

Pentecost 24

Proper 27

11 Nov 2012

Over the past few weeks I've been promising a few folks that one of these days I'd have something to say about our readings from the Letter to the Hebrews. With all that the Letter to the Hebrews has to say about priesthood, it seems reasonable to think I might have a thing or two to say about it, too. Well, sadly enough, I don't.

To be perfectly honest, after 5 years of discernment and a whole year as a priest, I have to say, I'm as confused as ever about what it means to be a priest. I am really grateful that our tradition calls a lot of folks together to be part of the discernment process.

It wasn't just me thinking I had to become a priest. It took many, many meetings with the Bishop, several other priests and many laypeople, before we all decided together that God has some purpose in calling me to be a priest in the Episcopal Church.

So, even though the Letter to the Hebrews has a lot to say about priesthood, all I can say after all my experience is that it is somehow intimately and completely connected with a worshiping community.

We are all of us, all together, trying to figure out just what God wants each and every one of us to do - in the world, and in his Church.

I guess one thing that has become clear in my particular calling to the priesthood is that I am a teacher of the faith. While I look to you all, to your experiences of God and Christ in your lives, to try to gain a deeper understanding of God's work in the world, I find that I do have a very clear responsibility to teach.

And so, I have to say that I was quite happily surprised by our passage from Hebrews this week in that it gives me a clear opportunity to update you on something the church, in the last 20 years or so, has come to understand about our faith.

Please turn your attention now to the last few sentences in Hebrews, where it says, "...he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the

sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him."

Our Hebrews reading gives us a forgotten insight into the importance of what Jesus Christ did and what he will do.

You see, to put it mildly, for many, many generations, the Church has had a bit of a confused idea about sin. And, not just our Church and the whole Roman Catholic tradition, but we also find a confusion in the other Protestant churches. To be sure, most pastors wouldn't agree with me that there's a confusion.

To use a technical term, there are pastors who believe that Jesus' death on the cross for our sins was a matter of violent atonement.

There are two clearly different theories on how and why Jesus Christ had to die on a cross. Basically, it's the difference between what's called "violent atonement" and "non-violent atonement".

Many folks who were raised in the church have been taught, explicitly or implicitly, the idea of violent atonement. Even folks like me, who never went to church until I was teenager, and then on my own, even folks like me were exposed to the notion of violent atonement.

What violent atonement teaches is that God is so angry with sin, that Jesus, being the perfect sacrifice, took on our sin and then took on the full anger of God.

You take the idea from Hebrews that Jesus was the perfect sacrifice, the perfect offering for sacrifice. Then you take God's anger at sin, and there you have the idea that Jesus took on our sins and died instead of us. Sometimes it's said that Christ was a substitute for us. Instead of us being completely destroyed, as we justly deserve, God chose his own son to be destroyed for us.

That's one very powerful and historically very popular interpretation of the crucifixion. In fact, there's quite a few statements in our worship services that present just that point of view.

But, there have been some problems with that point of view.

Every time we proclaim the Nicene Creed, we have the rather curious statement - "We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins".

Now, you might be wondering, if we acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins, then why do we usually do a confession of sin at our services? It seems pretty strange. But, a bigger problem is that if Jesus came once and for all to take away sin, then how on earth does anyone sin any more?

Well, not surprisingly, I can get into all the theological problems, but here is a curious fact - as a matter of fact, I was just talking to Bishop Adams about this just last week.

It seems a strange sort of rule that wherever you find people focusing on this violent, substitutionary atonement, you also find a great deal of focus on the importance of the crucifixion.

The main problem with that, is that from the very beginning of our faith, the focus has *not* been on the crucifixion, rather what got Christianity up and running was Easter Day - the resurrection.

Through the 20th century, there has been a great re-evaluation of the violent atonement theory. I was fortunate enough to go to an Episcopal seminary that had a professor who is deeply involved in what's called "non-violent atonement".

From talking with folks, it seems even people with no theological training have always had some misgivings about God killing his only son because of our sins. But, as more and more scholars and pastors thought about and prayed and studied the Bible, they began to see that they can be completely faithful to the Bible and still present a very different idea of how and why Jesus had to die.

As I said, violent atonement, the traditional view - at least for the last several generations - tells us that Jesus was the perfect sacrifice - completely innocent - and Jesus took all of our sins upon himself - all the people who have lived and will live - and because God is so angry with sin, Jesus took all of God's anger upon himself and was sacrificed on the cross.

What I'd like to offer you is a different view. Yes, Jesus was perfect, Jesus was without sin, Jesus was completely innocent. And yes, Jesus took all of our sins upon himself.

You see, Jesus was the completely innocent victim of every bad thing humanity is capable of. Jesus' trial and execution show just how inhumane humans can be. Jesus took all our sins upon himself, because he faced the full wrath of what humans are capable of doing to other humans. Jesus exposed for all time, just how bad people can be to other people. He really did take all human sin upon himself - even to the point of death.

Certainly, God hates sin, but the worst of humanity hates goodness. It was humanity that killed Jesus, not God's wrath. The death of Jesus shows most clearly just how evil humanity can be.

Jesus removed sin by showing it for what it was. Our baptism is a baptism into Christ's life and death and so by our baptism, we too are supposed to see sin for what it is. Since we're not perfect, even though we have the opportunity to see sin for what it is, we still sometimes fall short. Because we fall short, we have our weekly confession.

But what's crucial for us to understand is where God is in all this. You see, God's answer to human sin was *not* the violent, sacrificial death of his only son.

God's answer to human evil was Easter morning.

Jesus died once and for all to show all the world what sin is. And on Easter morning, God showed the world that sin will not overcome his plan for his world.

And that's why we know that Christ will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, he's already done that, but to save a world that is eagerly waiting for him to appear. A world that is eagerly waiting for all things to be set right. Amen.