little bit of violence—violence of all against one—to ward off the possibility of the overwhelming violence of all against all.

James Alison continues: "That was the *pharmakon* in the ancient Greek world, the one who is being lifted up. That is the moment when all people will start to be able to be drawn to him, when hearts will start to be able to be opened, because all hearts that are formed by the principle of this world learning how to gang up together against whoever it is that is going to give us our unity, all hearts that are formed in that way, find themselves exposed in the presence of the exposed victim."

But Jesus is not the ultimate sacrifice because he is the biggest fish ever caught by the mechanism, as if the bigger the victim the bigger the pay-off and as the Son of God Jesus is the biggest possible victim. The truth is rather that because in the light of the resurrection his innocence is so obvious, and because he enters so willingly and consciously into his own death, so filled with divine love and forgiveness toward those who hand him over, he dismantles the machinery of death, he exposes the vanity of sacrifice. And because it is in the cross once and for all exposed, this apparently automatic and divinely ordained machinery can no longer be used to hide our responsibility for scapegoating. The mechanism is no longer effective. Because now questions are raised: was the victim of our execution really innocent after all? Was he himself the victim of an abusive childhood? Were there mitigating circumstances in his trial? As any cost benefit analysis will show, it no longer works.

Nevertheless, we Christians are not immediately healed of our scapegoating ways, our reflexive tendency to work the sacrificial mechanism to gain the benefits of peace and harmony that it promises. The prime example is our historic tendency to anti-semitism. Judas, the primal betrayer becomes the obvious new scapegoat and for centuries we have blindly projected blame and guilt on Jews. Christian Europe was largely held together until World War II by that mendacity. But the Holocaust exposed, like the crucifixion itself, the innocence of its victims in such a way that we could no longer deny our complicity. Hopefully Christians have begun to learn that the crucial thing that makes the church a new community is not our solidarity against some sacrificial victim, but, rather, our identification with the crucified One. Thus, when the resurrected Jesus says "Peace" and we repeat that in our Eucharistic liturgy it truly is Peace not as the world gives. It is peace based NOT on new victims.

So the death of Christ is not unique; it is like any other sacred, substitutionary execution in the sense that Jesus dies like any other outcast scapegoat, the victim of our need to gain peace through violent sacrifice. In this way we could say that this day is Bad Friday, because in it we just see more of the same human tendency to Sin and Death in which all of us are enmeshed. Yet the death of Christ is unique insofar as it exposes to us our own part in the mechanism of sacrifice that defines our world. and to withdraw our faith and trust from it, that is, insofar as it begins to heal in us our need to be safely found in the right, on the side of the persecutor, our fear of being outcast ourselves. It is truly Good Friday for those who receive the liberty of the forgiving victim.

The work of the cross is the work of the all powerful, righteous and transcendent God insofar as in it that God allows himself to be handed over to sin and death, and occupies the place of the victim on our behalf, and by doing so grants us the grace to follow him in that humiliation.