

The observant worshiper here at Christ the King Anglican Church may notice a difference in our altar setting this morning. Our colors have shifted from purple to red, because we have moved into Passiontide. Jesus is drawing nearer and nearer to Jerusalem, and we are liturgically walking with Him on His path. We are walking with Him, approaching the great torment that He will endure throughout His prayers in Gethsemane. We move with Him closer to His arrest, His trial, His scourging, His journey along the Via Dolorosa, and finally His crucifixion. So the color red this morning reminds us during these last two weeks before Easter of the blood that He sheds for us. As a way of orientation this morning, we consider two big ideas: first, an overview of the Atonement itself, and then today's collect in light of Christ's sacrifice for us.

We call this morning Passion Sunday because once again we are called to specially contemplate the atonement that Christ made for us on the cross. This is one of the core doctrines of the Christian faith, and yet through the centuries, it has caused very much consternation in the history of the Church. Why? Because critics and skeptics frame Christ's sacrifice in terms of paganism where an angry God demands a sacrifice of an innocent victim to appease his wrath. Indeed in history this interpretation is a common, yet demonic, framing of what happens in a sacrifice.

However, this characterization is foreign to the Judeo-Christian worldview. The Biblical heart of sacrifice isn't the appeasement of a deity who delights in suffering. Rather we see that in the Bible, the heart of sacrifice is gift, a display of love, not one of fear, in order to bring union, to repair a breach in relationship. In other words, it is as if one permanently gives a part of himself to another in order to be united together, to enjoy mutual fellowship and the

blessing of oneness. It is the establishment, or re-establishment, of a covenantal union. The blood that is shed, the life that is poured out, becomes a witness that one party has given his life for another. This is the closest of relationships – uniting two parties into one. Sounds like marriage right? Well, it is. In the Atonement, Christ marries His Bride, the Church.

As I said, critics of Christianity love to mis-characterize the Atonement. The picture they paint is a caricature – a deliberate exaggeration of a false notion of the Atonement. The failure in this image is a division of Christ from God. It views Christ as being of a different substance from God the Father. What they miss is that the Father doesn't insist that the punishment of man's sin and the wrath of God be poured out upon a person totally disconnected from the Father. Jesus and the Father are One. In the Atonement, therefore, God Himself dies out of love for us. Jesus is The innocent victim, but He is also the Priest who offers, and the King to Whom we are united. We humans cannot die to effect this union, for then no union would exist because we'd be dead. We therefore symbolically die through sacrificial giving. With Christ, however, no such limitation existed; Christ did die for us to effect actual union. And then Christ rose from the dead, continuing in actual being so that we who have been baptized into Him are ontologically bound to God in this final sacrifice. Our very being is different after we become followers of Christ through baptism, which is the rite of dying to oneself and becoming alive to God.

But why was the Atonement necessary? Why didn't God just annihilate the world that had rebelled against its Creator? St. Athanasius points out the predicament that man's rebellion causes for God. He calls it "The Divine Dilemma." God created us to love Him and to tend His creation, to grow the Kingdom of God, to expand the Garden, so that it would fill the whole earth. God created us out of love, and, in fact, all true creation is an act of love. What

God therefore had created in love, He could not, would not, abandon. God's good intent for humanity would not be thwarted. So the breach that humanity introduced must be healed. The Atonement is how God healed this breach while still being true to His own character; for He had indeed promised, "In the day you shall eat of it, you shall die." Without the Atonement, the death of creation through the death of Adam would eternally persist.

Of course when considering the Atonement, it is critical to understand the unique role of Jesus Christ, for the salvation of all depends only and exclusively upon Him. He is the Anointed One, the Messiah, *Christos*. And He is Jeshua, Jesus, Savior. The early Church wrestled with who Christ was, concluding that He was both fully man and fully God. This is the only way the Christ can be the Atoning sacrifice. He had to completely represent, us so He had to be just like us, subject to temptation, subject to our suffering, subject to every experience and emotion that is common to humanity. At the same time, He had to be divine so that He would be able to obey God in every aspect and remain the spotless Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, so that He could bear the sins of all and renew creation, and so that He would rise from the dead. If either the humanity or the divinity of Christ is minimized, or if Christ is made into some demigod, some hybrid of man and divinity, the Atonement is undermined.

But the Atonement is not, of course, subject to our understanding of Christ. The Atonement was the eternal and divine plan of God from eternity past and for eternity to come. Of course, we always come back to the question, "Why did He do this?" And we must always be reminded, again and again, of the answer. Christ died for us, out of the purest and most divine love.



Maybe we can get a deeper sense of this love by looking at a few verses from the Gospel of St. John, chapter 19, which I believe connects with our collect of the day. Starting at verse 25, we read:

Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene.

When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son!

Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home.

In this passage we see Jesus, in the midst of unimaginable pain, looking down from the cross, not in anger at the injustice, not in a desire to destroy His creatures, not in despair or desperation or even fixation upon the torment He is suffering. Jesus looks down from the cross in complete, perfect, eternal, and divine love. He notices us, even as He suffers and dies for us.

This scene on the cross is reminiscent of today's collect: "We beseech thee, Almighty God, mercifully to look upon thy people: that by thy great goodness they may be governed and preserved evermore, both in body and soul." In this collect we place ourselves at the foot of the cross as the object of Christ's eternally compassionate gaze. Christ keeps us perpetually in that gaze, interceding for us to Father. In this atonement scene, from St. John's gospel, the people of God have placed themselves at the foot of the cross out of loyalty to the God-Man who dies for us. Many of Christ's followers had fled and were scattered. They could not comprehend what was happening. It was too awful for them to behold even though the One they swore to never abandon, needed them at that moment. Many abandoned Jesus in those hours. But a few, women notably, stayed by His side. Their gaze was fixed upon the God

who suffers – upon the God who suffers for them, for us.

And this God always sees us. We are never out of His gaze— His attention to Creation sustains its very existence. However, sin does separate us from God. We see in our psalm for today, David’s psalm of confession, that David asks God

Turn thy face from my sins,

and put out all my misdeeds.

Make me a clean heart, O God,

and renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from thy presence,

and take not thy holy Spirit from me.

O give me the comfort of thy help again,

and stablish me with thy free Spirit.

Sin, and the fear it brings us, will drive us away from God's presence, not because He goes anywhere, but because we are too ashamed to face the One who loves us and suffered for us. We run away and abandon Him like Peter and the other disciples. But instead, we should to be like the Blessed Virgin and the other Marys and like John who stayed and gazed on Him. If our devotion to the Christ who made atonement for us remains strong, then we will never hide from Him. And it is here, within the gaze of Christ, that we remain united to Him.

It would be wise for us to always keep short accounts with God. This is one of the reasons why we, in the Anglican tradition, confess so much. We never want to be out of the gaze of God. We always want to kneeling at the cross, beholding the Christ who suffered for us, once for all upon that awful tree. We always want to stay close to the Christ who now lives in us, bringing us into eternal perfection as is befitting the Sons and Daughters of God.

Finally, I am reminded that in the Holy Communion, we do indeed behold our Savior. It is the sacrament which He left to us for a continual remembrance of the Atonement, as a reminder that we are united to God in Him. So come, let us confess our sins, let us receive His pardoning forgiveness, let us behold Him, and let us adore Him as we partake of His Body and Blood. Lift up your eyes unto the Christ, who is seated in Heaven where He reigns, and may we be overwhelmed in gratitude and love.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.