

## Salvation and Sacrifice

### The presentation of Christ in the Temple

St. Brandon's

Luke 2:22-40

30 January 2022

If I were to go [with actions], “God is good, all the time”, you might respond, “All the time, God is good.” It was a statement and response we used quite a bit. But what has that to do with the presentation of Christ in the Temple? All will be revealed!

Our gospel reading begins, “When the time came for *their* purification ...”, and I was intrigued by that because the passage then seems to suggest in what follows that it's the presentation of Jesus that's being referred to – as a firstborn male He was to be “designated as holy to the Lord”, and a sacrifice of “a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons” was to be made. So why “*their* purification”. Well, what's actually going on here is a little more complicated than the passage suggests.

First, for seven days after the birth of a firstborn son, the mother was ceremonially unclean, and on the eighth day the boy was to be circumcised (Lev. 12:2-3), and named. The verse before our gospel reading began (Luke 2:21) recorded that happening to Jesus. Then, 33 days after the initial seven days, the mother was to go through a process of purification (hence the 40 days that were mentioned right at the start of our service), which involved ideally the sacrifice of a lamb and a pigeon or a turtle-dove, but if she was poor, as clearly Mary and Joseph were, two turtle-doves or two pigeons would do. So it's Mary, not Jesus, for whom the turtle-doves or pigeons were offered, and the sacrifice, echoing the Passover of the Lord in Exodus when all the firstborn of the Egyptians, both animals and humans, died (Ex. 12:29), achieved atonement for her so that she was clean (Lev. 12:6-8). (Just as an aside, if it was a girl rather than a boy, do you think the period for purification was the same, less or more?! Well, for a girl the time periods – the seven days and the 33 days – were both doubled (Lev. 12:5)! Why? Your guess is as good as mine.)

So, if the time had come for “*their* purification”, what was the ‘purification’ of Jesus about? What was it that his parents brought Jesus into the Temple to do for him that was “customary under the law”? Well, all firstborn animals and humans were to be sacrificed, except that for humans they were to be redeemed from that sacrifice by the payment of five shekels of silver, reckoned from one month of age presumably to allow for high rates of child mortality (Num. 18:15-16). So, it's possible, even though not stated in our gospel reading, that in addition to the turtle-doves or pigeons for Mary's purification, there was also a payment by which Jesus' life was redeemed.

So, it seems that 40 days after Jesus's birth, Mary and Joseph with Jesus made the five mile journey from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to do “everything required by the law of the Lord” as it says at the end of our passage, before returning to Galilee and to their own town of Nazareth. (And quite how that fits with Matthew's gospel and their hasty retreat to Egypt isn't clear!)

Now, what's the point of telling you all of that? Well, it is clear that Mary and Joseph were obedient Jews, held within a religious / legal system that involved sacrifice, a system into which Jesus was born and brought up. It was a system that demanded the blood of an animal or the payment of a

sum of money to purify or redeem those involved. Somehow, it seems, God required and was placated by the sacrifice, and hence such deliverance often, though not always, involved violence – the death of an animal.

Now I'm not sure that the sacrificial system was quite as straightforward as that,<sup>1</sup> and that's hinted at in our passage when Simeon speaks of Jesus as God's "salvation", and Anna speaks about Jesus "to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem". So we find three similar terms – purification, salvation, redemption – being used by Luke which come, so my theological consultant informs me, from three different Greek words, but all of which seem to have something to do with the new 'deliverance', if we can use that as a generic term, that happens in the coming of Jesus.

But, and here's the crunch point, is it right to assume that the way in which Jesus achieved that purification, salvation, redemption, that deliverance for us and the whole world, is by Himself becoming the sacrifice that God required? In a few minutes' time, as part of the Eucharistic prayer, we will hear these words: "All glory be to you, our heavenly Father, who, in your tender mercy, gave your only Son our Saviour Jesus Christ, to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption; who made there by his one oblation of himself once offered a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world". They are words from the Book of Common Prayer, which themselves come partly from the book of Hebrews (see 10:5-14). And they might seem to suggest that indeed Jesus's sacrifice was required by God the Father, if God the Father was to be satisfied and our deliverance was to be procured. A little earlier in the Eucharistic prayer we seem to find the same thing: "By his [Christ's] sacrifice he made our peace with you [God the Father]".

But, we began with the statement, "God is good, all the time". And while that doesn't carry any creedal weight, it does seem to provide an accurate summary of how we usually understand God. And "all the time" indicates that being good is in the very character of God – not just good sometimes, but good always and everywhere. And if God is good, surely that means He is both loving and non-violent. And we know for sure that God is loving, indeed that He is love, because we're told so explicitly in the bible (e.g. 1 John 4:16), and because that is probably our own experience of Him. And we know that He is not violent through the life and death of Jesus, where He eschews violence particularly during His passion, and in His resurrection appearances when again there is no hint of violence or vengeance against His enemies, just when we might expect there to be if God is a violent God.

So we seem to be facing a contradiction. On the one hand, a sacrificial system where our deliverance seems as though it can be achieved only by the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus to placate God the Father, to redeem us by paying the price demanded by an angry and violent God. And on the other hand, a God of love and non-violence who couldn't possibly require any of this. And we can't have it both ways – it's one or the other. So which is it?

Well, Jesus says three things that might help us here. First, in response to a lawyer's question about which commandment in the law was the greatest, He replies, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, James Alison, An atonement update, in *Undergoing God*, pp.50-67, Dartman, Longman and Todd, 2006.

commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt.22:37-40). So Jesus is confirming the absolute priority of love, and by implication that God is love, and He is saying that love underpins the law. Second, and earlier in Matthew’s gospel Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish, but to fulfil” (5:17). So the law of love is to be fulfilled in Him. Third, also in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus says to a group of critical Pharisees, “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’” (9:13) – and here He’s quoting from Hosea (6:6) in the OT. And this implies, of course, that God is not a God who demands sacrifice.

What, then, are we to make of Jesus’s passion and death? What is the cause of it? And surely the answer is that it is not God but mankind, all mankind, and mankind alone which is the cause. It is mankind which is actually on trial, not Jesus, because it is clear that Jesus in His trial is convicted and condemned to death on trumped up charges. And here is the truth behind the sacrificial system – that it is mankind which demands sacrifice, not God. And what Jesus does, by allowing Himself to become the innocent victim of this sacrificial system, is both to reveal the love of God for mankind by being prepared to give up His life, and to reveal to mankind the whole sacrificial system, thereby bring it to an end. God desires mercy, not sacrifice. Jesus comes and fulfils the law by revealing its true origins in love, not sacrifice.<sup>2</sup>

So, if there is sacrifice involved in Jesus’s death, it is only in the sense of self-sacrifice – Jesus chooses to die in order to reveal and bring to an end the violent and sacrificial ways of mankind. Sacrifice, on this understanding of self-sacrifice, needs to be understood on the basis of faith in a God who is love, and who does not make a secret pact with His Son that calls for His murder in order to satisfy God’s wrath.<sup>3</sup>

And, on this basis, mankind’s purification, salvation, redemption, deliverance consists in realising and then doing away with our own violent ways, and by turning to be reconciled by faith in a God who is in His very character loving and non-violent. In that way, the sins of the whole world are absorbed by God the Son, and forgiven by God the Father who desires mercy, not sacrifice.

Understanding Christ’s self-sacrifice in that way resolves the contradiction between a violent God who demands the ultimate sacrifice of His Son, and a God who in His very nature has nothing to do with violence or sacrifice, and everything to do with love. And we might then understand those words from the Eucharistic prayer rather differently: “All glory be to you, our heavenly Father, who, in your tender mercy, gave your only Son our Saviour Jesus Christ, [who voluntarily] suffered death upon the cross for our redemption; who made there by his one oblation of himself once offered a full, perfect and sufficient [self-]sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world”. And in so doing, He brought to an end the whole sacrificial system, and any idea we might have of God being involved with violence.

And on that basis we can then affirm with integrity that God is good, all the time. ✠ All the time, God is good.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> If you would like to read further on this, then Jonathan Sacks’ *Not in God’s name. Confronting religious violence*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2015 is a good place to go.

<sup>3</sup> See *The Girard Reader*, ed. James Williams, Crossroad Publishing, 1996, pp.177-188