If Jesus's death is the solution, what is the problem?

Sermon at the Chapel at Churchill College

25 February 2024; Lent 2

Ps 74.12-17, 20-23; Jn 12.23-32

Nigel Cooper

I am keen to present the key doctrines of Christianity to you. Today I am examining the work of Christ, often termed the atonement, though that is a narrower concept. When I tackled the person of Christ last term I fear I lost many of you. This time I have decided to write out and read the sermon, hoping I may be clearer that way. Keep your fingers crossed!

++++

If Jesus's death is the solution, what is the problem?

A patently obvious problem lies to hand in the daily diet of news – of wars and atrocities, of murders like that of Brianna Ghey, of earthquakes and disease.

Sections of the contemporary church with which I am familiar may be embarrassed, but the Church traditionally emphasises in this the problem of sin. Clearly murderers sin and wars involve war crimes, but what of us decent folk? We may sometimes say unkind words to our friends, or take an extra slice of cake when it is in short supply, and these may be technically sin, but is it of the order that makes the death of Jesus a necessary solution? In what sense can he have died for me as he may have done for Vladimir Putin? There are orders of magnitude between us.

Let me quote John Ruskin again, "the cruellest man living could not sit at his feast, unless he sat blindfold." – *Unto This Last*

We are caught up in vast networks of abuse and terror that we try not to think about. The perpetual exploitation of poorer and less powerful people through trade. Our relatively comfortable lifestyles at the expense of the

planet – think for a moment of the carbon emissions from heating this chapel for us this evening. We can only do so much researching, boycotting, protesting, lobbying, clicking on Facebook. For the rest we sink back into being silently complicit with it all. If asked, we refer to the comforting blindfolds of our go-to excuses.

Yet the Church, following St Paul, not only identifies sins, plural, but also Sin, singular, as a force that enclaves us. In many ways we do not have free wills. As today's collect puts it, "we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves." It is not merely the overwhelming effort I have just described that entraps us. We know we have all sorts of psychological wounds that play out to perpetrate a perpetual cycle of hurting and being hurt. We are caught up in social dynamics and cultural norms that make some good behaviour almost unthinkable and some bad ones almost inevitable. We are subject to the laws of the dismal science of economics, of scarcity, conflict and trade-offs.

Even more fundamentally, as animal heterotrophs, we can only stay alive by killing and eating other creatures. Even those of us who are vegan eat plants, at the cost to both the individual cabbages and the wild habitats destroyed to grow our crops. These food chains affect not just us humans but all organisms, as any Attenborough documentary reminds us.

Let me draw this revelry in gloom to a close with a famous summary from Psalm 51.5, "Indeed I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me."

So one answer to what is the problem is set out by St Paul, "Christ died for our sins and was raised for our justification." – *Romans 4.25*

++++

But I find this on its own an inadequate account of the work of Christ.

What has it to say about our lack of free will, of nature red in tooth and claw (think of Darwin's horror at ichneumon flies consuming their hosts from inside), of earthquakes, famines and disease?

In earlier centuries it was easier to attribute the horrors of nature, not to the poor design or evil intent of the creator, but to an undoing of a good creation by a fateful Fall when Adam and Eve committed the first sin and ate the apple.

This is no longer possible in a post-Hutton world (those who came to Arran will remember his unconformity which provided the evidence he was looking for, establishing the earth was of immense antiquity). Not only are there fourteen billennia of years of cosmic history before the appearance of humans, there is also the implausibility of such a singular moment in the evolution of hominids. Whatever the illuminating value of the myth of the Fall it cannot lie in its explanation for the grief of the whole created order or, to put it bluntly, for the origin of evil.

"The buck stops here," Truman had on his desk in the Oval Office. God has to take ultimate responsibility for the existence of evil. Evil is too pervasive and extensive to be the responsibility of humans alone, however much we may aid its cause.

++++

I have other ideas about this, but for this evening I am going to explore one line of thought, which is that the creative process necessarily involves death and suffering.

It is a common Christian position that evil is not something in itself, but the absence of the good. *Privatio bono*. Let's follow that thought. Christian theology usually emphasises that God created out of nothing. But nothing is a sort of a something. Perhaps it is like a strange attractor that tempts real, created things to fall back into nothingness; a sort of Freudian death-wish. There is a perpetual struggle not to sink into decay, an undoing of

becoming. The Greek Fathers termed this φθαρςια, corruption – though it may be helpful to think of it as 'contagious dissolution', and made it one of their foci for understanding the work of Christ. St Athanasius wrote, "As humans had at the beginning come into being out of non-existence, so were they now on the way to returning, through corruption, to non-existence again." – *De Incarn I.4*

This somethingness of the nothingness of evil is even found in the *locus classicus* of Genesis ch 1, especially in vv 2 &4: "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep,… And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light; and God saw that the light was good and separated the light from the darkness." This is picked up in the famous Christmas reading from John, that echoes this struggle between a primaeval darkness and the divine light. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."

I am fascinated too by the creation myth of the battle of God with the Sea and the Chaos Monster (named Leviathan or, sometimes, Rahab). This is found in the Hebrew Bible in several psalms (as in Ps 74), Job and elsewhere. This is very similar to the neighbouring Canaanite and Babylonian creation myths, although the Bible treats it more figuratively than mythically.

These strands of Biblical and Patristic thought are an alternative resource to the more dominant sin-focussed legal metaphors of the Western Church.

++++

The costly effort of the creative process is also reflected in metaphors of birth and growth in the New Testament. I am thinking of the language of:

- Labour pains – "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now" *Rom 8.22*

- Pruning of vines in both Paul and John – “Every branch that bears fruit the Father prunes to make it bear more fruit.” *John 15.2*
- Parables of the Kingdom of God around the sowing of seeds – “It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.” – *Luke 13.19*
- Seeds ‘dying’ to produce the next generation in both Paul and John – “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” *John 12.24*

We can also think of St Irenaeus and his understanding of the world as a vale of soul-making. I often liken this to the need for the surgeon’s knife in healing. And this reminded me of Eliot’s *Four Quartets* and the stanza:

> The wounded surgeon plies the steel
> That questions the distempered part;
> Beneath the bleeding hands we feel
> The sharp compassion of the healer's art
> Resolving the enigma of the fever chart.
> *- ‘East Coker’ (1940) pt. 4*

The costliness of the creative process, the New Testament images from nature remind us, is something shared throughout the development of the cosmos. There is a pattern of death and new life – dare I say, ‘pain for gain’? – of new and more complex things out of the destruction of earlier and simpler existents. The heavier elements in our solar system come from earlier generations of stars that exploded in supernovas, for example. This resonates with the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. They are like the script embedded in a stick of rock.

This is most evident to me as a biologist in evolution by natural selection. Through this harsh process we end up with Darwin’s ‘tangled bank’ and its overflowing biodiversity. In his words, “Thus, from the war of nature, from

famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life." – Last paragraph of *Origin of Species*

++++

Darwin, probably politically, attributes the origin of this to the Creator. I would rather emphasise the ongoing, intimate role of the creator in the cosmos's moment-by-moment struggle of existence. Thereby I come to the next step in my argument. If the death of Christ is the solution, might not the problem his death solves be the whole creative process of the bringing-to-be of all things out of the strange attractor of nothingness and then, further, its irreversible establishment by the resurrection, an establishment beyond the reach of those forces of corruption and nothingness? The resurrection of Christ is the first-fruits (note biological metaphor again) of the new inalienable creation that is no longer vulnerable to sin and death.

The Nicene creed sketches the work of Christ as the whole trajectory of his life, from incarnation to his kingly rule that is without end, while placing an emphasis on his death on the way. This is "for us and for our salvation" or – to ground that religious term in ordinary life – for our healing. It is on the basis of Christ's death and resurrection that the creed can say that "all things were created through him." They are the pivotal moments that provide the loving power that retrospectively brought the universe into initial being; that prospectively will establish the final rule of love, joy and peace; which is the providence we need for daily life.

It is the self-giving unto death that is the gift of life to creation, and which in turn then reflects back the love that brought it into being. No longer shall we feed on the slaughtered corpses of our fellow creatures, but on the Eucharistic body and blood of Christ, freely and lovingly offered through the sacrifice of his life. Eliot's *East Coker* continues:

The dripping blood our only drink,
The bloody flesh our only food:

This is the principle enunciated by the Markan Jesus at the end of the first passion prediction. "'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life on account of me and the gospel, will save it." – *Mark 8.34-35* This is the rule for the creation of life.

It is in following in the steps of Christ, the pattern of his birth, death and resurrection that life lies. "But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him." *Romans 6.8*. It is in virtue of this participation in the story of Christ that we look forward to the life of the world to come. Back to our reading from John, his Jesus reuses the Markan injunction on following the way of the cross: "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." And on that cross Jesus draws all things, the whole created order out of nothingness, to himself *Jn 12.32*. Or, as the Johannine Jesus says a little later, "I am the way, the truth and the life." *Jn 14.6*. No one comes to the Father, and its concomitant union with the Son, except through sharing in that same pattern of death and new life. "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be one in us." *Jn 17.*21. The conclusion is our sharing in the divine life of the Holy Trinity.