

So what? - Easter Sunday 2024.

Two engineering students were walking across a university campus when one said, 'Where did you get such a great bike?'

The second engineer replied, 'Well, I was walking along yesterday, minding my own business, when a beautiful woman rode up on this bike, threw it to the ground, took off all her clothes and said, 'Take what you want.' The second engineer nodded approvingly and said, 'Good choice; the clothes probably wouldn't have fitted you anyway.'

I told you at least once before of a friend of mine who was chaplain for a time at the Naval Hospital I worked in. David Barlow climbed into his pulpit on Easter morning, grasped the

sides of it, stared down at his congregation, and said, "If you don't believe in the Resurrection, you might as well go home." Then he turned around, climbed down the pulpit steps again and sat down. You could have heard a pin drop.

But he missed the punch line.

It was a marvellous occasion for me, and I've often wondered if I would have the courage to do the same thing. I don't doubt that I would, but I feel it leaves a huge hole behind - rather like the empty tomb itself.

It leaves not Jesus hanging on the cross, but us - metaphorically. How is this so, and why?

Because over the last weeks of Lent , I have tried my best to give you the evidence that the gospels were actual eye-witness accounts of Jesus' life and death; that the chain of custody or evidence was carefully preserved from his lifetime until the canon of scripture was ratified at the Councils of Nicaea and Laodicea without modification; and that not only was Jesus crucified, but the evidence points to his resurrection as the only probable explanation of the facts that followed the discovery of the empty tomb.

Which leaves us in a position where we can reasonably say, "I believe in the Resurrection of Jesus."

But it may leave you wondering, 'why did he have to die? - and in what way does that have any effect on my life now?'

I want to borrow some thoughts from Brian Zahnd. He is a pastor at a church in Missouri and has had some controversial press for his views on the 'God of the Old Testament', but we don't need to go into that here. I think he has helpful remarks to make on the concept of 'atonement', and I have used part of his post called, 'Dying for our sins.'

When we say "Jesus died for our sins," what does that mean? It's undeniably an essential confession of our Christian faith, but how does

it work? This much I'm sure of, it's not reducible to just one thing. To try to reduce the death of Jesus to a single meaning is an impoverished approach to the mystery of the cross. I'm especially talking about those tidy explanations of the cross known as "atonement theories." I find most of them inadequate; others I find repellent. Particularly abhorrent are those theories that portray the Father of Jesus as a pagan deity who can only be placated by the barbarism of child sacrifice. The god who is mollified by throwing a virgin into a volcano or by nailing his son to a tree is not the Abba of Jesus!

Neither is the death of Jesus a kind of quid pro quo by which God gains the necessary

capital to forgive sinners. No! Jesus does not save us from God; Jesus reveals God!

Those of you who may have read Elie Wiesel's book, 'Night', will remember the passage where a child is hanged, but remains undead, in Auschwitz, and the question is asked, "Where is your God now?" To which the answer is given, "He is here, hanging on that gallows."

Jesus does not provide God with the capacity to forgive; Jesus reveals God as forgiving love. An "economic model" of the cross just won't work. It's not as if God is saying, "Look, I'd love to forgive you, but I've got to pay off Justice first, and, you know how she is, she's a tough goddess, she requires due payment."

This understanding of the cross begs the question of who exactly is in charge — the Father of Jesus or some abstract ideal called "Justice"?

When we confess with Paul that "Christ died for our sins," we don't mean that God required the vicious murder of his Son in order to forgive. How would that work anyway? Did God have some scale of torture that once met would "satisfy his wrath?" Think it through and you'll see the problem. Was death not enough to satisfy this god? Did it have to be death by crucifixion? Did torture have to be part of the equation? And how does that work? Was there a minimum number of lashes

required in the scourging? Did the thorny crown have to have a certain number of thorns in order for this god to call the scales balanced?

Are you squirming yet? Do you want to say, "Well, some of the abuse Jesus suffered was gratuitous torture by the hands of cruel men." But if that's the case, how does this division of labour work? How much was necessary to "satisfy God" and how much was just for the sport of it? No, this approach to understanding Jesus dying for our sins clearly won't work.

So what do we do? Let's begin here: Before the cross is anything else, it is a catastrophe.

It is the unjust lynching of an innocent man. This is precisely how the Apostles spoke of the crucifixion of Jesus in the book of Acts.

"This Jesus...you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." -Acts 2:23

"You killed the author of life, whom God raised from the dead." -Acts 3:15

"God raised up Jesus whom you killed by hanging him on a tree." -Acts 5:30

"The Righteous One you have now betrayed and murdered." -Acts 7:52

The Bible is clear, God did not kill Jesus. Jesus was offered as a sacrifice in that the

Father was willing to send his Son into our sinful system in order to expose it as utterly sinful and provide us with another way. The death of Jesus was a sacrifice in that sense. But it was also a sacrifice for God to absorb, once and for all, the final and ultimate atonement for sin, which was only possible in an unblemished lamb.

Zahnd suggests that when we say Jesus died for our sins, we mean something like this: We violently sinned our sins into Jesus, and Jesus revealed the heart of God by forgiving us. When Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them," he was not asking God to act contrary to his nature. When Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive

them," he was, as always, revealing the very heart of God!

I am not entirely happy with Zahnd's expression of us 'violently sinning our sins into Jesus'. I prefer the image of St Christopher, who when carrying a child across a river, though he himself was supposedly 7.5 feet tall and immensely strong, found the child so heavy he could hardly bare him. Asking why, the child replied that he was the Christ, and he was also bearing the sins of the whole world on his shoulders.

However we envisage our sins being borne by Jesus, Jesus absorbed them, died because of them, carried them into death, and rose on the

third day to speak the first word of the new world: "Peace be with you."

Zahnd attempts explain his idea, and you can take it or leave it; he says, 'we violently sinned our sins into Jesus, by that I mean that all of us are more or less implicated by our explicit or tacit support of the systems of violent power that frame our world. These are the very political and religious systems that executed Jesus. At the cross we see where Adam and Eve's penchant for blame and Cain's capacity for killing have led us — to the murder of God! At Golgotha human sin is seen as utterly crushing. God did not require the death of Jesus — but we did!

I had problems with this idea for two reasons; first, that I thought I had never sinned enough to be deserving of the death penalty; and second, because I would never have condoned the death of Jesus.

But I had to accept some basic premises. Let me ask you; have any of you ever told a lie? - or stolen anything? - even cash-till deceit? - or cheated, or wished someone dead? Well, I have, and I'm not proud of it. I suspect that I have probably broken all the commandments at one time or another, with the exception of actual murder.

If I believe in a system of justice in this world, it is not unreasonable that if I was

caught, I would pay some sort of penalty. Similarly, from a divine justice perspective, there would reasonably be a moment of judgement. This does not subordinate God to a superior god of Justice, but enables God in Christ to show His love.

Even in this world there are those who go to prison for someone they love, when they themselves didn't do the crime; Jesus knew and told his disciples what he was doing - several times.

So let's be clear, the cross is not about the appeasement of a monster god, though there is a need for justice - but in Jesus' resurrection it is tempered with mercy. The cross is about

the revelation of a merciful God. At the cross we discover a God who would rather die than kill his enemies. The cross is where God in Christ absorbs sin and recycles it into forgiveness. The cross is not what God inflicts upon Christ in order to forgive. The cross is what God endures in Christ as he forgives. Once we understand this, we know what we are seeing when we look at the cross: We are seeing the lengths to which a God of love will go in forgiving sin.

The cross is both ugly and beautiful. It's as ugly as human sin and as beautiful as divine love. But in the end, love and beauty win.

Now can you see the glory of Jesus and his Resurrection as a jewel beyond price - as that crushed carbon and dirt of sin that became the indestructible diamond for us all?

At this table Jesus hands you this diamond, to take or reject as you will; but if you take it - as a newly espoused person would show it off to others - so you must show off the diamond you have been given to others too, and tell them where you got it.

Maybe then more will come to find this store of love and beauty - and leave with the riches of his grace.