

Isaiah 49. 1-7

Psalm 40. 1-11

1 Corinthians 1. 1-9

John 1. 29-42

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What we have just heard from the first chapter of John is the beginning of the action in the gospel. As John the Baptist is out by the Jordan and Jesus makes his first appearance, it's clear that John has disciples there with him – he's not the lone figure as he usually appears to be in the other gospels - but someone with a community around him. As Jesus appears for the first time it is John who in a sense reveals who it is Jesus is – announces what Jesus is. It is a kind of theological statement about Jesus' nature: *Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*

It is a meaning-laden statement, but what does this phrase actually mean? And what is its importance, given that we say or sing it, each time we celebrate the Eucharist. Because this notion of Jesus taking away our sin is pretty central to our understanding of what we have come to call salvation. It is as if John, the writer of the gospel, is putting prophetic words into the mouth of John the Baptist, saying: see what this means for this one I am calling the Word made Flesh to take sin away.

There is a movement in the gospel of John from this declaration out by the Jordan all the way to the cross at the end of the gospel; because in John it is on the day when the lambs are slaughtered for the Passover that Jesus is crucified; a connection between the taking away of sin and spilt blood. We sing of the blood; maybe with a bit more cringing or ambivalence these days but many of us were raised on the power of the blood to save.

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O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood,
to every believer the promise of God!
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All of this is an expression of what is called the theory of substitutionary atonement – that the shedding of Jesus' blood was a substitute for the need for our own blood in some way to be shed because of our guilt. The theologian James Alison explains it in this rapid-fire way:

God created the universe, including humanity, and it was good. Then, somehow or other, mankind 'fell'. This 'fall' was a sin against God's infinite goodness and mercy and justice, affecting the order of creation. So there was a problem. Humans could not, off their own bat, restore the order which they had disordered, let alone make up for having dishonoured God's infinite goodness. No finite making-up could make up for an offence with infinite ramifications, and God would have been perfectly within his rights to have destroyed the whole of humanity. But God was merciful as well as just, and so he pondered what to do to sort out the mess. Could he have simply let the matter by, in his infinite mercy? Well, maybe he would have liked to, but he, was beholden to his infinite justice and honour as well. Only an infinite payment could do, something which humans couldn't come up with, but God could, and yet the payment had to be from the human side, or else it wouldn't be a real payment for the outrage in question. So, God came up with the idea of sending his Son into the world as a human, so that his Son could pay the price as a human, which since he was also God, would be infinite, and thus effect the necessary satisfaction. Thus the whole sorry saga could be brought to a convenient close: those humans who agreed to cover over their sins by holding on to, or being covered by, the precious blood of the Saviour, whom the Father had sacrificed to himself, would be saved from their sins, and given the Holy Spirit by which they would become able to behave according to the original order of creation. In this way, when they died, they at least would be able to inherit heaven, which had been the original plan all along, before the fall had mucked everything up.

Alison, pp 18-19

On being Liked, James

This is a pretty bald description of the theory, but I think probably quite accurate way of describing the order of salvation many of us were raised on. It is a theory of salvation, a model of salvation, developed by a fellow by the name of Anselm of Canterbury – an 11th century, Italian born monk who eventually became archbishop of Canterbury. The trouble is, Anselm's theory of salvation was based on the feudal practice [– that is a society where there was a lord, who lorded it over everyone under his sway] - of making satisfaction or recompense according to the status of a person against whom an offense has been committed, - a sort of tit-for-tat notion of the world based on offending someone of higher status – in Anselm's theory the infinite God being the offended party and humanity the offender. Anselm's mechanics of salvation was thoroughly established by the time of the Reformation came along and then became super-charged by John Calvin in the post-reformation period – into what is called penal substitutionary atonement. The problem with all this, James Alison points out, is that it is a theory – a kind of mathematical, mechanistic, legalistic approach to understanding the human condition – a condition for which we need mercy and grace - not a theory, nor a quid pro quo arrangement with the one in whose image we are made.

James Alison suggests that there are a number of issues with this understanding of salvation, issues which many of us have had sneaking suspicions about in some way or other for some time but find it difficult to shake off:

- It is a theory – drawn from a particular way of reading key texts in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures – and, I'd have to say ignoring other texts.
- It's a theory which suggests a very perverse God, a tit-for-tat God, a God really quite at odds with the nature of God revealed in the full breadth of the scriptures, particularly through the witness of the gospel. We might ask of such an image of God: How do you reconcile the Father portrayed in the Gospel of John with whom Jesus the Son is one, with this father requiring the shedding of the beloved son's blood. If we're intellectually and emotionally honest, this is not possible.
- It is a theory which actually makes sin the central character in the story. Not God, but sin. I was too young to attend the Billy Graham crusade in the late 60s here in Melbourne but I can always recall watching videos of his long crusade addresses – the rising and falling intonation (reminiscent of Adolph Hitler's rhetorical approach I have to say) – where there seemed to be an unhealthy preoccupation with sin – an endeavour to convince us of God's moral fury in relation to our shortcomings. Oh, and look, here is Jesus to fix the whole problem.
- This preoccupation with the problem of sin – and our own failings – means there is a preoccupation with morals, almost to the exclusion of all else. In our redeemed state we have to be good for the kind of God who seems to be not too distantly related to Father Christmas – concerned about whether children have been naughty or nice; about whether we have been good enough. Which has of course led to the tendency of the church to be finger-wagging and moralistic. The death of George Pell this week has highlighted the still very great tension within the church over being a church which proclaims an abundance of divine grace or which needs to keep a tight rein on people's morality – particularly sexual morality.
- James Alison suggests that this moralistic mindset also renders creation as problem; because rather than creation being the very good gift of God, it is simply the place where this moral battle for the eternal salvation of human souls is fought out. It is a theory which creates a kind of universe in which we are inclined to ask: what did I do to deserve that? As though there is some kind of divine fate associated with our moral behaviour.
- James also suggests that the theory unleashes a problem of power – that those who are in control of the theory of this order of salvation exercise power over others by being in charge of the story – and that they may do this even though they themselves have not undergone a true transformation themselves. James says: *it is a story of salvation that can be told by those who have not yet learned to live as powerless in the eyes of the world.* At the heart of the journey to the cross is Jesus' encouragement to take up our cross – to be broken like him, to take the downward path to emptiness where the grace of God is truly discovered. Yet here, in this theory of salvation – it can be told by people without undergoing death and resurrection.
- And James' final issue with a theory of substitutionary atonement is that it creates a group power dynamic – a dynamic of insiders and outsiders – of the moral and the immoral, of the good and the bad, of the saved and the damned, of believers and doubters, of the worthy and the unworthy. It creates judgemental people and

judgemental communities. And it causes to us to internalise conversations about ourselves and our own worthiness as if worthiness is the measure of what it means to be human.

James describes this theory of atonement as the default Western understanding of salvation. And in saying this he distinguishes it from that of the eastern Church; it is everywhere and it has deeply influenced and infected human self-understanding of western Europe. Indeed our legal systems and systems of justice, punishment and rehabilitation, or lack of it.

Part of me felt I should just gloss over these few simple words at the beginning John - *Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* - but part of me wanted to tackle this terrible knot of the theology which flows from this theory of atonement. It's a lot to deal with in one sermon-slot. Maybe I'll have to keep unpacking this through this season of revelation and discovery.

Many of us have in some way or other put this theory to one side – maybe cross our fingers behind our backs when we sing of the blood, a just go a bit quiet. What James suggests is that many of us have instinctively been able to detect that something is terribly wrong with this story of salvation; even have become dismissive, cynical about it. But he suggests: 'It is not enough to laugh! Acids leak from this dead battery into almost every aspect of how we live our faith. Can we not get a new and living battery to power our imaginations and self-understanding; especially our understanding of God?

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As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

Here is a theology of salvation – not a leaky, toxic, corrosive and dangerous theology which divides us one from another, and from God – but one which organically ties us back into the source of our life, the source of our fruitfulness, the source of our abundance, the source of our joy. Abiding.

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It is a meaning-laden statement, but what does this phrase actually mean? And what is its importance, given that we say or sing it, each time we celebrate the Eucharist. Because this notion of Jesus taking away our sin is pretty central to our understanding of what we have come to call salvation. It is as if John, the writer of the gospel, is putting prophetic words into the mouth of John the Baptist, saying: see what this means for this one I am calling the Word made Flesh to take sin away.

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On being Liked, James

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James Alison suggests that there are a number of issues with this understanding of salvation, issues which many of us have had sneaking suspicions about in some way or other for some time but find it difficult to shake off:

- It is a theory – drawn from a particular way of reading key texts in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures – and, I'd have to say ignoring other texts.
- It's a theory which suggests a very perverse God, a tit-for-tat God, a God really quite at odds with the nature of God revealed in the full breadth of the scriptures, particularly through the witness of the gospel. We might ask of such an image of God: How do you reconcile the Father portrayed in the Gospel of John with whom Jesus the Son is one, with this father requiring the shedding of the beloved son's blood. If we're intellectually and emotionally honest, this is not possible.
- It is a theory which actually makes sin the central character in the story. Not God, but sin. I was too young to attend the Billy Graham crusade in the late 60s here in Melbourne but I can always recall watching videos of his long crusade addresses – the rising and falling intonation (reminiscent of Adolph Hitler's rhetorical approach I have to say) – where there seemed to be an unhealthy preoccupation with sin – an endeavour to convince us of God's moral fury in relation to our shortcomings. Oh, and look, here is Jesus to fix the whole problem.
- This preoccupation with the problem of sin – and our own failings – means there is a preoccupation with morals, almost to the exclusion of all else. In our redeemed state we have to be good for the kind of God who seems to be not too distantly related to Father Christmas – concerned about whether children have been naughty or nice; about whether we have been good enough. Which has of course led to the tendency of the church to be finger-wagging and moralistic. The death of George Pell this week has highlighted the still very great tension within the church over being a church which proclaims an abundance of divine grace or which needs to keep a tight rein on people's morality – particularly sexual morality.
- James Alison suggests that this moralistic mindset also renders creation as problem; because rather than creation being the very good gift of God, it is simply the place where this moral battle for the eternal salvation of human souls is fought out. It is a theory which creates a kind of universe in which we are inclined to ask: what did I do to deserve that? As though there is some kind of divine fate associated with our moral behaviour.
- James also suggests that the theory unleashes a problem of power – that those who are in control of the theory of this order of salvation exercise power over others by being in charge of the story – and that they may do this even though they themselves have not undergone a true transformation themselves. James says: *it is a story of salvation that can be told by those who have not yet learned to live as powerless in the eyes of the world.* At the heart of the journey to the cross is Jesus' encouragement to take up our cross – to be broken like him, to take the downward path to emptiness where the grace of God is truly discovered. Yet here, in this theory of salvation – it can be told by people without undergoing death and resurrection.
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As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

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Isaiah 49. 1-7

Psalm 40. 1-11

1 Corinthians 1. 1-9

John 1. 29-42

Each time we celebrate the Eucharist we sing or say the words: *Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world: have mercy on us.* It is a fixed part of the communion liturgy known as the *Agnus dei* – simply the Latin phrase for Lamb of God. *Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world: have mercy on us.*

In this year of Matthew, as we launch into the season of Epiphany, we hear just one reading over the seven weeks of Epiphany from the gospel of John. The season is a period when we reflect of the manifestation of Christ to all people. Or as I talked about last week the revealing and discovery of the inclusive embrace of God. As the last lines of the two verses of the hymn we will sing as introit through the season go: *wash our eyes and make us see; make us children of the light.* It's a prayer giving voice to our desire to be able to discover.

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