

UNIT 4: RESURRECTION AND SALVATION

CRUCIFIXION, RESURRECTION AND SALVATION

Although the cross-resurrection event is central for Christian faith, the Church has never adopted any particular theory concerning Christ's death. Instead, it has simply asserted it as fact that 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures' (1 Cor. 15:3). Credal statements reflect this reticence over theory. The Apostle's Creed simply asserts the historicity of Christ's death and links forgiveness of sins to the Holy Spirit. Both the Nicaeo-Constantinopolitan Creed and the Chalcedonian Creed see 'salvation; as the object of Christ's incarnation, though the former concludes that the remission of sins is the result of baptism while the latter contains no reference to Christ's death or to the forgiveness of sins.¹

In spite of this, it is, and was, deeply embedded in Christian belief that in some way the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth and his subsequent rising from the tomb, did in fact have soteriological significance and was the means by which sins are forgiven. Without this affirmation that the historical particularity of Jesus' crucifixion is related to the forgiveness of sins, there could be no soteriology,² and this has found its outlet not in the Church's theology but in its liturgy and worship, particularly in the focus on the Eucharist. But, as no single theoretical model has been adopted by the church, many valid metaphors have been used as genuine attempts to answer the question 'Why did Jesus Christ die?'³ John McIntyre insists that we adopt a 'catena' of these models in order to arrive at the true depth of meaning of the cross as saving-event.⁴ He lists the ideas of ransom, redemption, salvation history in Israel, sacrifice, propitiation, expiation, atonement, reconciliation, triumph over evil, vicarious punishment, satisfaction and sacrificial example. In all cases these models are not to be implemented totally literally, as if they were 'complete symbols' of the death of Christ, but rather as 'incomplete symbols', which require us 'to desist before pressing to their logical conclusions'.⁵ Thus, in redemption,

¹ John McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), pp. 2-3.

² McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology*, p. 22

³ McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology*, p. 37.

⁴ McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology*, pp. 22, 28.

⁵ McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology*, p. 31.

we must be aware that god is not obliged to pay anyone in order to recover his creatures; propitiation suggests the need of placating an angry God who then proceeds to overlook human sin; reconciliation is one-sided as God needs no reconciliation towards humankind; example may serve to 'show up human disobedience in an even worse light than it would be without such an example'.⁶ For McIntyre, the model of salvation comes closest to offering a 'complete symbol' as it holds the dual dynamic of saving *from* sin and *for* eternal life.⁷ This is partly echoed by Paul Fiddes, who claims 'salvation' to have the widest scope for our current understanding where it offers healing for individuals and social groups and a symbol or dynamic for the conservation of the natural world. 'The quest for salvation,' he writes, 'is the search for authentic life, and many people hope for it beyond death as well as here and now'. But, on the other hand, a model like atonement narrows the focus as it claims this salvation to be dependent on the restoration of a relationship between human beings and God.⁸ The even of the cross, for Fiddes, cannot be fully described, which has led to the use of various symbols from the temple, the battlefield, the law-court, the slave-market, etc.⁹ The question remains as to how these symbols are appropriated and how, and if, they are to be related to each other.

There is, first of all, the question of context. Sin takes a different 'shape and colour' at different times.¹⁰ Different groups in different periods can be attracted to different symbols as speaking most directly to their temporal condition. Ransom could (for example) speak clearly to slaves. However, this raises the problem of diminishing other symbols in favour of one 'incomplete' symbol. Instead, McIntyre suggests that all these theories about Christ's death 'can be regarded as providing so many horizons which intersect at that point which is the death of Christ'.¹¹ They refer, even if partially, to what actually happened. 'An indirect description is still a description of what is really there'.¹²

⁶ McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology*, p. 49.

⁷ McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology*, p. 34.

⁸ Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (London: DLT, 1989), p. 3.

⁹ Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, p. 4.

¹⁰ Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, pp. 7-9.

¹¹ McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology*, p. 66.

¹² McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology*, p., 74.

Alongside this, the nature of the relationship between Christ's cross and human salvation is also of importance. It is not the same thing to argue that salvation occurs here and now and to assert that God 'saved' the world through Christ and that we reap the benefit of that salvific event. For Fiddes, salvation, and the forgiveness of sins, requires a personal element where God and his creature are known to each other. Therefore, salvation has to be a continual activity and not one single historical event.¹³ The connection between current action and previous event has to be seen in various symbols (Fiddes calls them 'themes of atonement'). This one event in the past, for Fiddes, makes salvation possible in the present, but it did not automatically change the rest of subsequent history.¹⁴

We move now to look at the work of two modern theologians, both of whom have asserted the centrality of the cross and resurrection for Christian faith but have differing views on the meaning of the event.

Karl Barth

The heart of the Church's teaching, according to Barth, is that God's covenant is fulfilled in the atonement. All other theological themes – creation, eschatology, redemption, consummation, etc. – are peripheral. They form the circumference to this centre.¹⁵

Primarily, for Barth, the atonement can only have meaning when viewed from the point of view of God's sovereign freedom. Events have meaning from the revelation of Jesus Christ rather than the other way around. So the starting point in understanding the atonement is the fact of 'God with us'. The atonement occurs because God 'does not will to be God without us' and as such he has ordained that he interact with his human creation. The divine life, being and history is also our life, being and history.¹⁶ Salvation is the 'fulfilment, the supreme, sufficient, definitive and indestructible fulfilment of being' and as such is not natural to the created order. Instead

¹³ Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, pp. 14-20.

¹⁴ Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, p. 106.

¹⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), p. 3.

¹⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, p. 7.

it must come from outside, from God to man.¹⁷ As well as not being endowed with salvation, human beings, through their own transgression, have broken all lines of communication with God. Sin breaks the continuum between his 'beginning in God' and the intended 'end of man in God'.¹⁸ But God, in the atonement, has acted to give human beings what they had forfeited which Barth characterizes as a 'yet' and 'nevertheless'.¹⁹ Thus, this 'God with us' in atonement points from the general to the particular. It 'speaks of a specific conjoining' in a 'single particular event' which has significance for all space and time. In becoming man in Jesus Christ, and acting in atonement, God fulfilled his own redemptive will. 'It means that God has become man in order as such, but in divine sovereignty, to take up our case'.²⁰

The character of Jesus Christ is the whole content of God's message. He, in his own person, unites God's being, life and activity with ours'. In one person, he is both the God who gives salvation and man who receives it. As a result, he has cosmic significance. Because he has joined man and God, he has accomplished atonement for all humankind.²¹ He is God's servant who stands before God as the nations' representative and before the nations as God's representative. God himself wills it, but he must become a man for it to occur.²²

Atonement is the fulfilment of communion between God and humankind. Its origin goes back to the creation and then into God's covenantal relations with Israel. The basis of the covenant was God's prior decision, namely 'I will be your God'. But this implies human involvement because it continues, 'you shall be my people'. In this covenant there is a 'presupposition of atonement'. It requires God's free and gracious activity to will to be our God. It requires nothing on our part, and indeed is bestowed in spite of the fact that humankind is undeserving,²³ and despite the fact that communion with God is rendered impossible by human sin and disobedience.

¹⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, p. 8.

¹⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, p. 10.

¹⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, pp. 11, 12, 68.

²⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, p. 12.

²¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, pp. 18-19.

²² Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, p. 35.

²³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, p. 39.

Atonement is God's gracious 'retort to man's sin'.²⁴ It is not a 'second and subsequent' act made necessary by sin, but is the first and original content' of God's will.²⁵ Humankind can only respond with thanksgiving. Atonement only requires the 'simplicity of heart' which will allow 'God's grace to be grace'.²⁶

Because it is an act of God's sovereign freedom, the atonement in Jesus Christ can only be accepted or rejected. It cannot be appropriated by human beings. In fact, man can do nothing to effect atonement with God. 'Human experience and knowledge cannot of themselves attain to the being of reconciled man'.²⁷ In this it takes the form of revelation from which all our knowledge of God, man, past, present and future is gained.²⁸ It depends entirely on God's act in 'crossing the frontier' to man. The atonement is a demonstration of God's faithfulness in taking on himself human duty in fulfilment of the covenant.²⁹ This event fulfils and makes effective human righteousness. It both declares them to be righteous and also makes them righteous.³⁰ Thus, in the person of Jesus Christ where man is truly man and God is truly God, the conversion of man to God takes place.³¹ Fellowship is attained with God because of God's sovereign act and this fellowship between God's eternal life and human temporality bestows eternal life on human beings because God wills it.³²

For Barth, then, the atonement consists of God's gracious act in which he fulfils the covenant obligation of humankind. It is not primarily known in the action and event of the cross and resurrection but is located within the person of Jesus Christ. There the human is brought back into full communion with the divine. This is done according to God's decision and will and therefore it opens the way of atonement for all humanity.

²⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, p. 46.

²⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, p. 48.

²⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, p. 84.

²⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, p. 90.

²⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, pp. 80-1.

²⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, p. 89.

³⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, p. 95.

³¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, p. 108.

³² Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, p. 111.

Jürgen Moltmann

Like Barth, Moltmann sees Christ's death and resurrection as the centre of Christian faith. These are not merely historical events but they are eschatological happenings which lie at the very centre of the whole of history. Christ's sufferings on Golgotha has eternal dimensions. They include his persona; suffering but also the suffering of those who proclaim the Gospel, the suffering of the nation of Israel and the suffering of the whole of creation.³³ Because he takes into himself this vicarious suffering, his death on the cross anticipates 'the death that is universal and absolute'. Christ's death anticipates both the end of this world and the beginning of a new one.³⁴ This apocalypse is not simply a catastrophe, for it looks forward to the fact that the end of this world is also the beginning of a new one, for if Christ is raised then he is already living in the new world of eternal life. Thus, because of Christ, God will also raise all humankind.³⁵

For Moltmann, this only works because God somehow experiences suffering through Christ's suffering. At one level, this is easily explained. The Father gives up the Son and experiences infinite pain in the death of the Son, so that he may be Father to all the forsaken.³⁶ But Moltmann is aware that this is too great a distinction between the divine hypostases. To suggest that one divine person caused suffering to another divine person is, he asserts, to demonstrate a lack of understanding.³⁷ Therefore, there must be an identification between God the Father and the one who suffers death on the cross. It is the nature of the divine perichoresis that Jesus' weakness and suffering on the cross is also God's, for as the Johannine Jesus proclaims: 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me'.³⁸ Yet Moltmann has emphasized the forsakenness and abandonment of Christ by God on the cross. If the two are so closely related, why did Christ feel abandoned? Moltmann never really answers this question, but his emphasis on the suffering of God certainly points to the cost of salvation.

³³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (London: SCM, 1990), p. 152.

³⁴ Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, p. 155; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM, 1996), p. 96.

³⁵ Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, p. 155.

³⁶ Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, p. 173.

³⁷ Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, p. 178.

³⁸ Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, p. 177.

After cosmic suffering, the death of Christ leads into cosmic renewal through Christ's resurrection. The whole of Christian faith depends on Christ's resurrection for it is only there that the cross can acquire any soteriological meaning. Resurrection is an event dialectically opposed to the cross. It is a 'radical antithesis', for human beings brought about Jesus' death, but God brings about resurrection.³⁹ Death, Moltmann argues, makes life historical. It is the power of history as it brings things to an end. For resurrection to have any meaning, death has to be taken seriously. The option exists between affirming the immortality of the soul or the resurrection of the body, he says. 'In the first image we have the self-assurance of the invulnerable soul; in the second faith's assurance that God will create new life out of death'.⁴⁰

The immortality of the soul is an option – the resurrection of the dead is a hope. The first is a trust in something immortal in the human being, the second is a trust in the god who calls into being the things that are not, and makes the dead live. In trust in the immortal soul we accept death, and in a sense anticipate it. In trust in the life-creating God we await the conquest of death 'death swallowed up in victory' (1 Cor. 15:54).⁴¹

The resurrection, then, breaks the power of death and by so doing brings history to an end. Thus it marks the beginning of a new cosmic order. 'If we keep the two together, then the cross of Christ comes to stand at the apocalyptic end of world history, and the raising of the dead at the beginning of the new creation of the world'.⁴²

But this new creation is still dependent on an 'eschatological verification'. The resurrection is the 'language of promise and well-found hope, but it is not yet the language of accomplished fact'. Violence and suffering continue and the world is unable to furnish proof that life is resurrected and death

³⁹ Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, p. 213.

⁴⁰ Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, p. 58.

⁴¹ Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, p. 65.

⁴² Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, p. 214.

annihilated.⁴³ Resurrection is the experience of the wholly other, and should therefore not leave us untouched. As no such change has occurred in the whole of physical life, resurrection remains a hope which points to eschatological fulfilment. Thus 'resurrection means not a *factum* but a *fiery* – not what once was done, but what is in the making: the transition from death to life'.⁴⁴ Christ's death was a historical event. The resurrection was an eschatological happening. It has reality for people now in that resurrection hope breaks the power of death. 'The person who is wholly and entirely seized and pervaded by the living power of the divine Spirit becomes immortal, because death loses its power over him'.⁴⁵ Hope is the central virtue of resurrection belief. It allows the living of this life to take place in a life-affirming, loving way, where men and women are 'ready to live their lives in love wholly' even though they know that this life must, naturally, end in death.⁴⁶ Moltmann puts it thus: 'I shall live *wholly* here, and die *wholly*, and rise *wholly* there'.⁴⁷ Resurrection hope grounds men and women in this life with the hope of its transformation. 'Hope for the resurrection of the body is not merely a hope for the hour of death; it is a hope for all the hours of life from the first to the last. It is directed, not towards a life "after" death, but towards the raising of this life'.⁴⁸ As such it calls for the liberation of the suffering creation. Because God's power is seen in resurrecting the crucified and helpless Christ, it is geared towards the quickening of life, the transformation of poverty, the exaltation of the humble and the raising of the dead.

The resurrection, then, is an eschatological happening and not merely a historical event. As such it has cosmic significance. It provides hope for individual living, and hope for the transformation of the whole creation. It points not to immortality but to the re-creating activity of God who gives new life in raising Jesus from the dead. So the resurrection is not simply 'exhausted by personal eschatology'. For Moltmann, if 'personal eschatology' begins here then it must push forward 'in ever-widening

⁴³ Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, p. 223.

⁴⁴ Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, p. 241.

⁴⁵ Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, p. 257.

⁴⁶ Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, p. 67; also, Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, p. 169.

⁴⁷ Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, p. 67.

⁴⁸ Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, p. 267.

circles to cosmic eschatology'.⁴⁹ 'The resurrection of the body means the metamorphosis of *this* transient creation into the eternal Kingdom of God and *this* mortal life into eternal life'.⁵⁰

Both Barth and Moltmann have given much attention to the cosmic significance of the cross-resurrection event. For both the matter goes beyond mere history into the realm of eschatological happening. For both it points to a reality to be lived in the present and to a promise which awaits its future fulfilment. For both it is the centre of Christian faith on which all else stands or falls. In Christ the world has been converted to God, a fact which now simply awaits its consummation.

⁴⁹ Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, p. 70.

⁵⁰ Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, p. 77.