The Cross and Forgiveness. March 17th 2021 prepared by Fiona

Opening words: This week, we have a transcript. We are no longer providing video resources every week but may continue to create these important seasons of the year. We have attached some pictures/ resources to help you in your meditation. If you are meditating alone but would like to feel 'with us' we meditate in our homes at 7.30pm on Wednesday. The tradition we meditate in is Centring Prayer which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centring Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob, Hazel and Paul, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Opening Prayer: *Eternal God,* through our meditation may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, peace and justice making. **Amen**

Introduction:

A few years ago, I worked as a commercial designer. Over the years I created several T-Shirts with the slogan 'it wasn't me; it was him' for popular retailers such as Marks and Spencer's, Primark, and Sainsbury's. Although I would like to think my designs were a little more imaginative than the example to the right, it is evident from the popularity of this slogan that letting an innocent party take the blame is recognized as at attribute of humanity.



The questions of why Jesus was crucified, and the purpose of his death have overarched the Christian narrative for over two millennia, often at the expense of his life and teaching. Because of Christian focus on the cross and the final three days of Jesus' life, we can easily overlook the transformative teaching of Scripture and instead go no further than Jesus as saviour.

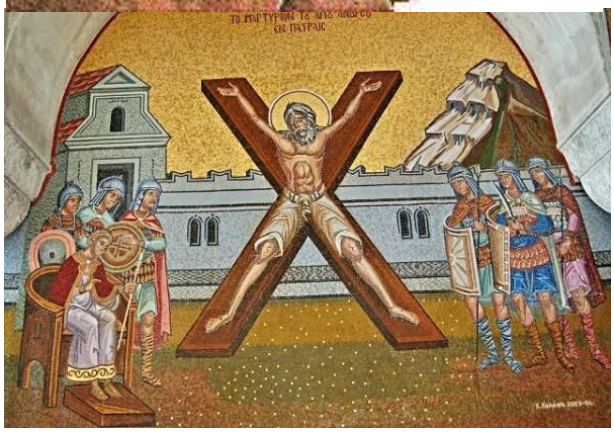
Reflection:

As Sr Marie said last week, 'from the death of Christ and right up to the year 1000, the cross was represented without an image of the crucified body of Jesus Christ.' Of course, Jesus was crucified, but only later did the image take the form of a bloody sacrifice. Moreover, recent Biblical Archeology discoveries make a good case for the crucifixion having taken place on an 'X' shaped cross, yet Jesus is not depicted this way for us. This theory from doctoral research is based on the positioning of nails in the hand and heal bones of 1st Century crucifixion victims and the angle of the nails themselves. Modelling has also shown that it is not possible to secure the victim to the 't' shaped cross. This theory makes sense when we consider the ancient Christian Chi Rho Symbol, a Christogram that is made by overlaying two letters of the Greek word 'Christos' meaning 'Christ'. What looks to us like the letter 'P, is actually the loop in the rho and represents Christ's head. The Chi Rho symbol is etched over the doorway of what is traditionally believed to be the home of Mary the mother of Jesus. Moreover, the high 't' cross we see in films is also an unlikely reality. John tells us that Jesus was given

a drink on a sponge on a hyssop branch (John 19:29), Hyssop looks a little like a lavender bush, the woody part of the branch would be no more than 2 ft in length. It was unlikely that Jesus was crucified far from the ground. The picture to the right shows St. Andrew on an 'X' Shaped cross with the Chi Rho symbol above.



Of course, unless you are interested in Biblical Archeology, the shape of the cross is less important than what it symbolizes, and what does it symbolize exactly? Christians are told, Jesus died for us, however, as Fr Richard Rohr says: 'For most of church history, no single consensus prevailed on what Christians mean when we say, "Jesus died for our sins."' In the contemporary version of the Lords Prayer "trespasses" has become "sins." Trespasses, a Reformation word, was a change from the earlier Greek term which means debts.



Debts, then trespasses, and later sins developed into what became known as "substitutionary atonement," The theory of atonement ultimately rests on an accepted notion— The doctrine of "original sin." Adam and Eve, we are told, tarnish all humanity. Faced with his own guilt, in Genesis 3:12, Adam looks for someone else to blame. This has been human instinct ever since. He points the finger his wife and God: "The woman [blaming her], whom you [blaming God] gave to be with me" did this. Eve then passes the blame to the serpent…

Substitutionary atonement is a theology which gained popularity during the Reformation (Protestant) and revival (Catholic). As Rohr says, "substitutionary atonement" is the theory that Christ, by his own sacrificial choice, was punished in the place of humans, thus satisfying the "demands of justice" so that God could forgive our sins. As Sr Marie said last week, St Anselm's (1033–1109), 1st theory of Redemption Theology was that Christ offered Himself as a ransom. Anselm's 2nd theory was that Christ offers himself as satisfaction and penitential sacrifice. This concept is not explicit in the Second Testament but is developed from the thought of Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430) in the fifth century and taken up with greater fervor during the 16th Century onwards.

Many figures of the Protestant Reformation and Counter Reformation/ Catholic revival of the 16th and 17th centuries rely on the 'original sin' of Adam and Eve to justify penal thinking. If we peel back the layers of history, we can find the roots of substitutionary atonement in the First Testament in the theology of the scapegoating ritual. For example, in Leviticus 16, on the "Day of Atonement" the high priest, Aaron, was commanded to symbolically lay all the transgressions of the people on one sacrificial goat, the people would torture the animal until it escaped into the desert. This symbolic act was somehow required to unify and set free God's people of Israel.

When understood in the light of Leviticus, instead of owning their debts, the ritual substitutionary atonement allowed people to scapegoat them elsewhere—onto an innocent creature. As Richard Rohr says: "The image of the scapegoat powerfully mirrors the universal, but largely unconscious, human need to transfer our guilt onto something or someone else by singling that other out for unmerited negative treatment." The French philosopher René Girard (1923–2015) advocated a theory that the scapegoat is a keystone of most social structures and cultures.

In my mind, reducing Jesus to the equivalent of a primitive goat, an innocent animal, to "atone" for sin-filled humanity is a scandalous reduction of God to one who requires a brutal act to forgive the debts of his own people – As if God could be so small minded….

In Proverbs, a book widely believed to be a treatise in God's Wisdom, 'Love prospers when a fault is forgiven, but dwelling on it separates close friends;" In the Psalms, "as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed… (Psalm 103:12-17). This version of God is more familiar…

In the Second Testament it is true that when John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him, he declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29-34). Doubtless, John was already aware that Jesus' presence was not welcomed by the Jewish and Roman authorities. John was pointing to the likely truth that Jesus would be scapegoated for a movement in the tide of religious thought. Indeed, John the Baptist himself was later beheaded. (Matthew 14). The "the sin of the world" referred to here is ignorance, fear, and abuse of power. Jesus paid for living in a corrupt world amidst a collision of conflicting interests and ambition of a Roman Empire and religious establishment at cross purposes. As Fr Richard says ''Jesus stood as the fully innocent one who was condemned by the highest authorities of both church and state."

In John 16 Jesus refers to the power and corruption of the Jewish leadership when he says, "They will put you (my Disciples) out of the synagogue; in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God." Jesus identifies that the religious Jewish leaders do not know him, Jesus then says, 'it is for your good that I am going away." This reference to his crucifixion shows that Jesus did indeed die to save his followers who would later be empowered by the Holy Spirit to teach the world the truth (John 16:1-10), something which practicing Christians seek to do to this day.

While it is true that the human family has given preference to blaming almost anything or anyone else rather than be accountable and own our bad behavior. My reasons for being uncomfortable with substitutionary atonement are these: The common theme of Genesis 3 and the crucifixion narrative was the coveting of power, unconsciously and naively in Adam and Eve's case. The difference is that Adam and Eve knew God, meeting him in the Garden. Both showed shame and remorse (Genesis 3:8). In contrast, the Jewish and Roman authorities according to Jesus neither knew him or God the Father and showed arrogance in their unjustified condemnation (John 7:28; 8:19,28;10:38;15:21;16:23). Jesus's mission was to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24), the very ones who rejected him. Jesus sought to reveal the true nature of God as Love. "My Father's sun shines on both the good and the bad; his rain falls on both the just and the unjust" (Matthew 5:45).

Substitutionary Atonement teaches that the meaning of the cross is a transaction in which Jesus takes our punishment. This widespread understanding implies that ultimately, what we do in this life does not matter as Jesus has secured our insurance policy. "He was delivered up for our sins and rose again for our justification." (Romans 4:25). Crucially, this last element is often neglected. Preachers will often explain that Jesus "died for our sins". but, according to Scripture, the resurrection and Pentecost (the pouring out of the Holy Spirit) completes salvation. To quote Paul, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (1 Cor 15:14). We also need to note that, in a Christian theological context, we consider the Holy Spirit the third 'person' of the Trinity. At the time of Peter's Pentecost sermon (Acts 2), the Trinity was not yet spoken of. For Peter, the Spirit is the enabling presence and power of God himself at work amongst his people. As we will see later, during the season of Pentecost, Jesus is the one who is able to dispense the Spirit, therefore, Jesus is the one who mediates God's own presence and power, showing Jesus Christ, who is for us the Wisdom of God, incorporated into the person of God himself.

Luke, in his record of Peter's sermon, avoids any language of God 'punishing' Jesus on the cross. When we say,

‘he died for our sins’, although God did not prevent it, it is clear that responsibility for Jesus’ death sits entirely with those who executed him. Luke says as much quoting Peter in Acts 2:36, 36, “’let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified… Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

To quote Henri Nouwen, “the core message of Jesus is that real joy and peace can never be reached while bypassing suffering and death.” The meaning of the cross is transformation. When we choose to follow Jesus’ teachings we metaphorically die with him and rise to a new life. We are changed from the inside out, taking responsibility for our mistakes but having the means to grow from them by grace and love (Romans 6). We become agents of God’s Kingdom, which starts now and one day will come in full (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Beginning Meditation: Let us prepare now for our meditation. Notice any tightness in your shoulders and neck and allow any tension in your muscles to relax. Allow your back to rest upright. Be conscious of where your body is touching the chair. Allow your breathing to settle, allow your body to slow down. You may wish to silently repeat a sacred word, bring to mind an image, or simply focus on your breath as an aid to mediation.

We Meditate for 25 Minutes…

Post Meditation reading: God's forgiveness is unconditional

God's forgiveness is unconditional; it comes from a heart that does not demand anything for itself, a heart that is completely empty of self-seeking. It is this divine forgiveness that I have to practice in my daily life. It tells me to keep stepping over all my arguments that say forgiveness is unwise, unhealthy, and impractical. It challenges me to step over all my needs for gratitude and compliments. Finally, it demands of me that I step over that wounded part of my heart that feels hurt and wronged and that wants to stay in control and put a few conditions between me and the one I am asked to forgive. This "stepping over" is the authentic discipline of forgiveness. *(from RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON by Henri J. M. Nouwen)*

Closing prayer: Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for the gifts of prayer, meditation, and contemplation. We thank you for being with us and for this community. May we, therefore, pray with all others, as one community, one world and one spirit to One God…Moments of your personal prayer follow…**Amen.**

Thank you for meditating with us; please join us again soon. Stay safe and well.

Resources:

The Universal Christ, Richard Rohr
https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/the-many-meanings-of-pentecost/
The Return of the Prodigal Son, by Henri J. M. Nouwen)



Our peaceful outdoor spaces promote wellbeing and are open to all, free of charge.