

The central act in history - the Cross of Jesus

How we should understand the cross of Jesus will continue to be a question that has to be explored. It was, Paul suggested, a stumbling block to Jews, foolishness to Gentiles, and in contrast to those responses to those who believe the power of God to salvation. Yet to understand it will always be a mystery. It is beyond comprehension and all theories / exegesis of texts will not answer all the questions that inevitably will remain.

In what follows I do not suggest that I am bringing any fresh revelation, but are reflections that have developed over a number of years. I am sure there are holes in what I put forward, but submit these perspectives as they might open some fresh windows for someone else.

When Might help us understand why

Understanding what took place at the cross is gladly beyond every theory, and there is not a single theory that can adequately sum it up. The New Testament employs metaphors, different metaphors, and because they are metaphors we cannot treat them as literal. The 'ransom' metaphor, for example, is drawn from the slave market, but is situated within the 'ransomed from Egypt' (in the Exodus) narrative. The slave market might set a price on a person in order that they might be set free, but in the Exodus narrative there is no payment made... indeed the Egyptians 'paid' Israel to leave! That biblical background shapes the ransom metaphor hence we should not be seeking to explain ransom along the lines of 'payment'. Some early church fathers wrestled with the ransom motif seeking to explain who the payment was made to. Was it paid to God? Or was it to the devil, with the payment being at the level of a trick payment, with the devil grabbing the payment (the life of Jesus) and finding that this was simply his downfall. There is, though, no need to go for the payment at any literal level when considering the 'ransom for many' texts.

I think a starting point is to ask 'when does the cross take place when it does?', for if we can get some sight on the when it should open up some ideas about the why.

Paul, quite a thinker that guy!, suggests that Jesus comes in 'the fullness of times'. Although I take Adam and Eve as mythical (no literary reason to suggest otherwise, though I think Paul probably thought they were literal, or like me, he perhaps considered them theologically as real) we could well ask why the cross did not occur immediately after the fall? Why, before the cross, do we have all the sacrificial system, the law, all of which are rendered redundant post-the-cross?

The cross is central and we often reason that Abraham, et al, is saved through the cross, though I think that can be questioned, for we can legitimately ask if God needs the cross to forgive. Without exploring that aspect of 'God needing the cross to forgive?', we can and must accept the centrality of the cross. Yet why the delay? Why the thousands of years before the Incarnation?

In short we have to assume that before the time of Jesus we were not living in 'the fullness

of times'. So to my narrativ understanding...

Israel is not chosen to be saved and by contrast all Gentile nations to be damned. Israel is chosen to come into relation with God for the sake of the Gentile nations. If we borrow Adam and Eve language (and a number of Rabbis saw the creation story simply as an Israel story – fruitful garden, promised land flowing in milk and honey, expulsion from the Garden, expulsion from the land in the Babylonian exile) Israel is uniquely in the image of God, an all-but replica of God. What is God like? Look at the image, placed at the heart of the temple, placed within creation for the heavens are the place where God sits, and the earth the place where his feet are displayed.

I read a fall, or more literally a series of falls in the life of Israel. In brief, a nation that was to be a priestly nation for all others, move from that calling through a set of 'falls'. They adopt a priestly tribe for themselves; a nation who had no king but God rejects that path and asks for a king to be like all the other nations; this leading to a building of a Temple that really weakened the image that was then visible, for the God of the heavens does not dwell in houses made by hands. Thus by the time of Jesus we read,

Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor." Then he handed him over to them to be crucified (John 19:15,16).

No king but Caesar... just like the other nations. **Then** he handed him over to them to be crucified. what a strong word 'then' can be. The extent of the fall is revealed: no king but Caesar. The good news (*euangelion*: gospel) of Rome; the kingdom (*basileia*) of Rome; the peace (*shalom / eirene*) that Rome brought to the world through military rule etc... The image has gone, or the image of Rome has now come to bear on the nation that was to be set apart. **Then**... if Jesus is not crucified we can say 'good-bye' to any hope for humanity. The 'then' signifies also that in a very real sense Jesus is dying for the nation of Israel. How ironic is the 'prophecy' of Caiaphas:

So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to put him to death (Jn.11:47-53).

If Jesus does not die (is not sacrificed) they will lose the Temple and the nation destroyed. Jesus is sacrificed for the nation and for those beyond... and within 40 years the Temple is gone and the nation dispersed.

If the nation that was to be the image of God, the priest for the world, the 'redeeming' nation has fallen to the extent it is now one of the nations we have a problem! We can summarise this as Israel being under a curse, a theme that was familiar from Deuteronomy (I set before

you blessings and curses) with the rabbis. I consider that is exactly the view that Paul shows in Galatians 3:13, 14.

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”— in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

He redeemed those under the curse of the law – this has to refer to the Jewish people and explains why a crucified Messiah was a stumbling-block for them. A ‘cursed’ person as the Messiah? Yet without that intervention from heaven the Gentiles could never be included. They will be blessed through the blessed nation (Abrahamic promise), but the nation is cursed, under foreign rule, hence there can be no flow of blessing to the Gentiles. If however the curse on them can be broken, and Paul insists it is with ‘Jesus becoming a curse for *us*’, then there is hope for the world.

The when, the fullness of times, for me, then is the ultimate time when there was no hope. No hope for the Gentiles **because** there was no hope for Israel. Jesus travels Israel’s path, just as they were condemned to 40 years in the wilderness because of the refusal to go into the land when the spies had been 40 days in the land, so now Jesus will travel 40 days in the wilderness. Thrown into (same word as casting out demons) the wilderness he confronts the three powers – economic, political and religious – as summed up in the temptations that came from the adversary. He binds the ‘strong man’, the one who by now had become the ruler of this world.

The when... when there was no hope, when the world lay in the grip of the evil one. when there was no hope for the fulfilment of human destiny (we should read Revelation 5 in this context where we read that there was no one found who was worthy to open the scroll). It is at the full height of demonic power that Jesus comes. If that is the ‘when’ a strong indication of the cross has to be to set us – Jew or Gentile – free. Freedom from slavery, hence the ‘ransom’ paradigm is very poignant.

The freedom is where Paul begins in his rapid fire letter to the Galatians.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father (Gal. 1:3,4).

To set us free...

Back in the day

It is often assumed that any view of the cross must have at the centre the idea that the human race is to be punished, but thankfully Jesus took the punishment, and so we go free (penal substitution). It works as an explanation though it raises serious questions if it is not nuanced extremely well about the inter-relationship of God (the Father) and Jesus (the Son). At worst it gives us a loving Son and a more-than-overbearing Father; a loving Son and a holy God who cannot look on sin, who turned his face away from his Son, abandoning him

on the cross (thus 'My God, My God why have you forsaken me'). It divides the Trinity. Not only do I distance myself from such views, even the more nuanced ones, but it might come as a surprise that the penal substitutionary view is not the most ancient view – unless one ascribes it to the pages of the New Testament itself.

The two oldest views (developed soon after the NT period) are what could be termed 'Recapitulation' and 'Christus Victor' (the defeat of the powers, though that term really owes itself to a certain Swedish Lutheran theologian / bishop who published a book with that title in 1930). Recapitulation was simply that Jesus assumed every aspect of humanity, he 'retraced' the steps of Adam, so he redeemed what was lost, and sin was killed in the Son. There is in this view a great emphasis on the reality of the humanity of Jesus, and also on the reality of two humanities – one in Adam and one in Jesus. The conquering of death for all is essential, thus Jesus travels our path and even to death. He goes beyond death to resurrection thus giving us hope.

With Christus Victor being the defeat of the powers we see how they wrestled within that view with how the idea of ransom fitted in. For those who suggested the ransom was paid to Satan, there was an acknowledgement that the devil had certain legitimate claims over humanity. The debt was paid for the release of humanity, and then with Jesus in his grasp the overwhelming goodness and holiness of Jesus just proved too much to hold and the devil having already lost the hold over humanity just could not hold on to Jesus – hence salvation for humanity and resurrection for Jesus.

In neither of the above views – which I consider historically are the two most ancient strands – are there any discussion of Christ appeasing the Father nor of the Father punishing the Son. Those discussions come later.

A big shift takes place with a certain Archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm (1033-1109) who, using the framework of his day, put forward the concept that the 'debt' that is owed by humanity is due to the universal failure to honour God, and therefore we have not paid him what is his due. And even if we could pay from now on we cannot pay for the past; add to that the honour due to the Eternal, Almighty God cannot be measured in human terms the problem is insurmountable. This is where Jesus, the God-human, comes to pay the debt that we owe. He is the one who honours God, with the result that all offence is removed. The culture of the day is the background, with landlords and serfs, and in the case of God a supreme king. The debt is one that can never be paid. With Anselm there is a shift, and we clearly enter the world of transaction. A further shift comes as the culture shifts and we move to the time of the Reformation. Debt language can continue to be employed but the language of justice and guilt become central. We move from the agrarian world of lords and serfs, to the legal world of the law court. With this comes the emphasis on guilt, the breaking of the law, and as it is God's law eternal punishment is the appropriate sentence. In this approach Jesus, the innocent one dies in the place of the guilty, so the guilty go free. This shift has essentially made this, or a modified version of this, the central understanding.

Guilt, substitutionary atonement, God separating from Jesus on the cross; the righteous dying for the guilty and as a result forgiveness of guilt takes place.

As I continue to write here are a few thoughts that we can ask as we reflect:

- Does God need appeasing? Can God not forgive without someone (Jesus) standing in the gap? Is forgiveness from God to be understood along the same lines as we understand forgiveness? In one of my books I suggest that 'wrath' when applied to God is righteous in Scripture, but we do not find such a description of human anger – thus we should not look to human anger to help us understand what the Bible means when it talks of the 'wrath of God'. Likewise with forgiveness... Forgiveness at a human level is 'I choose to let the offence (and therefore the person) go', 'You owe me nothing'. If we can do that without asking for recompense, why can God not do that?... And if forgiveness is to 'let someone go' (the Greek being also a term used for example of untying a ship to let her sail) what is being forgiven, from what are we being untied? Untied from God and the need to pay back... or untied from somewhere / someone else?
- Assuming we want to avoid an automatic Universalism, we will find it harder to do with the concept of a payment, or any 'in the place of humanity' as Universalism seems to me most likely to follow. If it is 'the cross' plus repentance in what sense is it 'the debt paid in full'? Of course there are universalistic texts and one might be happy with that understanding. The solution of 'Jesus only died for the elect' of course does not do it for me... hence I find debt payment, universal guilt condemnation not to wash.
- Any view of the cross must take seriously the unified work of the Trinity. 'God was in Christ' Paul says... God is not apart from Christ, and the work was one of restoration, for 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself'. The cross does not reconcile God to the world, it does not change God (wrath to acceptance) but it changes the world. It restores a broken relationship, it restores all breaches, hence the 'restoration of all things' is the hope. In Genesis the issues are relational breakdown and alienation.
- And finally (but far from the final post) the cross will never be worked out theoretically. Maybe the men are not seen at the final scenes of the death of Jesus (other than one... who was characterised by love) because it is the heart, the emotions rather than the head and logic that will grasp what takes place. That for me is sure, for something of heaven and earth meet, history and new creation, humanity and divinity all meet there.

God cannot look at sin

Jesus was a friend of sinners, not simply a friend of ex-sinners. Paul was a friend of those who had not responded to the Gospel he was passionate about (or at least had not responded to the 'personal salvation' part of it). But God? Can God not look at sin? Jesus was like God but are we suggesting that God was not like Jesus? Really?

He cannot look at sin, he turns away, we see that ever so clearly with the cry of Jesus:

And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46).

God-forsakenness. Psalm 22:1 being quoted by Jesus, the words of David. So do we suggest that God abandoned David? David certainly had many moments when that is exactly what he **felt** but God never abandoned him. Jesus certainly **felt** and **expressed** that abandonment on the cross, the very cross where God was (present) in Christ. Thank God for Scriptures that mean we are not alone. Scriptures that even indicate we have been abandoned by God, but in spite of the very real and powerful feeling we then discover that others have gone this way before, and they have found that God was with them. There is a cloud of witnesses that testify to the ever present Presence of God, in and through all circumstances, that though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death that God is walking that path with us. In the case of the Psalm being quoted by Jesus we need to keep reading the Psalm, for almost certainly Jesus is using that Scripture while on the cross. Read on, read on... Come to verse 24:

For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.

He did not hide his face from me. Did you feel abandoned, at that time, Jesus? Yes, desperately... the feeling was real, it was overwhelming, but the reality is the cross is not an evidence of a divided Trinity but of a Unified Trinity, unified for humanity. Human experience and despair (abandonment) meeting Trinitarian undivided commitment and love to go through whatever is necessary to achieve reconciliation.

It is possible that those final words on Jesus' lips 'It is finished' is his reflection on the end of Psalm 22 (emphasis added):

his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that **he has done it**.

He has done it. He, the God in Christ, has done it, has brought deliverance to a people yet unborn. It has been done, it is finished. Whether Jesus' words are reflective of that final verse or not, we rejoice that God is the friend of sinners and there was no appeasement required. Only humanity needs to turn their face to God, for his face has always been turned this way.

Afflicted by God, punished even by God, is a common understanding of the cross. But Isaiah 53 a chapter that was taken up in the New Testament of being totally exemplified in the death of Jesus said that this was **our perception, not the reality**:

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.

We saw and understood the suffering as something that God was doing to this Servant, this is how we reckoned it, how we saw it... 'yet' shows how it was understood, but the reality is something is going on for us. The affliction was caused by 'us', by our infirmities, our diseases. Jesus was not killed by God – the universal witness of Acts is that 'you crucified him'. Sin, in all its forms, crucified Jesus. This does not mean that the cross is not an act of God, but it is not the anger of God in any personal sense that sends Jesus to the cross; it is our sin, our estrangement from God, our inability to know him, hence our failure to represent him, to be the glory of God.

The popular presentation of Jesus taking the punishment that was due to us might be a

simple way of putting things. Sin brings about God's anger; we can do nothing to pay for the sin(s) committed; Jesus pays and takes the rap; believe in that substitution in your place and you can be forgiven, never needing to pay.

Simple to present. Simple does not mean either adequate nor right.

Universal or particular

Jesus died for all (Universal). Thank God. I also think Jesus died for males and for Jews (particular). We all betrayed Jesus, but the Scriptures and the creeds (not many names in there, but Judas get in!) tell us that Judas betrayed Jesus. Both are true, and in that sense Judas 'acted for us'. Judas is the particular betrayer; but we all universally betrayed Jesus.

Jesus was male, born of a woman, born under the law... so that he might redeem those who were born under the law... (Gal 4:4,5). This makes his death have a very specific application for Jews. He died for Jews, becoming a curse for them. And now let me add what certainly is not explicitly written in Scripture, so I am going beyond Scripture (more of that below), that he died as male in order to redeem males, masculinity, or maybe better put the perverted form of masculinity exhibited in patriarchy and dominance.

Why was he born a Jew? Because Jews were the problem... hang on, nothing anti-Semitic there, just hang on. They were the problem simply because **they failed to be the solution**. If we had a camp of people who were sick but there were no doctors able to come, we might well say the problem is 'we have no doctors'... but the real problem is that sickness has gripped the camp. Sickness has gripped the world, a contagious disease, a pandemic is present throughout creation, and we can call it sin. The doctors though are not available... don't blame them, they too are sick. Their (Israel's) sickness was to make chosen to mean 'them' and 'us', to transform 'life' into 'separation', to fail to see that 'we want to be like them (give us a king)' meant they also became a 'them'; that there was no effective 'us' but all are in a mess together, hence Paul's words 'all (Jew and Gentile) have sinned and fallen short...' of being truly human.

That is the strong 'when' to the cross. The Jews have to be set free, and the grace of God was to give them a clear generation gap to get on board with such statements as (to Jews) 'there being no other name under heaven by which you may be saved' – not Abraham, nor David, nor 'I am of Israel'. Only in Jesus, the one who died for Jews. 'Save yourself from this crooked and perverse generation'. There is salvation – in Jesus; salvation from the Romans and salvation for the sake of the world. If there was a restored Israel then we have hope for the nations (Gentiles).

I also think Jesus as male is significant. Certainly not because of some superiority or creation order. And although I do not read the early chapters as history, history bears witness that the patriarchal nature of the fallen world is a source of deep distress. Maleness, as patriarchy, goes to the cross – maybe the last to be seen at the cross, the first to see the resurrection (women) pushes us to consider that perspective? Jewishness goes to the cross for all divides are nailed there, with the biggest of all divides being revealed as an ultimate wrong (or at least inadequate) perception when the Temple curtain ripped in two. God is not

behind the screen. God is with us. Emmanuel. The divide does not exist, and how could it for the two were united in Jesus, fully God, fully human?

Jesus came to his own, but his own did not receive him... yet a few chapters later we read that Jesus sat down with his own and ate with them; he put a towel around his waist and got down... washing the feet of his own. God with us, with those who can receive **this** God.

Yes, I do believe Jesus died for all. Yet there he is – male, Jewish flesh on the cross. He died that there might no longer be the divide that we who had the power to draw the lines that divide can continue to make. The sharp end of the cross should not be ignored, for in it is salvation for all.

Does my understanding of Jesus being male in order to nail patriarchy to the cross, to finish that way of being something that is beyond Scripture? I do not believe it does in the sense of seeking to understand a story that is unfolding, a story that takes us from Creation to New Creation. A story that presents the cross as the roadblock to total destruction; a halt in that path, and the opening of a new path, a new creation that we are not simply walking toward but one that is coming this way. Beyond the pages - yes; but totally within the story of Scripture.

A new creation is here. God is with us. Always was, was present in the cross, identified and embodied sin, embodied it in a concrete way, embodied flesh that used (fallenly created) privilege to exclude and divide, embodied that flesh in order to include and unite.

He died for Jews and males; he died for all.

Substitutionary?

We all struggle to get terms that work and the word 'substitution' with regard to Jesus' death could work to some extent, for there is a strong 'in our place' element within passages, though the over-individualisation of that concept does not do the NT justice. He tasted death for everyone; he died for the Jewish nation. In both of the previous statements we have a corporate element, a participation by Jesus in a corporate journey, with the end result that something corporate might come forth, a royal priesthood, a new people, indeed new creation. This corporate rather than personal element is visible (I suggest) in all passages, it is only our individualised West that somehow sees death for 'sins' being some crude accumulation of my sin + yours + this person + that person... all of which can lead to an idea of Limited Atonement, seeking to answer the question of whose sins did he die for. That is the world of simple transaction – x amount paid for, those whose sins are paid for go free.

A big challenge to 'substitution' if defined in too tight a way can be illustrated by 2 Cor. 5:14,15 (emphases added),

For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

'For all' could be understood as 'in our place', dying so that we do not die, but the latter part

says he was also raised for us (same term 'for': *huper*). If we press the term 'substitution' with the clear meaning of something replacing what would have taken place otherwise (I order a product from the supermarket and when it arrives the product has been substituted / replaced by another product) we run into huge problems with the statement regarding that Jesus being also raised 'for us'. This would imply that Jesus is raised so that we will not be raised? I think not!!!! We cannot press the language to be 'in our place' in that strong substitutionary sense.

We have to move beyond the 'for' word and not reduce it to mean a rigid 'in my place' and if we insist on using the 'substitution' word we have to use it carefully, and I suggest that probably we should rather think more along the lines of Jesus participating in our journey, going there for us, on our behalf. This for me is consistent with how I understand the activity of God... God travels with us, walks our journey (three leave Eden, three again visibly pick up that journey on the road to Emmaus). Jesus does this for us, both in terms of death on our behalf for that is our journey and then opens up the future (through resurrection) so that we can follow his journey, he being the guarantee for our future. Indeed it is not simply he dies our death, but opens the way **so that we can die his death, and as a result experience his resurrection** – crucified with Christ, buried and raised with / in him. He does this for us, so that we can die with him. That is not substitution but an invitation to an identification and participation with him, all made possible because he identified and participated in our journey.

I certainly do not see any traffic moving in the direction of Jesus being punished in our place, but of the Triune God willingly taking on the consequences of our rebellion. There is an identification with us; a participation in our journey; but substitution – no; and penal substitution a definite no!

The big issue with the idea of God punishing Jesus is what this would reveal of God. Restorative justice (as opposed to punitive justice) is not something that has been recently invented, but seems to be the very heart of God with respect to justice. Punitive justice calls for 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth', it calls for the death penalty for the murderer, yet God comes to protect the murderer (Cain), in spite of all that we read of the punishment fit for the murderer in the later books of the law (God's law?). God likewise does the same with regard to Cain #2 (Barabbas), allowing him to go free, with the blood of Abel #2 calling out for forgiveness. God is not looking to uphold the law as if we are guilty and Jesus satisfies the requirement of the law. God is looking to heal, to restore the relationship. The law remains broken in that sense, but the guilty go free, forgiveness being the label over the door that leads to freedom, not 'paid for'.

This is probably where the more eastern expressions of the church have a huge advantage over us. We have so focused on the individual, law and guilt and the solution we come up with is the law is upheld with Jesus dying in our place. If we think more along relational lines and turn our focus on shame and sickness of soul we will press in deeper to areas of cleansing and restoration; after all the Scriptures seem to focus on that the first humans felt ashamed, knowing they were naked. It does not come across as guilt being the central issue. Restoration of relationship is what is to be solved at the cross; not restoration of God's honour, nor a visible demonstration that law and that the right / wrong divide has to be upheld.

Shame means we cannot turn our face to God. Something deep inside has to take place. Guilt (which is present in the Scriptures) emphasises the falling short of what we were meant to be, and I essentially would wish to suggest that the falling short is centred in on a failure to be truly human, and as a result not to treat others as human (we should also add in a reference to the planet, the habitation for humans, and for them as stewards of it). Paul calls that to fall short of the glory of God, and the opposite of glory is in many senses shame. The glory of God is revealed in the cross, for there we see God unveiled; the glory that could be seen in Jesus, glory full of grace and truth, was revealed publicly at the cross. In stark contrast the falling short of the glory of God – that failure to be human – is revealed there too, for it was we who killed the Author of Life.

Thus shame and guilt are dealt with at the cross as we respond by faith that he dies for us.

The resurrection is not about 'raised back to the previous state after a temporary *kenosis*', for the Jesus who died is the one who is raised, establishing in the face of death, indeed through death a path for all who wish it to travel, a path to true humanity, or as Paul says 'one new humanity in Christ' no longer defined by any previous category. 'In Christ' says it all, and 'in Christ' cancels all other previous categorisations. Those in Christ no longer will claim any definition as giving them a place of power and superiority (Gal. 3:28), and they will live that out 'no longer seeing anyone according to the flesh' (2 Cor. 5:16).

The resurrection of Jesus is God's affirmation that the first-born of all creation, the forerunner for us all has overcome. Never succumbing to any level of 'falling short', yielding his spirit to God, praying forgiveness for us. The resurrection is not a return to a superior power way of living, it is the affirmation of an unbroken way of living, the God way, of outpoured love.

Through the cross we begin to tread that path. Sanctification is the onward journey, not one of conquering all the right / wrong rules, but the path of love. (Future) resurrection will make that all permanent.

Substitutionary? Not in the classic sense of the word. Only in the sense that the cross opens a path that can be substituted for the common path of humanity (new path for old). He died for (*hyper*) us.

Sacrifices?

I never enjoy getting to Leviticus in any systematic reading, just too much weirdness going on for me, and far too many questions that I have no answer to. I am ever so glad that we have a New Testament! Sacrifices are very central in Leviticus, and it could be easy to read the instructions there as informing us that God demands sacrifice otherwise there will be no forgiveness, maybe even to push it further in our thinking that God needs to be appeased. That is a not uncommon perspective in religions that are outside of the Judeo-Christian faith, and probably sneakily creeps into our own thinking at times, with a 'how will I get on the good side of God?' thought.

Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure (Heb. 10:5,6).

God does not desire sacrifices! It is certainly possible that God never put in the sacrificial system that we read of in Leviticus (we do not have 'I command you to do this...' but a more gentle 'when you do this...'); it is possible that given the ancient culture God is accommodating what they were already expecting culturally to do, thus with that reading God would be using something already in place but adjusting the content in a direction more fitting. We see this with Paul's use of the patterns from the day of the 'household codes', where he addresses (as other authors do) the male head of the household who is the husband, father and master. He does not abolish the culture but injects meaning into the structure that was already culturally set for every household. If this be so we can go a little easy on 'God demands sacrifice'. (The Septuagint, in use in Jesus' day, has in Leviticus 4 the introductory word 'if... if anyone brings a sacrifice, suggesting that an offering will be brought, and any instruction that follows is to modify and clarify, rather than to stipulate that an sacrifice is to be made.)

Most of the sacrifices have nothing to do with any form of 'appeasement' for sin. They are celebratory of fellowship with God. We do come across, though, the sin offering in Leviticus. The sin offering that Mary, mother of Jesus made in the Jerusalem Temple! A sin offering by the mother of our Lord, that sin offering being prescribed for post-birth (Lk. 2:24; Lev. 12:8). Where is the sin that needed to be forgiven in the conception, carrying of and subsequent birth of the Holy One? That should alert us somewhat that we should not be thinking 'bad deed done', God not happy, make an offering, God now happy again!!!!

Many scholars, and now a few translations, move right away from the word 'sin offering', and go for something along the lines of 'purification / cleansing offering'. Ancient worlds are not our world, but it would seem cleansing was the real issue. Child-birth is messy, it is bloody, and common with all bodily discharges there was the need for some cleansing, almost some 'spiritual detergent' needed to be applied.

Jumping to the New Testament we read that the Gentiles received the Holy Spirit through being **cleansed**:

And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us (Acts 15:8,9).

Peter was no longer to call unclean what God had cleansed and his fellow-Jews rejoiced that,

God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life (Acts 11:18).

What a lovely phrase... a repentance that leads to life. Cleansing meant that they could receive the Holy Spirit and come on to the life path. No more labouring unsuccessfully on the 'right / wrong', 'I will do better' path. Life is opened up for the Gentiles also... the necessary element to open this up was that of being cleansed.

Hebrews 9:22 read a little more carefully lays this cleansing element as being necessary and that blood was (is) the way for that cleansing to take place. If not read carefully we read that forgiveness is not possible without blood, and that can lead us down the line of 'God demanding sacrifice'. Forgiveness (and here I pull on forgiveness as 'being loosed from something that ties us down, refusing to allow us to progress') requires that we are cleansed.

Here is the text:

Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

No forgiveness of sins, without blood... but why? Because blood purifies. Freedom comes, forgiveness comes, release comes post cleansing. It is cleansing that is central; there is no forgiveness without cleansing and without blood there can be no cleansing. The Old Testament use of blood has a cultural element to it, but the purification through the blood of Jesus goes ever so deep:

For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God! (Heb. 9:13, 14).

How does the blood of Jesus purify? That might be something very hard to grasp but the depth of the cleansing that comes through the cross is very real. The blood of goats and bulls purified the flesh; the blood of Jesus purifies the conscience. A deep cleansing, a healing of the soul, something that offers us a new heart, a new core to our being, the Holy Spirit within, a door open to walk the path of life.

He died so that we might live, truly live. God does not demand sacrifice in order to forgive; we need the sacrifice, the self-giving of Jesus, the self-giving of the Triune God to break the cycle of death and sin, we need that sacrifice to cleanse us within.

Sin is condemned

In Jesus 'sin' is condemned. It is certainly not that Jesus dies as a sinner; he is holy, separate to God throughout his life and death. It is not that God killed Jesus, for the continual phrase in Acts is 'you put him to death'. He is killed as an act by corporate humanity, poignantly with religious and political powers finding their way of colluding together. In that situation Jesus does not resist the inevitable path, but embraces it. There is a submission to the hostile powers. Submission to the powers, powers that we could describe as human, but in reality they are non-human powers for what is taking place is simply an ultimate demonstration of dehumanisation. Those non-human powers we can describe in terms of 'principalities' or we can describe them under the heading of 'sin' and the partner / consequence to sin, the power of death.

Sin, a way of living, in alienation to God, in denial of the God-path for humanity is condemned in Jesus (Rom. 8:3). Sin could not reign over this man. It is condemned as his life is poured out like a cleansing agent and the poison is pushed back - not only into every aspect of human life on earth, but even into the very heavens (Heb. 9:23-28. The Hebrew writer continually uses the sacrifice / cleansing paradigm for the work of Jesus. Perhaps what we read here of 'the heavenly things themselves need better sacrifices than these' is a way of saying the death of Jesus reaches into all creation, but perhaps it is also saying that the heavens were touched by the sin of humanity?)

Why such a radical effect? Yes the innocent doing something on behalf of the guilty, a theme that was very Jewish indeed, with the remnant doing something for the whole, or the (Maccabean) martyrs giving their lives and the vindication of God will be manifest in the nation. But something more than this is going on, for 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself'.

The effect is so powerful because of the '**when**' and the '**who**'. It occurs at the fullness of time, when the domination of that one-world government and the fall of Israel has reached a point with the result that the whole world is in the hands of the evil one, the one called the prince of this world. The poison in the wound cannot be healed, the situation is terminal, not meaning that all are condemned (as in 'hell fire'), but we are all condemned to live under the domination of 'sin' (NB the singular use). The when.

The life of God is poured into the situation, and not from the outside but the inside. A deliberate embrace of whatever the powers can summon, and a submission to those powers. Sin and death; devil and demons. **That level of powerful coming together of hostile powers though cannot overcome love.** Death cannot overcome life, not the kind of life that has eternally been poured out (hence we can read of the cross 'being before the foundation of the earth').

Jesus submits to powers: the 'human' or better the 'non-human' powers.

He also submits to God. The human Jesus submits to God. It is far too crude to say he is submitting to the Father, rather he, as human representative, is submitting to the God-flow. Not my will - human will, and a very real will that was - but yours, and perhaps if I take a liberty, he could have said 'but our will be done', other than he is speaking as the Son of Man, the human representative.

In submitting to God he is not submitting to the punishment coming from God, he is submitting, as human, to the God-flow.

The when... the **who** - this is the act of God in humanity. The cross is for us. Sin cannot survive in that environment, regardless of what form that sin takes. Sin is condemned in the 'flesh' (humanity) of Jesus.

All sin was gathered to that place, for that place (the cross) was where the literal outpoured life of God was focused. In that sense we can suggest Jesus was made sin for us (perhaps could be 'sin offering for us'), but not that he was made a sinner. Sin is fully manifest, the totally innocent one, the one who never wavered in pulling for the future of humanity, that flesh becomes the place where sin is condemned.

Can God forgive without the cross? Absolutely. He has no issue with forgiveness. There is no need for payment. Can the power of sin be broken without the cross? No, for God does not come with power to remove what has been chosen by humanity; other 'gods' might do that. But he will come in human likeness, when the powers are at their maximum, and he will demonstrate that he was always journeying eastward from Eden. 'In the day that you eat of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil you (and I will be counted with you) will surely die'. From Eden to the tree of knowledge of good and evil, to the cross where those full of knowledge crucify him, but life calls for a forgiveness pleading that they don't know what they are doing. But that is OK from God's perspective. I'll submit to that human journey, to the

consequences of the consistent choice made by humanity; that was the response of Jesus. This is the moment of glorification, this is the hour. The hour of the cross.

Creation responds, earthquake, tombs open, darkness. Sin is condemned.

Now comes our grateful response. Not to the fear of judgement, but to love. If he died there for me, I died. I died with Jesus. I can begin a path, begin with repentance toward God. A change of mind, a change of mind about God, for the cross reveals who God is (no one comes to the Father except through me). A repentance for sin committed. A cleansing from the pollution that we have both experienced and contributed to. An imperfect journey in that new way, for the powers are defeated, yet remain present. The cross is not about transaction, it is about transformation; transformation of the whole of creation, and about personal transformation.

God does not seem to be looking for perfection... God is simply just too realistic for that. Genuineness, openness, receptivity, and a faltering 'let your will be done' response seems to be what is required. That response takes faith and trust that God is for me, that a submission to God is not about killing me(!) but bringing me truly to life, to a fullness of life.

As a Gentile I gladly affirm that 'even to us Gentiles God has given the gift of repentance that leads to life'. For the Jew, as those ethnically descended from the patriarchs, so loved because of that, a repentance toward God, no longer looking to defend themselves because they have names they can call on, for now 'there is only one name under heaven by which we can be saved' (a Scripture directed to an exclusively Jewish audience). To all, whether Jew or Gentile, for we both have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, the good news is that at the cross, the male Jew, in whose person the life of God was present in fullness, went there for us. Surely this is what gripped the Jew of all Jews (Paul) to become the herald of good news, to glory in nothing but the cross, a herald to all of creation. He knew a new time / creation had come. The old had passed away; sin had been finally not simply confronted nor simply contained, but condemned. He died for us. So in him now we all have died. He was raised for us. So in him we become witnesses (based on what we see) to that resurrection.

Foolishness to the Greeks, a stumbling block to the Jew, but to those of us who believe it is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16).

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength (1 Cor. 1:22,23).

Finally let me finish this short paper with a suggestion. Theories will take us so far, but something beyond theories is at work in the cross. The heart is touched, and touched deeply. The men disappear from view. The women stay, they see. Along with one man, John, who was marked by love. Maybe defined as 'with special needs' (after all he leans on Jesus chest at the Last Supper), so a little bit on the outside of the acceptable. Hearts open at the cross; minds offended. Perhaps we should read the narrative that way. Certainly I will not be closer to God the more I understand, but the more open I am will make all the difference.

Maybe if I open myself I can be one of those who see that he is raised, and gladly think that the one raised is the Gardener, returning to the place of work, encouraging me to find what part of the 'garden' I too can tend to, and in that part if my heart is open I will find there are trees of life for me to take of the fruit and to give to others. Yes, there will always be present that other tree, the result might be that my eyes will be open... but open to the shame that comes.

He has died. He is risen.