

EVANGELISATION AND SALVATION 3

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3. St Paul: compassionate solidarity

Welcome

In the first presentation, the flaws of the atonement model were exposed. We went back to the Jesus of history to identify how he himself saw his destiny and eventual death. Now we continue the exploration of the New Testament, beginning with St Paul. The sequence of steps we will follow is this:

1. Persecution
2. Encounter with the risen Jesus
3. Galatians
4. Further thoughts
5. Jesus of history?
6. The Joy of the Gospel?
7. And so...?

From now on, the presentations will all conclude with steps 5, 6 and 7. It means we will be asking each time three questions:

- (i) How does this teaching of the paschal mystery “fit” with the historical Jesus?
- (ii) Does this developed understanding relate to the teaching of Pope Francis, especially in his *The Joy of the Gospel*?
- (iii) Can we learn anything from it on how to be “church” today?

It was a gift, a grace, that a person of St Paul's energy, intelligence and faith was “available” to the Christian movement at its inception. In an interview with Joe Duffy once I was asked if Christianity would have been different if St Paul had not existed? The answer of course is yes. St Paul is a life-long project, so in one presentation we can only offer so much. Where to begin? The big event for him was his encounter with the risen Lord, his so called conversion. To grasp the significance of this encounter, it is vital to start one step behind that with his persecution of the first followers of The Way. Why did a gifted young theologian take it upon himself to undertake so untypically Jewish a task as to persecute?

Persecution

In my response to this question, partly I will base it on verifiable facts and partly on reasonable speculation.

1. Paul was a Pharisee, an apocalyptic Jew, full of devotion to God's will (cf. Phil 3:5-6)
2. Paul was informed about Christian teaching (as usual)
3. Paul objected on the basis of Deut 21:22-23
4. Paul objected: speaking falsely of God (cf. 1 Cor 15:15)
5. Paul objected: spreading (cf. Acts 5:33-40a)
6. Paul objected: poaching the God-Fearers (cf. Acts 10; 13:16, 26, 43, 50; 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18:6-9)

Paul's personal background counts for a great deal. He was not only a Pharisee but like many at the time, including Jesus, he was an apocalyptic Jew. This means someone unhappy, waiting for God to establish his kingdom, and at the same time someone faithful, steadfast in discovering and doing the will of God. The later Paul is always informed about situations before he confronts them. We may safely conclude that the younger Paul was also informed about the followers of The Way and what they were saying about Jesus: he is risen, he is the Messiah, he is Lord. The solid basis for his objection to this is found in a text in Deuteronomy 21, as follows:

If a person commits a sin punishable by death and is executed, and you hang the corpse on a tree, his body must not remain all night on the tree; instead you must make certain you bury him that same day, for the one who is left exposed on a tree is cursed by God. You must not defile your land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance. (Deuteronomy 21:22–23)

This text has a background:

1. Only enemies were supposed to be publicly exposed (Josh 8:29; 10:26; 1 Sam 31:10; Esth 9:6-14).
2. Exposure (with the risk of becoming carrion — cf. 2 Sam 21:10; Ezek 39:17-20) was an extra degradation of the perpetrator.
3. It is explained that such a criminal is already under God's curse.
4. This law, imposing same-day burial, sets limits on the practice.

It was also “available” at the time, as we can see from the Dead Sea Scrolls, which offer an expanded version.

If a man is a traitor against his people and gives them up to a foreign nation, so doing evil to his people, you are to hang him on a tree until dead. On the testimony of two or three witnesses he will be put to death, and they themselves shall hang him on the tree. If a man is convicted of a capital crime and flees to the nations, cursing his people and the children of Israel, you are to hang him, also, upon a tree until dead. But you must not let their bodies remain on the tree overnight; you shall most certainly bury them that very day. Indeed, anyone hung on a tree is accursed of God and men, but you are not to defile the land that I am about to give you as an inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:22–23).

For a believing Pharisee like Paul, this is simply God's opinion and *therefore* Jesus cannot be the Messiah, for the Messiah will be a blessing not a curse.

Paul's other objections would be related to a mixture of ordinary religious practice and experience. What the Christians are saying is false—very like Paul's own sensitivity in 1 Cor 15:15. Of course, there is no need to oppose a religious movement which is not a threat. But Christianity was a threat. It was growing. Finally, mostly like took its earliest converts from the God-fearers—those gentiles attracted to Judaism and the very same poor from which Pharisees hoped to make converts. For the reasons sketched here, Paul opposed the followers of The Way. All of this changed radically once Paul encountered the Risen Lord.

Encounter

The fullest version of this encounter is found in Galatian, and even that is somewhat opaque:

Gal 1:11 Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. 12 For I did not receive it or learn it from any human source; instead I received it by a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Gal 1:13 For you have heard of my former way of life in Judaism, how I was savagely persecuting the church of God and trying to destroy it. 14 I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my nation, and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. 15 But when the one who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace was pleased 16 to reveal his Son in me so that I could preach him among the Gentiles, I did not go to ask advice from any human being, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before me, but right away I departed to Arabia, and then returned to Damascus.

It was years later when Paul wrote this account and it lets us in on his own appropriation of the event. As he tells it, it resembles the call of the prophet Jeremiah and Paul does see himself as a bearer of God's word just as the earlier prophets were. Secondly, he uses the language of apocalyptic very directly: when God was pleased *to reveal* his Son to me. This is not accidental. For Paul, the revelation of Christ was part of God's final plan for salvation. Paul then faced a paradox: according to the Word of God, Jesus was cursed; according to Paul's direct experience, Jesus was risen, the Messiah and Lord.

Galatians 3

It may be helpful to read this passage carefully:

Gal 3:6 Just as Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, 7 so then, understand that those who believe are the sons of Abraham. 8 And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, proclaimed the gospel to Abraham ahead of time, saying, "All the nations will be blessed in you." 9 So then those who believe are blessed along with Abraham the believer. 10 For all who rely on doing the works of the law are under a curse, because it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not keep on doing everything written in the book of the law." 11 Now it is clear no one is justified before God by the law, because the righteous one will live by faith. 12 But the law is not based on faith, but the one who does the works of the law will live by them. 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (because it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree") 14 in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham would come to the Gentiles, so that we could receive the promise of the Spirit by faith.

The passage needs careful interpretation:

1. The covenant (and the Law) entailed blessings and curses.
2. Curse, in this context, means exclusion from the covenant blessings, having the status of an outsider
3. The manner of Jesus' death placed him "outside the Law" - according to Deut 21:22-23
4. This was God's intention and purpose...but why?

Paul, the great teacher of faith, *knows* Jesus is reason; he also knows was Jesus “cursed,” that is, placed beyond the covenant blessings, outside the Law. Why? The only answer a believer can give is that this was the intention of God.

There were several purposes in this journey beyond the Law, some of which are significant for us.

1. To show that the time of the (ritual) Law was over
2. To bring to fulfilment of the promise beyond the ethnic boundaries of Judaism
3. To include the Gentiles...how?
4. By going outside the law and becoming an outsider himself

Simply put, because being a curse meant in covenant terms to be placed outside the covenant, Jesus being there was God’s outreach beyond the ethnic limits of Judaism to all human kind. A glance ahead to Ephesians shows how well this teaching of Paul was appreciated in second generation Paulinism.

For he is our peace, the one who made both groups into one and who destroyed the middle wall of partition, the hostility, when he nullified in his flesh the law of commandments in decrees. He did this to create in himself one new man out of two, thus making peace, and to reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by which the hostility has been killed. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, so that through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. (Ephesians 2:14–18)

As we shall see further on, this is completely coherent with the teaching and ministry of Jesus. It is time to gather in some contrasting results.

Negatively:

1. Paul does not view the death of Jesus as a punishment
2. Paul does not view the death of Jesus as a propitiatory sacrifice
3. He does use the language of redemption—but not in the sense developed in the western theology of redemption as penal substitution

Positively:

1. Jesus’ death was an act of compassionate solidarity
2. God’s response of resurrection means (a) the power of death is over and (b) the power of sin is over
3. Previously, God put in place the “mechanism” of the law; in Christ, he has put in place a “bridge relationship” through which, by participation, we may finally live fully as the children of God
4. Thus the radical incapacity of the Law is bypassed

Further thoughts

These deep insights are taken further in a few significant texts to which I will quickly allude. In an earlier paragraph in Galatians (not without its opacities), Paul writes:

Gal 2:15 We are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, 16 yet we know that no one is justified by the works of the law but by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by the faithfulness

of Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified. 17 But if while seeking to be justified in Christ we ourselves have also been found to be sinners, is Christ then one who encourages sin? Absolutely not! 18 But if I build up again those things I once destroyed, I demonstrate that I am one who breaks God's law. 19 For through the law I died to the law so that I may live to God. 20 I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So the life I now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not set aside God's grace, because if righteousness could come through the law, then Christ died for nothing! (NET translation)

This is complex. Let me draw attention to two things. For the only time in his writings, Paul says the Son of God *loved him*. This is a dimension of the encounter which did not emerge earlier but it does here. Secondly, the bridge relationship God has now put in place consists of the faithfulness of Jesus. We will see more in a moment.

Two passages—again not without difficulty—illustrate the universal embrace of what happened in Jesus's death and resurrection. Usually, Paul goes back to Abraham but in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5, he goes back to Adam.

So also it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living person"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. However, the spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man is from the earth, made of dust; the second man is from heaven. Like the one made of dust, so too are those made of dust, and like the one from heaven, so too those who are heavenly. And just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, let us also bear the image of the man of heaven. (1 Corinthians 15:45–49)

So then, just as sin entered the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all people because all sinned—Consequently, just as condemnation for all people came through one transgression, so too through the one righteous act came righteousness leading to life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of one man many will be made righteous. (Romans 5:12, 18–19)

Paul's purpose here is to illustrate universal need matched by universal salvation. His overall purpose is overwhelmingly positive as may be seen from the intervening verses:

Rom 5:13 for before the law was given, sin was in the world, but there is no accounting for sin when there is no law. 14 Yet death reigned from Adam until Moses even over those who did not sin in the same way that Adam (who is a type of the coming one) transgressed. 15 But the gracious gift is not like the transgression. For if the many died through the transgression of the one man, how much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one man Jesus Christ multiply to the many! 16 And the gift is not like the one who sinned. For judgment, resulting from the one transgression, led to condemnation, but the gracious gift from the many failures led to justification. 17 For if, by the transgression of the one man, death reigned through the one, how much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one, Jesus Christ!

There is one final text for Paul—also difficult—which helps a great deal. To illustrate what is at stake, the text is given in two versions.

Rom 3:21 But now apart from the law the righteousness of God (which is attested by the law and the prophets) has been disclosed— 22 namely, the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. 24 But they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. 25 God publicly displayed him at his death as the mercy seat accessible through faith. This was to demonstrate his righteousness, because God in his forbearance had passed over the sins previously committed. 26 This was also to demonstrate his righteousness in the present time, so that he would be just and the justifier of the one who lives because of Jesus' faithfulness.

NET Bible

Rom 3:21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

ESV Bible

In the opinion of many, the NET version is much more accurate. It teaches that the faithfulness of Jesus disclosed both God's righteousness and God's mercy. We may summarise as follows:

1. Paul has a specific interpretation of Jesus' death and resurrection: (i) compassionate solidarity (ii) the outreach of love (iii) disclosure of God's faithfulness
2. This matches the teaching and actions of Jesus
3. It also matches his death, as he himself becomes what he proclaimed
4. If we use "sacrifice" at all, it refers to a communion sacrifice, with emphasis on Jesus' costly faithfulness
5. Neither for Jesus nor for Paul does it mean atonement sacrifice

Jesus of history?

This teaching of Paul matches the ministry and teaching of Jesus himself. In summary form, it looks like this:

1. Ministry: "Those who are healthy don't need a physician, but those who are sick do. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mark 2:17; many examples)
2. Actions: Sabbath, tax-collectors, prostitutes, lepers etc.
3. But especially: open table fellowship.
4. Destiny: rejected (Mk 8:31); condemned, handed over (Mk 10:33);

5. But especially: I tell you the truth, I will no longer drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” (Mark 14:25);
6. He said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Take this cup away from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” (Mark 14:36)

The compassionate solidarity of Jesus on the cross matches closely the compassion and solidarity of Jesus in his ministry. In this view, the death of Jesus is not distinct and detached from his ministry, as in the Anselmian view. On the contrary, it is all one piece.

The Joy of the Gospel?

In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis reflects upon solidarity, looking at it is socially and economically, of course, but grounded in the solidarity we have in Christ.

Today, when the networks and means of human communication have made unprecedented advances, we sense the challenge of finding and sharing a “mystique” of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage. (EG 87)

Solidarity is a spontaneous reaction by those who recognise that the social function of property and the universal destination of goods are realities which come before private property. ... These convictions and habits of solidarity, when they are put into practice, open the way to other structural transformations and make them possible. (EG 189)

Being Church means being God’s people, in accordance with the great plan of his fatherly love. This means that we are to be God’s leaven in the midst of humanity. It means proclaiming and bringing God’s salvation into our world, which often goes astray and needs to be encouraged, given hope and strengthened on the way. The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel. (EG 114)

And so...?

In the first presentation, the absence of good contemporary language for what happened for us in Jesus was noted. At this point, we may ask if the alternative language of Paul offers us some avenues? I would summarise Paul in four words, each with a contemporary resonance:

1. Compassion
2. Solidarity
3. Faithfulness
4. Relationship

I conclude with four questions:

1. Do these teachings of Paul speak to us today?
2. What kind of disciple should I be?
3. What kind of church should we be?