

To what extent, if at all, is the person and work of Christ as explained in Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* a contribution to our understanding of the Doctrine of the Trinity?

Cur Deus Homo begins with Anselm posing the central question of the book: 'By what logic or necessity did God become man and by his death... restore life to the world?'¹ In this, he establishes a range of points that he proceeds to defend: that God became man (Christ); that Christ's death restored life to the world; that God's actions were either logical, necessary, or both. The text is soteriological in its aim, focusing on the problem of how salvation has been achieved, and this appears to be the way in which the text is a contribution to our understanding of the Doctrine of the Trinity. Humanity, turning from God in disobedience, bringing death and ruin onto themselves, have been saved through Jesus' obedience to God. This sort of language would be familiar to churchgoers to this day, and the reasoning behind it is often still glossed over. In fact, many of the points he raises and tries to answer still trouble believers. The general lack of cogency in the arguments was not lost on Anselm, and he sets out to provide that solid reasoning which goes some way to providing a clear conception of God.

There is a contemporary view that Jesus was merely a good man. Jehovah's Witnesses deny that Jesus is God, but rather identify him as Archangel Michael². Both of these claims would appear to be just two of a multiplicity of beliefs that co-exist in the church. Similar views must have existed when Anselm wrote *Cur Deus Homo*, as he addresses both establishing the centrality of the Trinity in the work of salvation. 'The redemption of man could not be effected by any other being but God.'³ Had a perfect man or an angel redeemed humanity, then humanity would be a bondservant to that being. This is an archaic idea. However, a more accessible

¹ (Anselm 2020) Book 1, ch.1.

² (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 1989) pg.21

³ (Anselm 2020) Book 1, ch.2.

interpretation would be for us to ask what would all of this have to do with God if some other being, human or angel, had done all the legwork? Our thanks, if not worship, would surely be due to that creature, rather than God. So, the discussion proceeds, God 'came himself to drive out the devil on our behalf because we were ourselves incapable of this.'⁴

Again, here, we find ourselves on familiar contemporary ground of puzzles that exist in public consciousness: could not an all-powerful God have devised another way to bring about salvation, except for the humiliation and crucifixion of Jesus on the cross? The crucifixion does seem counter to reason, as Paul reports: 'a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,' 1 Cor 1 :21-25. Anselm counters that God, in his impassibility, cannot be abased. God was not lowered in the incarnation. Rather, in Jesus there are two natures in the one person as the Chalcedonian Creed admits: the divine nature and human nature, 'Very God and very man.'⁵ However, he does speak of the human nature and the divine nature as if they are divisible and separable; also that the will of the Father and the will of the Son might be different to the will of the Son⁶. True, this distinction is formulated negatively. However, it is assumed that the Father and the Son might will things differently, that it is conceivably possible. This seems counter-intuitive, that God and God's Wisdom could ever be at odds. In our own time, Swinburne⁷ struggles with the same issue, creating a hierarchical command structure within the Trinity to iron out disagreements, and the shadow of a two-fold fracturing appears in the text: between Father and Son and between Lord Jesus and Jesus the man. Clearly, although the creeds had been established in words, there persisted a confusion about what is entailed in the terms. Anselm has the scriptures and the creeds to work with as fixed points, but to focus on those points, he seems to lose focus on God's nature.

⁴ (Anselm 2020) Book 1, ch.6

⁵ (Anselm 2020) Book 1, ch.8

⁶ (Anselm 2020) Book 1, ch8

⁷ (Swinburne, 2007)

That aside, Anselm makes an important point about the crucifixion, which is often misconstrued: that God didn't treat Jesus unfairly, and did not hand him over to be killed. He did not give permission for him to be killed, nor did he force Jesus to act against his will. Jesus' obedience was an unflinching adherence to truth and righteousness. That was his duty as a human, and it is no less our duty as humans. The Father's demand was not a special demand placed only on the Son, but on all creation. Where we inevitably flinch from such a responsibility, Christ, in his perfection, would not. God would not have forced a sinless, guiltless person to die. However, Jesus incurred death at the hands of other humans in their sin. Though Jesus is God incarnate, he was subject to God's laws. This, rather than the fact that he had feet and hands, is the clearest demonstration of Jesus' full humanity. He emptied himself of his divinity, becoming man (Phil 2:7). This mode of existence is a peculiarly human experience. It was necessary that a divine person brought about humankind's redemption. However, it also seems highly important, if not necessary, that the reconciliation with God and the return to God was accomplished by a human person too.

All creatures owe a duty to render to God what is owed him. However, no human is capable of passing through life without failing in that duty. Anselm states, "Sin is nothing other than not to give God what is owed to him."⁸ All humans accrue a debt to God which they are unable to pay. This understanding of sin is different to that of Athanasius⁹, who claims that repentance would be sufficient for humankind, if it were not for our sinful nature. Anselm believes that the problem is more systemic than this. Our rebelliousness puts us in a debt to God which cannot be repaid and which keeps us in a state of permanent guilt. Again, in chapter twelve, Anselm tackles a question which would not be unfamiliar to contemporary believers: if God is merciful, why can

⁸ (Anselm 2020) Book 1, ch.11

⁹ (Athanasius, 2007) chapter 7

he not just forgive humanity their sins? The answer is that if all sin was routinely forgiven and no punishment made, then sin would not be regulated. The sinner and non-sinner (if there could be such a human) would be made equivalent before God, which seems unjust. Secondly, sinfulness places humans in an equivalent relation to God, since both sin and God are bound by no law, or rather sin places itself above God, since God would not do anything in an unjust or unregulated manner. Thirdly, in chapter thirteen of book one, Anselm advances the idea of the perfect order of God's universe and God as supreme justice itself. He speaks of honour, which may sound trivial to our ears. However, the overall thrust is comprehensible in the sense of honour being a facet of perfection in a perfect universe which humans make imperfect. We are the grit in the finely-tuned machine, as it were. Although he places a lot of language in medieval terms, giving rise to the criticism that he is projecting onto God the image of a feudal overlord¹⁰, Anselm's point is clear: sin keeps the universe from operating perfectly and as such it is an affront to God. God must regulate the universe and must regulate sin. As Gerald O'Collins points out, 'The honorable service owed by vassals to their lords was a social factor that guaranteed order, peace, and freedom.'¹¹ Anselm seems to be pitching towards a more (much later) enlightenment idea of a harmonious universe. This is quite fitting given the importance he places on rationality.

Humans were made to live and to enjoy God, choosing good over evil and to be happy choosing to do so. Furthermore, they have not been made to die, since that would be 'inconsistent with God's wisdom and justice.'¹² Since this was God's plan, Anselm says, he will accomplish what he intended. However, in the regulation of the universe, it is essential that sin is defeated and that humans must atone. Humans, of course, are unable to pay the price for sin for the reasons he outlined in the first book. In fact, since all of creation is due to God, the only thing that can

¹⁰ (Campbell 2018) pg.470

¹¹ (O'Collins 1995)

¹² (Anselm 2020) Book 2, ch.2

give anything to God must be God himself. The problem with this is that humans are the ones who have the debt. A divine being cannot become human. Humans cannot become divine. Their natures cannot mix: a third type of being would emerge, neither human nor divine. To achieve a satisfactory atonement, then, the Word of God became incarnate, perfect God and perfect man, with two natures and was able to save humanity through the expiation of their sins.

Anselm makes a number of convincing points and makes them comprehensible to a modern reader. What is less comprehensible is how, precisely, Jesus' death on the cross was the price that had to be paid. The question at the very beginning of the book seems only to have been half-answered. How has satisfaction been rendered, precisely? The meaning of the previous points can be separated from their feudal overtones, but that does not seem possible here. Our contemporary sensibilities cannot help but feel that 'an injustice would be done if another were punished or obedient to the law in one's place,¹³' as Kathryn Tanner puts it. Peter Abelard's thesis, which saw Christ's death as a persuasive and forceful symbol of his love and love's willingness to sacrifice seems more fitted to our time. However, whilst we might be more drawn to this idea, as O'Collins points out, it may be criticised as 'unilaterally subjective and merely exemplary.'¹⁴ It does not answer the necessity of the incarnation in a trinitarian way, leaving open the question of whether Jesus might have been a good man or an angel in the way that Anselm denies.

¹³ (Tanner 2021)

¹⁴ (O'Collins 1995)

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