

## The Sacrifice of Christ

John McDade SJ

At the end of the eucharistic prayer, the Church relies upon very small words to bring its priestly worship of God to a climax. It prays, ‘Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is yours, Almighty Father’, and in this sentence, the simple words *through*, *with* and *in* are like rich, complex chords with depth and resonance, bearing all the weight of worship grounded in Christ.

This shouldn’t surprise us: in Christian theology, the important and interesting words are often the smallest and least significant. Take the phrase ‘God and the world’: initially, it looks as though the word ‘and’ is adding the world to God as one thing to another, like ‘Mary and John’, that fine pair, but if you tease out the meanings of the word, it contains all the features of God’s dynamic self-gift to the creation, with all the connotations of relatedness, dependence, gift, communication, revelation, union and a destiny of ultimate blessedness. Who would have thought that a little word could do all that? But that is the point: small words, the simplest prepositions, can carry all the weight of understanding springing from faith and giving rise to thought.

Similarly, in the phrases we use about the meaning of Christ’s death, it is the word ‘for’ that carries all the weight. Paul says simply, ‘While we were still sinners, Christ died *for us*’ (5.8), and quoting the earliest creed of the mother Church in Jerusalem, he writes: ‘Christ died *for our sins* in accordance with the scriptures’ (1 Cor 15.3). These little phrases, expressing Christ’s dynamic, proactive love for us, express how Christians spontaneously think of the value of Christ’s death: Christ is for us precisely in our weakness and mortality; Christ is for us although (because?) we are sinners; Christ is for us as we resist Him. The word ‘for’ tells us that Christ’s regard for us is an impulsive, creative, re-creative, generous self-gift that has no bounds – he ‘empties himself’ – to be *with* and *for* those who deserve little. ‘Love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be,’ as the hymn has it. Two phrases, again from Paul, intensify this in a devout way: ‘the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me’ (Gal 2.20) and ‘Christ Jesus has made me his own’ (Phil 3.12). The word ‘for’ opens into prayer.

When we try to elaborate the significance of Christ's death beyond the simple statement that it is 'for us', we draw upon a number of foundational metaphors such as salvation, reconciliation, redemption, atonement, expiation, sacrifice, intercession, justification, healing, ransom, etc., and all these metaphors, like starlings, cluster together as multiple descriptions of why Christ's death is effective. Reflection on Christ's death flows from a complex of images which together illuminate what needs to be said. And because the significance of this death is difficult to pin down accurately, we need this range of metaphors, yoking together patterns of death and life, enmity and reconciliation; hatred and love, aggression and peace-making, sin and forgiveness, to get it right because Christ's death, simultaneously a moment of intense violence and a moment of enduring love, yokes together human brutality and divine mercy. Our particular concern here will be the theme of the sacrifice of Christ, and I want to consider two approaches to it: the first which thinks in terms of Christ sacrificing himself out of love for us, for many, for all (as in the first quotation from Romans 5.8), and the second which, more technically and ritually, views his death as a sacrifice performed for the atonement of sins (I Cor 15.3).

The first approach works from a sense that the salvation of the world consists in the Son's mystery becoming ours and of our mystery (a problematic condition riven with fissures and anxieties) becoming his. The great Calvinist theologian Karl Barth has a wonderful way of telling this story using the parable of the Prodigal Son: the son of man (humanity) takes his freedom and leaving the house of the Father goes into the far country of sin and alienation. Misdirected freedom leads him away from the Father's house. This, says Barth, is 'the way of man in his breaking of the covenant with God'. God's response to this is to send his own Son to accompany the son of man as he gets lost, to take the condition of the lost son of man as his condition, accepting 'identity and solidarity with this lost son, unreservedly taking his place, taking to Himself his sin and shame, his transgression, as though He Himself had committed it, making his misery His own'.<sup>1</sup> The Incarnation, in other words, is the way of the Son of God into the far country of a lost human existence, in which Christ undertakes a journey unto a forsaken death as a blasphemer and criminal, one who hangs on a tree and is accursed (Gal 3.13).

The way of the Son of God into the far country is how Christ gives expression to his love for the Father: he understands that it is the Father's will that those who are lost in the far

country, far from the house of the Father, should not be without the Word spoken by the Father. And so Christ makes his home among the lost sons and daughters of man, so that no part of their frailty is not shared by him. As the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it, he is made like his brothers and sisters in every respect, is tested and beset with weakness, offering prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who could save him from death. Christ is so obedient to the demands of this mission, becoming the brother of the very least and the lost, that he takes upon himself the alienation that we have chosen for ourselves. What is ours (forsakenness) becomes his, so that what is his (loving union with the Father) becomes ours. In this sense Christ's being 'for us' in his death is an act of solidarity in which he sacrifices himself so that no one subject to the fear of death (Heb 2.15) and to the forces of sin stands outside the circle of restored children that God gathers through his Son. But for this death, but for this searching love of Christ that pursues us in the dark corners of the far country, we would not be able to stand once again, as we do, as beloved sons and daughters in the house of the Father. All this and more than this is understood when we say that Christ sacrificed himself 'for us'.

This is a wonderfully rich way of bringing together Incarnation and salvation, focusing on the theme of Christ's solidarity with and commitment to human beings who have lost their way. But more should be said: there is a particular significance in the fact that the climax of his journey into the far country is a death at the hands of brutal human beings. This matters: think for a moment of how different our account of Christ and God would be if Christ had died of natural causes after a ripe old age, surrounded by grieving disciples. If his life had unfolded in this way, he would have been regarded as a teacher of wisdom rather than as the saviour who by his sacrificial death opens the Gates of Mercy. His impact on us and our relation to God would then be pedagogic, exemplary and moral, the one among us who 'gets things right' and shows us how to do the same.

It is surely significant that a strong current in our contemporary Life of Jesus Research is the interpretation of Jesus as a teacher of subversive wisdom who challenges the constraints of conventional living, a Palestinian gadfly more grounded in the Socratic method than in Torah fidelity. Our destabilised culture is currently so uncertain about how to be a good man or woman, how to be real and holy, moral and secure, stable and authentic, strong and honourable, that we are desperate to find a way of avoiding the manipulations of our culture by a uncovering a pre-modern depth of wisdom. Jesus, at

the hands of some American interpreters, fits the description of such a teacher. That by portraying him in this way they downplay his sense of bringing God's relation to Israel to a climactic pitch is something they are prepared to accept; that they insistently marginalise the aspect of Christ's self-offering in death makes their interpretation of the historical Jesus inadequate not only for historical purposes but also for Christian faith.<sup>2</sup>

That Christ dies violently is significant: as Gabriel Daly puts it, 'so pervasive of creation is innocent suffering that not even God's Son can escape it'.<sup>3</sup> In the Biblical narrative, the first thing that takes place after Adam and Eve leave the garden is that their first child Cain kills Abel his younger brother. It is, if you like, the archetypal act of human history, the killing of an innocent one who makes an offering acceptable to God.<sup>4</sup> Thus Christ's death at the hands of his executioners re-enacts the decisive moment in our early history when the one who is innocent is killed. That this should happen to the divine Son of God makes Golgotha the moment at which something absolutely fundamental, and therefore elusive, comes to light in the drama between God who is *for us* and human beings who resist God. That Christ is killed by human beings matters because both God and human beings behave *in character*. The characteristic response of God, if we may be so bold as to say this, is to permit human beings to express against his Son a will to do away with him and to turn that very moment into a moment when God's love becomes an effective healing reality in the world. On the other hand, the characteristic response of human beings to the climactic moment when the Son of God comes among us, embodying divine goodness and love, is to kill him: a dramatic statement which should shock us every Good Friday.

No Christian stands as a neutral observer while the Passion is being read. I take very seriously the teaching of the Council of Trent that not Jews but (Christian) sinners 'were the author and the minister of all the sufferings that the divine Redeemer endured...Our crime in this case is greater in us than in the Jews... When we deny him by our deeds, we in some way seem to lay violent hands on him'.<sup>5</sup> This teaching means that I cannot think of this death without acknowledging my role in bringing it about. Through my sins I cause the death of Christ, and Christ's death in turn brings forgiveness of the very sins which cause it. This circular sentence mirrors the strange paradox that when we are most ourselves, God is most God and the sign of this encounter is high on the walls of our churches.

This leads us directly into the second approach to Christ's death as a sacrifice in relation to human sin: it is caused by sin and it is for sin. The well-spring of the interpretation of Christ's death by the earliest communities is an awareness of two things which continue to guide Christian reflection. Firstly, that although he is killed by others, the core of the mystery is that Christ willingly offers himself to the Father. He is not sacrificed by others; Christ charges his own death with spiritual significance, and whatever meaning it has is to be found there, in what takes place in his mind and heart, and not in what his executioners intend. The second insight is that the shedding of blood on Calvary Mount as an offering to God is analogous to what takes place on the Temple Mount when, as an offering to God, blood (the symbol of life) is taken into the presence of God in the Holy of Holies by the High Priest for the atonement of sins. Who first made the imaginative connection between the two events? We cannot be absolutely sure because it is one of those areas of overlap between complex traditions, but the smart money says Jesus himself.

It is very hard to think that Jesus did not include his death in what he does for human beings: the Gospels, in spite of the different significances they see in his death, are uniform in insisting that the first interpreter of the meaning of his death was Jesus himself and only modern exegetes locked into positions of methodological scepticism seriously entertain otherwise. The most cogent account of Jesus' understanding of himself and his mission is that he intended to bring about the restoration of Israel, to prepare a remnant within Israel, a community (*ecclesia*: Mt 16.16) to which all the nations would come and find mercy, and that the image he used to convey this is that he understood himself to be the Son, the master-builder of God's Temple.<sup>6</sup> Hence the significance of what is called the 'Temple Riddle': 'Destroy this Temple and in three days I will rebuild it,' the accusation at his trial, significantly following his 'cleansing' of the Temple, leading to his death.

If the Jerusalem Temple was the location of God's atoning action through the High Priest who enters his presence, then the final Temple that Jesus builds – he clearly expects that the Jerusalem Temple will be destroyed – must be the location of the definitive atonement of the sins of the community summoned there (both Jew and Gentile). This Temple, as he says, is to become 'a house of prayer for all nations' (Mk 11.17). (You will

notice again the dynamic contained in that word ‘for’.) While the Pharisees envisaged Israel as sanctified by the faithful observance of the prescriptions of the Torah, thus endowing Israel with the holiness proper to Temple purity, Jesus draws upon another aspect of Temple worship, that of the ritual on the Day of Atonement, and comes to understand that the Temple of restored Israel is to be constructed through the shedding of his blood, his entering the presence of God to make an offering for the sins of those who are to be sanctified (everyone). Through Christ’s self-offering in death, the sins of the world will be atoned and those who are near (Jews) and those who are far off (Gentiles) will be brought together to form the definitive community of salvation that God builds, breaking down the dividing walls between them. Christ ‘creates in one new man instead of the two, so making peace and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross’ (Eph 2.16). God presses this atonement on a world that has difficulty construing divine love.

There are fragments of this Temple imagery throughout the New Testament: even the First Epistle of John, a work not strongly preoccupied with soteriology, says that ‘the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin’ (1.7). What is evoked here but the Day of Atonement? Even more closely evoking the Temple ritual, the Epistle says, ‘..not that we loved God, but he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice (*hilasmon*) for our sins’ (4.10). The Greek word refers to the verb to ‘expiate or make propitiation’ and another form of it occurs even more dramatically in Romans 3.25 when Paul, again quoting a formula from the Jerusalem mother church (where else would these themes be retained and cherished as a memory of Jesus’ own interpretation of his death?), says of Christ that ‘God brought him forward as an expiation (*hilasterion*) by his blood’.

*Hilasterion* is the Greek word for the mercy seat, the golden lid of the ark of the covenant (Ex.25.17-22) that is sprinkled with blood by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. It is where God is: ‘I appear in the cloud above the mercy seat’ (Lev 16.2). In the formula that Paul is quoting, the implication is clear: Christ is now the mercy seat, the locus of definitive expiation of sin. It is only a short step from this to the rich themes of the Epistle to the Hebrews which presents Jesus as the High Priest who enters the divine presence, taking with him his own blood as an offering to God, there to be received by God and to become in person the source of final atonement.

If this approach is correct, and I become more and more convinced that these are the features of how Christ understands his death, then Hebrews' amplified treatment of Christ as High Priest springs originally from Jesus' sense of himself as the one whose self-offering in death will constitute humanity to become the sanctified presence of God. And within this are the germs of the profound relationship between the death of Jesus, the Eucharist and the Church. What happens on Golgotha spreads through the human race with the ease of divine goodness and the power of grace as anyone who attends Mass knows already. This death happens 'for you and for all, so that sins may be forgiven'. And as we also know, the locus of salvation is the Body of Christ in its three-fold form: the sacrificed and risen Body that is the mercy seat, the throne of grace (Heb 4.16); the Eucharistic body, the bread of the presence; and the ecclesial body, the Temple of divine mercy for all. All this is what we mean when we say that 'Christ died for us'.

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<sup>1</sup> K.Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2 (T.&T.Clark, 1958), 23.

<sup>2</sup> John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg are the best known writers on this theme.

<sup>3</sup> Gabriel Daly, *Creation and Redemption* (Gill & Macmillan, 1988), 213.

<sup>4</sup> This gives rise to the patristic and medieval idea that the Church begins with the person of Abel, 'Ecclesia ab Abel' because Abel the shepherd, is a type of Christ. The Church then has its roots in the violence of human pre-history.

<sup>5</sup> *Roman Catechism* I, 5, 11 ; quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (589).

<sup>6</sup> This view is elaborated in Ben Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (SCM, 1979) and has been influential on the work of E.P.Sanders and N.T.Wright whose book on the historical Jesus, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God, Vol 2* (SPCK, 1996) is highly recommended. A summary of Meyer can be found in J.McDade, 'Jesus: Peasant Messiah or Master-Builder?', *The Month* (November 1995), 439-45.