

## The Crucifixion

Penal substitution is the idea, prevalent since the Reformation, that Christ was punished on the cross for our sins. It sounds normal to those of us who have grown up with the familiar hymns and preaching of the last few centuries. It is not, in fact, a terribly Christian notion, and it is not until the 16<sup>th</sup> century that it takes much hold in Christian teaching as anything other than a passing image. Nowhere in the New Testament, for example, do we read of Christ being punished for sins. The problem is not the idea of substitution – that Christ takes our place – it is the problem of Punishment, as if God's punishing the innocent could ever be salvific.

When the New Testament and the Christian Fathers talk of Christ in our place, the language they adopt is that of sacrifice. This is not punishment language – sacrificed animals were not being punished, they were being offered, and what was being offered in them was life. The key to the death of Christ is not to forget his life, and so the key to the doctrine of redemption is not to forget the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation.

Human beings are made in the image of God; they are made to imitate the Trinity, the life of God which is nothing other than the perfect offering of love. Human beings are not very good at this imitation. Instead of being selfless, they are self-centred, instead of life being nothing other than giving, it is all too apt to be nothing other than taking. In the miracle of the incarnation, God takes our nature upon him in order to transform it, in order to offer for us the perfect human life which we are unable to give for ourselves. The life of Christ is then the life of the Trinity lived out on earth, a life which is wholly and perfectly given in love. As Paul observes in Philippians, this involves giving himself in entirety, giving himself to the point of death, and beyond. The life of Christ and the death of Christ are, in that sense, one and the same – they are the perfect life perfectly given, poured out, in love for you and for me.

It is sometimes maintained that we need to hold that crude punitive account of Christ's death in order to take seriously the reality of human sin. Such a notion entirely misunderstands the doctrine of the incarnation. It is precisely because of the seriousness of human sin, precisely because we are not able to overcome it for ourselves, that God takes our sin upon him, that God crucifies our sin by offering not a flawed and diminished human life, but a perfect life, a life with nothing to gain, a life which, in that sense, is as selfless as it can possibly be. The reality of human suffering which God embraces is essential, but this suffering is not about appeasing divine wrath or satisfying punitive justice, it is about accepting our state in all its mess and violence and pain and sharing it, transforming it in love whilst continuing to embrace it as long as you and I and the rest of the

world remain efficient at hating and at killing one another. The cross of Christ is the source of all life not because of some strange transaction, but because your life and mine is being offered in an act of perfect love which transforms our nature from being merely human to being once again the children of God, made in his image. This transformation, this divinisation, is the decisive act of God – God changes human life by offering human life. On that cross sin and death are once and for all defeated, because they are drowned in the ocean of God's love, an act we imitate in baptism. And the truly extraordinary thing is that our determination to go back to sin, to continue with the hate and the lies and the violence, cannot reverse the victory of the crucified God, because it is precisely in embracing evil and suffering that the love of God is revealed in all its human weakness, in all its divine power.