

THE ASTONISHING ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING BELIEF IN ATONING SACRIFICE

When we are buying a new insurance policy or some tablets to alleviate pain we are advised to read the small print about the product, though most of us don't do so. When it comes to buying into religion we don't normally study the small print either. But it could be a good idea sometime to have a look at that small print. Let me give one example - evangelical preachers and certain filmmakers try to persuade people to believe that Jesus died for them and for the whole world. That is to say they interpret Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice. This is what the Gibson film is all about. However, people do not usually study the religious small print that reveals the astonishing assumptions that must be accepted if Jesus' death is to be interpreted to be an atoning sacrifice. As millions of people do believe in this way, it is important to give serious consideration to the underlying assumptions of their belief.

I personally do not find it credible to believe in Jesus' death interpreted as an atoning sacrifice, but I accept that many Christians do find it credible.

Here, in my opinion, are some of the assumptions underlying belief in Jesus' death when interpreted as an atoning sacrifice.

(1) If the correct way to interpret and explain Jesus' death is to say that he suffered and died in the sinners' place, then it makes god out to be a very severe, harsh and punitive god. It is saying that there was a punishment that had to be borne, there was a penalty that had to be paid. It should have been us sinners doing so; but instead, it is claimed that Jesus took our place. Furthermore, if this theory of what Jesus' death meant were correct, it would involve God in an unethical procedure, for it is not part of the ethics of justice for one person to bear the punishment due to be borne by others. It is assumed that this does not matter.

(2) Our normal explanation of why we die is in terms of natural causes, such as ageing or sickness or war or accident. However to see Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice is to accept a different worldview. In this

understanding, death entered the world as a curse imposed by God because of Adam's disobedience to Him in the Garden of Eden. It is held that Jesus' innocent death in obedience to the will of God lifted this curse, so that we could be freed from the powers of death and be able to enter heaven when we die. It assumes scientific explanations are incorrect, and implies that Adam was a real historical person.

(3) To see Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice assumes that there is no contradiction between believing in a forgiving god who is also a severely punitive god. Why is it assumed to be insufficient to simply believe in a forgiving compassionate God (who is not also a punitive god) and who does not require there to be a mediator or a redeemer between God and humanity?

(4) It is possible to understand the ancient sacrificial system of Judaism, similar to other such systems in pre-scientific days, as an invention by human beings in those societies who thought that this was a way to restore harmony between a people and their god. Such systems developed and were modified over time. Indeed much interesting research has been conducted into the Hebrew and Greek equivalents of words such as "atonement" and "sacrifice" as well as their history within the English language. People who believe in Jesus' atoning death tend to see the ancient sacrificial system of his religion as divinely ordained; they believe God required a human sacrifice so that peace could be restored between humanity and God. By contrast, there are other people who today look on all the religions as the product of our search as to how we are to live and who claim that we have created for ourselves our theologies and our rituals. Such people have an understanding of the scriptures which allows them to say, "this is what people, thousands of years ago, thought to be right or to be the will of their god, but what they believed then does not constrain how I think today". What is the underlying assumption behind the idea of sacrifice: is it to appease an angry god? If so, is this an idea we still need to hold onto today?

(5) Some of the arguments in favour of seeing Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice depend on what he is claimed to have said himself. This assumes that liberal scholars are mistaken in thinking that a good deal of what Jesus is recorded as saying is in fact the theology of the church put on his lips. But whatever the source of the words or the theological

ideas, they are still open to our critical judgement today.

(6) Many evangelical preachers tell people that if you believe Jesus died for you and if you believe that he is alive again, then you are guaranteed a place in heaven. How can such certainty be assumed or justified? For we can't prove either that there is a God or therefore can we prove that there is a place called heaven. We walk, as it is said, by faith and not by sight.

Will these points give some believers or potential believers in an atoning sacrifice pause for thought? I hope they will.

Readers of my book "Tried for Heresy A 21st Century Journey of Faith" will have discovered that, while I believe in an ultimate reality characterised by infinite love, goodness, graciousness, forgiveness and compassion, I deny the existence of a severe and punitive god and do not interpret the death of Jesus of Nazareth as an atoning sacrifice. I just don't find the assumptions underlying this belief credible. I do think that seeking to be forgiven (as well as acknowledging wrong-doing and harm and trying to do some act(s) of restitution) should be on both the political agenda of the world and on each of our own personal agendas and so too should be the difficult endeavour of offering forgiveness.

Andrew Furlong

(Dean of Clonmacnoise, 1997- 2002)