

Pentecost 14 2025 All Souls' **SIN AND ATONEMENT** dtw

I Tim 1.15 *The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*

Luke 15. 10 *Jesus said, "...I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents"*

Last week in my sermon *The Potter's Hand and Self Esteem*, I observed, in reference to the BCP, that before I could even read, sealed within my memory before the age of four, I 'bewailed my manifold sins and wickedness, provoking most justly God's wrath and indignation against me; the remembrance of them is grievous to me, the burden of them is intolerable'...I mean, how could I even get out of bed in the morning? The weight of sin and unrighteousness is too great! Seriously, maybe this theology has put some people off church; you may know someone yourself? Wouldn't it be a wonderful thing to inform people that our God is in love with us, wants us to come home, believe and breathe again.

Today, I want to develop this a bit further and unpack a bit of Atonement Theory with you, to see where it might take us in our own theological and spiritual outworking. I want to start with a fundamental question: Do we sin because we are by nature, sinful, or are we only sinners because from time to time we sin? (rpt). Many of us have been influenced at some point in our lives by what is known as the doctrine of 'Original Sin'. St Augustine of Hippo, (born 354 died 430) has been described as *The Father of Original Sin*. This doctrine is not biblical because you won't find the coupling of those two words anywhere in the Bible. But Augustine's influence on the western world and the Church has been immense, and it has largely had a negative impact on billions of people and the way they see their lives and the world. We are predestined, by nature, to sin, on a fixed track. We sin because we are, by nature, sinners. Well, that's a strong view. Most hardline Christians believe it, including hardline Anglicans.

Another theologian, Pelagius, who lived at the same time as Augustine, had a different view, for which he was branded a heretic. He did not believe in original sin and claimed that human choice in the way of salvation was paramount, and that we are only sinners because we choose to sin. I like to think of Pelagius as being the *Father of Original Blessing*! After all, we are all created in the image of God, carved in the palm of God's hand, fearfully and wonderfully made, and essentially good, not bad. Matthew Fox developed that view in the post-modern era. Most progressive, incarnational, sacramental Christians believe it, including me.

One common Christian reading of the Bible is that Jesus died for our sins to pay a debt to God the Father, as proposed by Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) and has been called "the most unfortunately successful piece of theology ever written." (Rohr) Theologians after Anselm developed what is known as 'substitutionary atonement theory', the idea that, before

God could love the creation, God needed and demanded Jesus to be a blood sacrifice to atone for sin-drenched humanity. This is a picture of a cruel, malevolent God, not a loving God. Richard Rohr, in his book *Eager to Love*, observes, 'When you start with a negative, it is almost impossible to ever get back to anything positive and wonderful. When you start with a positive, things tend to take care of themselves from within. We have had enough trouble helping people to love, trust and like God to begin with, without creating even further obstacles...as if God could need payment, and even a very violent transaction, to be able to love and forgive his own children..'

God's willed creation and love were at work before the beginning of time. In Ephesians we read, *..he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us.* (1.4-6) Here is the eager extravagance of God toward us! Sure, we do goof up, and pretty badly at times. Human beings do terrible things to other humans and willfully, by choice. Right now, in our world, the scale of destruction and depravity is massive, beyond comprehension. But, also willfully, by choice, we have the capacity to rise above, to transform this world, to reflect the sheer goodness and grace of God, to forgive one another, as Christ has forgiven us. And there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God!

John Duns Scotus was a philosopher theologian who joined an early group of Franciscans who first came ashore at Canterbury in 1224 while Francis was still alive. Rohr, himself a Franciscan, observes that Scotus tried to change the Augustinian equation in this way: *Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity (it did not need changing!)*. *Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God.* Christ was Plan A, and the whole Plan. God was in Christ, reconciling the world to God and entrusting us with a ministry of reconciliation. (2Cor 5.19) Now that is good news if I ever heard it! And, here comes my personal key text again, for by grace alone we have been saved through faith, and this is not our own doing, it is the free gift of God. (Eph 2.8) God does not love us because we try to be good; God loves us because God is good. And we are called to image that love to the world.

Getting back to atonement, I am happy to witness and profess at this later phase of my life, my faith and my ministry, that I am a Good Friday Christian. Easter Day is a bonus for me, God's huge exclamation mark on Good Friday. Why do I say this? I say it because when I gaze at the cross on Good Friday I am utterly convinced, persuaded beyond doubt by the last verse of Isaac Watts' *When I survey the wondrous cross*:

*Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small:
Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all. Amen*