

ANSELM'S *CUR DEUS HOMO*?

These excerpts from *Cur Deus Homo*? should indicate the central areas of debate in the mediaeval period:

- Was it necessary that God bring salvation by the incarnation?
- What are the roles of justice and honour in Christ's redemptive work?
- Did God will Christ's suffering?
- Was Christ punished for our sins?

One further question is not explicitly addressed in Anselm's text, but his thought provoked the issue as the Reformation approached:

- Is Christ a substitute for humanity, or humanity's representative?

What you may detect is the beginnings of an attempt to delineate a doctrine of the atonement, namely a view of how and why Christ brings about our reconciliation with God.¹ This is something which the early Church sought not to address, and for very good reason. The Bible uses many different images to describe how and why Christ brings salvation. In the end, the patristic theologians seem to have concluded that it was neither necessary nor expedient to try to condense these 'pictures' into a single 'theory'. Theories tend to exclude other theories by necessity. Images, like metaphors, can be mutually enhancing and overlapping. For this reason, none of the Church's creeds gives a doctrine of the atonement; the issue is left open quite deliberately.

It is often noted that the language of debt, justice and honour pervades Anselm's discussion in a way that is quite new. As O'Collins points out very succinctly, this has much to do with Anselm's social milieu and his intended audience.² Within the hierarchical feudal and monastic structures in which Anselm lived, the honour due to abbots and feudal lords from their monks and subjects helped to guarantee the right order and peace of the ecclesial and social bodies. This 'right order' depended very much on the obedient performance of duty in accordance with one's place in the monastery or wider society. The discussion is in some senses strange and unbalanced. Why? Because Anselm discusses Christ's obedience to God at some length, and one might think that this would lead him towards a discussion of sin as disobedience and the fracturing of an intimate relationship with God by humanity. Instead, Anselm seems to talk of sin in rather

¹ Atonement can be distinguished from soteriology. The former is particularly concerned with *how* Christ reconciles us to God (or, in some versions of atonement, how Christ reconciles God to us). The latter is a much broader examination of salvation as it links with other areas of Christian doctrine such as creation and ecclesiology.

² Gerald O'Collins, *Jesus our Redeemer: A Christian Approach to Salvation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp.135-6.

legalistic terms as an infinite dishonour to God for which God must exact an infinite recompense in order to maintain justice.

Anselm has been interpreted as holding a view of atonement which focuses on the recompense or satisfaction which God is duty-bound to exact from sinful humanity by the demands of justice. What are the problems with this view? It seems to suggest that God is compelled by a criterion or standard of justice which somehow lies outside God himself (and is thus sometimes labelled 'extrinsicist'). Moreover, the idea of justice with which Anselm is working does not seem to be particularly Biblical and theological. It may have more to do with the notion of justice, recompense and honour which happened to be operative in the monasteries and feudal fiefdoms of his day.

However, Anselm's discussion does set the agenda for later Christologies and soteriologies in a rather simple but important way. He points out that, because of the infinite goodness of God, humanity's sin has established an infinite separation of humanity from God. Because it is humanity which has sinned, it is only humanity which should offer the sacrifice (we will return to this term in a moment) which inaugurates humanity's reconciliation to God. On the other hand, because the nature of that separation is infinite, there is nothing which finite humanity can do of itself to overcome its separation from God. Only God can overcome that separation. Joining up both sides of the equation, it seems that only a divine-humanity – the God-man or *Deus Homo* – can bring about humanity's reconciliation to God and, concomitantly, our salvation. It is for this reason that Anselm concludes that God brings about our salvation by the incarnation *of necessity*. As we will see shortly, Aquinas nuances Anselm's notion of necessity in respect of the incarnation.

Anselm's Christology and the doctrine of atonement have also been seen as precursors of a very controversial view known as penal substitutionary atonement. The debate concerning penal substitution has been particularly heated amongst protestant evangelical theologians. Put simply, according to this view of the atonement Christ is our substitute – Christ stands where we ought to stand – and bears the consequences of our sin. In other words, Christ pays the penalty and settles the account for our wrong doing. By force of his justice, God extracts due recompense for the dishonour done to his name, but he extracts that recompense from himself in the crucified Christ. He pays the price. The image of debt and account is to fore in this understanding of the atonement.

For some evangelicals, penal substitution is simply Biblical orthodoxy. Others take a very different view. The Baptist leader Steve Chalk wrote a populist book in which he described penal substitution as akin to 'cosmic child abuse' (i.e. the

Father venting his wrath on the Son).³ I do not wish to enter the ins and outs of the debate amongst evangelical theologians on this issue, but make some general comments and point out why Anselm cannot be read in any straightforward fashion as a precursor to modern penal substitutionary theories of the atonement.

The first point to be made is highlighted consistently by the patristic and mediaeval theologians: whatever atonement and salvation mean, they do not mean the placating of a vengeful God. The Bible speaks of God's 'righteous anger', but St. Paul is also clear that 'God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself' (2 Corinthians 5.19). In other words, God is eternally reconciled to us; we have become estranged from God and we are reconciled to Him. If some theories of the atonement imply that God is persuaded to love us by Christ's suffering sacrifice, or that God's anger is assuaged so that he loves us again, this is contrary to the patristic and mediaeval witness to the Biblical description of Christ's saving work. God never stopped loving his creation.

Secondly, a careful reading of Book I.8-9 of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo?* reveals his views concerning the suffering of Christ as a consequence of Christ's obedience. Anselm makes it clear that what God demands of his creation is faithful obedience. The Church comes to believe that, in Christ, we find a life lived in full and perfect obedience to the love of God. Now, the question is this: is it therefore God's will that Christ suffer? Anselm's answer to this question is 'yes' and 'no'. His answer is 'yes' in the sense that God demands faithful obedience, and if the consequence of this is death then God responds to that obedience with the promise of life in all its fullness. But does God desire Christ's suffering simply for its own sake? The answer to that question is 'no' because God does not desire the suffering *qua* suffering of any creature or his only-begotten Son. The point of this line of reasoning is that the suffering endured by Christ is not inflicted by God (that, indeed, would be 'cosmic child abuse'): it is inflicted by humanity. More particularly, Christ's suffering is a consequence of humanity's sin, frustration, blindness, idolatry, and so on. It seems to me that too many 'theories' of the atonement have implied – more or less clearly – that it is God who beats and crucifies Christ. Others have suggested that, because God allows it to happen, it is God's will, or even God's act. This, again, is very odd indeed. In Book I.9, Anselm writes the following:

God did not, therefore, compel Christ to die; but he suffered death of his [i.e. Christ's] own will, not yielding up his life as an act of obedience, but on account of his obedience in maintaining holiness; for he held out so firmly in this obedience that he met death on account of it.

³ Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Zondervan Publishing House, 2003).

There is a subtle distinction here. Anselm is saying that Christ's obedience is not constituted or proved by his death. Rather, *because* of Christ's obedience to his Father's will (because of who Christ was and is), he was put to death. Anselm goes on to say that Christ is not exalted because he successfully endured the cross (i.e. the resurrection is a reward). Christ is exalted because he is the one whose obedience has been eternally perfect. He was exalted before the foundation of the world. This is an important point: Christ is not made good because he obeyed his Father's will and went to his death; Christ is good and obedient to his heavenly Father, and as a consequence of this faithful goodness the world rejected Christ and crucified him.

Here is another way of thinking about Christ's sacrifice which you may find helpful and which, I think, is in the same 'key' as Anselm. God has loved the world since its foundation. That love has never waived or diminished. God was not 'put off' loving us by our sin and that love has always flowed.⁴ However, our sin is the rejection of that love. The Bible is the story of humanity's attempt to do without God's gift of love, or to stem the flow of that love (Romans 8.37-39). The cross of Christ now represents the love of God which has flowed from eternity but which now, in the context of human sin, *takes the form of a crucified man*. What Anselm wants to maintain more than anything is the sense that God in Christ is not doing anything that he has not done eternally: love. Moreover, Christ is God's way of 'keeping that love flowing' to his creation. In other words, in the face of sin's pretence that the love of God can be stopped or refused, the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ demonstrate otherwise. As the New Testament scholar and Bishop of Durham, N. T. Wright, has put it, in the cross Christ endures and exhausts the power of evil, and transforms and returns that gesture with nothing less than an infinite love. That being said, what Christ offers in the crucifixion and resurrection is not simply our restoration to a pre-lapsarian state, but something which, from our historical point of view, is entirely new: eternal life in the presence of God.

⁴ One rather trite response to this view is that 'God hates the sin but loves the sinner'. This betrays a tendency to think of who or what we are as really distinct from what we do. However, the Christian tradition has tended to see sin as a state and our actions as flowing from who and what we are. Our actions and our being are inextricably intertwined. The difficulty lies, I think, in the use of rather anthropomorphic and metaphorical imagery concerning God's 'wrath' or 'righteous anger'. God's wrath is at once God's love: they cannot be separate. God's wrath is simply the rejection of that which is contrary to his love. We do not have to assume that God's anger is expressed in the same way as my anger is expressed towards my children. Neither is God's love expressed in the same way as my love for my children. God's love is perfect, mysterious and eternal; mine is not. Moreover, as many in the tradition have pointed out, there is an innocence to God's love which we often fail to see.

The debate concerning the atonement is intricate and the Bible most certainly does speak of Christ as our substitute who endures the consequences of our sin. In particular, much revolves around the interpretation of the so-called 'suffering servant' passages in Isaiah 53, and texts such as Matthew 20.28. Overall, atonement theology, and soteriology more generally, is an attempt to come to terms with the teaching that 'Christ died for our sins' (1 Corinthians 15.3), and to understand what this means. Some kind of substitutionary understanding of the atonement may be quite appropriate, and penal substitution is just one version of a much broader tradition. Furthermore, there is a question concerning the nature of Christ as substitute or representative, for some theologians imply that, because Christ accepts the penalty due to us, we do not, or should not, suffer. Yet as C.S. Lewis put it, 'Christ did not die that we might not suffer, but that our suffering should be like his'; that is, born of obedience to God. The interpretation of the Biblical verses pertaining to these themes must be undertaken with the greatest of care and always in the knowledge that we are apt to impose upon the Biblical text notions of fairness, justice and recompense which are more ours than God's. What many now recognise is that the Bible and the patristic theologians invariably use multiple images to describe the mystery of God's saving work in Christ. For the moment, I only intend to point to the need to read Anselm with due care and not impose onto his text certain themes and tendencies which belong to later theology. Rather, *Cur Deus Homo?* should be taken on its own merits as a reflection on God's saving work in Christ that belongs to a particular context and social milieu.