

EVANGELISATION AND SALVATION 1

Kieran J. O'Mahony, OSA

www.tarsus.ie

1. Evangelisation and Salvation

You may recall that the prophet Jeremiah was given six commands as follows:

“See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” (Jer 1:10)

Notice that poor Jeremiah has four negatives and two positives. For my presentations, I'm going to do a bit of destruction first and then construction. The proportion, however, is different: one destructive and four constructive. It means that the presentations are all of a piece. It would be a pity if a participant heard only the first one; conversely, it might not make sense to hear the last three without the foundation of the first. In a word, the five presentations are interrelated and, I hope, form a constructive whole. In any case, they are intended to provoke a conversation.

Overall plan

In outline, this is what I want to look at in these presentations:

1. Evangelisation and salvation
2. The historical Jesus and his destiny
3. Model 1: Compassionate solidarity (Paul)
4. Model 2: Serving love (John)
5. Model 3: Communion (Hebrews)

As you can see, presentations two through five are constructive. In presentation one, I want to examine a critical dimension of proclamation today.

Sequence

The title of the first presentation is “Evangelisation and salvation.” The steps to be taken are these:

1. Evangelisation today
2. Classical “models”
3. Strengths and weaknesses
4. Towards a new understanding
5. The Joy of the Gospel

Evangelisation today

The concrete task of proclaiming the good news of salvation is shaped by several contexts.

The social and cultural context is marked by several features: secularism, evangelical atheism, globalisation of outlook, paralysis of choice, the breakdown of traditions and societal practices.

Within the church, there are specific features. Always in the background you have the abuse crisis and the handling of it. It will rumble on for many years more and every so

often some new and ghastly revelation will rock us. There is a crisis in handing on the faith. In spite of specialised teacher training, great commitment in schools, generous support from parishes and so on, handing on the faith is, for the most part, simply not working. There are lots of reasons for this, such as those mentioned in the previous paragraph.

There is one further dimension to the context which passes unnoticed but which is at the centre of our proclamation. Simply put, we *used* to have an account of redemption, a very powerful account, classically called atonement or among the reformers penal substitution. It *was* very powerful: it accounted for the origins of humanity, sin and evil, guilt, the incarnation, the cross, the church, baptism and the Eucharist and so on.

It is my long-held conviction that this classical account no longer speaks to us or works at all. If this is true, the consequences are far-reaching. When we come to the proclamation of what happened for us in “the great events that gave us new life in Christ”, we don’t know any more what to say. One way to check that in your own ministry would be to ask yourself what was it exactly that you preached last Easter, in particular, on Good Friday and the Easter Vigil.

Models of redemption

To explain what I mean, we will now explore three models of redemption, which I will call the classical model, the satisfaction model and the moral example model. Most attention will be given to the second one.

The classical model

By the classical model, we mean the one commonly available in the patristic period. The easiest thing to do is to follow one proponent, St Irenaeus of Lyons. In brief, it looks like this:

1. Also known as: the Recapitulation Theory
2. Originated with Irenaeus (125-202 AD).
3. He sees Christ as the new Adam, who systematically undoes what Adam did. Thus, where Adam was disobedient concerning God's edict concerning the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, Christ was obedient even to death on the wood of a tree.
4. Irenaeus is the first to draw comparisons between Eve and Mary, contrasting the faithlessness of the former with the faithfulness of the latter.
5. In addition to reversing the wrongs done by Adam, Irenaeus thinks of Christ as “recapitulating” or “summing up” human life.

An image can speak loudly, so here’s a late interpretation of the recapitulation theory in art. It comes from the former Church of the St Saviour in Chora, Istanbul.

Image

Satisfaction

The best known proponent of the satisfaction model is Anselm of Canterbury. In brief, here is his teaching:

1. The Satisfaction (or Commercial) Theory

2. The formulator of this theory was the medieval theologian Anselm of Canterbury (1034-1109), in his book, *Cur Deus Homo* (Why the God Man?).
3. In his view, God's offended honour and dignity could only be satisfied by the sacrifice of the God-man, Jesus Christ.
4. Anselm offered some biblical evidence that the atonement was not a ransom paid by God to the devil but rather a debt paid to God on behalf of sinners.
5. Anselm's work established a foundation for the Western understanding of redemption and, more specifically, the Catholic understanding of Calvary, the Mass and the priesthood.
6. Anselm's work established a foundation for the Protestant Reformation, specifically the understanding of justification by faith.

Again, an image may capture the message very well. Here's a still from Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*.

Image

The satisfaction theory won widespread allegiance and became *the* explanation of the Western Church (the Churches of the East never used it). Even after the Reformation, when the Western Church split over so many issues, the satisfaction theory of atonement held its place in all the different traditions. It was even elaborated further or better accentuated by the Reformers, when it came to be called *Penal Substitution*.

Penal substitution

1. Also known as: the Penal-Substitution Theory.
2. This view was formulated by the 16th century Reformers as an extension of Anselm's Satisfaction theory.
3. According to the Reformers: Anselm's theory was correct in introducing the satisfaction aspect of Christ's work and its necessity, however the Reformers saw it as insufficient because it was referenced to God's honour rather than his justice and holiness and was couched more in terms of a commercial transaction than a penal substitution.
4. This Reformed view says simply that Christ died for man, in man's place, taking his sins and bearing them for him.
5. The bearing of man's sins takes the punishment for them and sets the believer free from the penal demands of the law: The righteousness of the law and the holiness of God are satisfied by this substitution.
6. In Catholicism, this further understanding is found in the Jansenist tradition and in a great deal of popular piety.

Moral example

Moral example came into its own in the period of Liberal Protestantism. Its roots, however, were medieval. In brief, this is what it teaches:

1. Also known as: the Moral-Example Theory (or Moral-Influence Theory).
2. Christ died to influence mankind toward moral improvement.
3. This theory denies that Christ died to satisfy any principle of divine justice, but teaches instead that His death was designed to greatly impress mankind with a sense of God's love, resulting in softening their hearts and leading them to repentance.

4. Thus, the Atonement is not directed towards God with the purpose of maintaining His justice, but towards man with the purpose of persuading him to right action.
5. Formulated by Peter Abelard (1079-1142) partially in reaction against Anselm's Satisfaction theory, this view was held by the 16th century Socinians. Later versions of it can be found later in F. D. E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Horace Bushnell (1802-1876).

These accounts of redemption have each had their period of influence. What are the strengths and weaknesses?

Strengths and weaknesses

Firstly, here is a chart outlining the different characteristics of each model.

	Structure	Sin	Salvation	Incarnation	God
Classical “from God to man”	God effects it No satisfaction All is grace	God’s triumph over sin, death and the devil, as hostile objective powers	The victory of the risen Christ over the hostile powers is continued in the work of the Holy Spirit	God-in-Christ reconciles the world to himself; Incarnation and atonement are one	God in conflict with Evil; yet, sovereign creator, whose costly love overcomes his wrath and effects reconciliation
Satisfaction “from man to God”	God effects it Legal satisfaction Christ as Man	Sin is indeed grave, but essentially moralistic and subjective	Satisfaction with the death; no place for the resurrection; separation from the life of Jesus	Christ, as human, makes atonement for human beings; the incarnation (Jesus as God and man) is not at the heart of it	Separation of God’s justice and his mercy; once the justice is “satisfied”, God’s mercy can be released.
Moral example “from man to man”	God is not agent; It happens in us through conversion and amendment of life	Sin as infirmity; Very weak on the radical hostility of God to evil and sin	Christ is a perfect example, the “Ideal Human”; harmony and self-realisation	Emphasis on the human nature of Jesus as a pattern of behaviour; incarnation = the revelation of God and not that God redeems us in Christ.	Simple idea of God’s unchanging love, with no sense of hostility or struggle.

Looking only at Anselm, the checklist of weaknesses is fatal to its potential for today.

1. Depends on the historicity of Genesis 2-3
2. Depends on a feudal idea of God
3. Redemption (buying back) requires a price (punishment)
4. Redemption is completed with the death of Jesus
5. The resurrection has no place (the best miracle etc.)
6. It has no connection with the life and ministry of Jesus
7. The picture of God who cannot be merciful until he receives legal satisfaction is unappealing and unconvincing

If I were to emphasise one particular weakness, I would single out the lack of connection with the life and ministry of Jesus. Nowhere does Jesus speak of his death as a remedy for Adam's sin. Nowhere is his death seen as a punishment. We might even say the contrary. He preached and lived a God of compassion. It is simply not the case that this God of compassion turned on him towards the end of his life and made him pay the price for the sin of Adam and the sins of all subsequent human beings. If true, this Biblical critique deals a deathblow to Anselm's theology.

Towards a new understanding

"The great events that gave us new life in Christ" stand at the heart of Christian proclamation. This is true in a radical way, for example, in St Paul. Strictly speaking, he is interested *only* in the death and resurrection of Jesus. We have, in my opinion, largely abandoned satisfaction theories but we have replaced them with very little or nothing and certainly nothing enjoying a consensus or nothing as powerful in its day as Anselm's account.

It means in some ways that things are worse than we imagine. Not only is belief as such under pressure, not only is the credibility of the church at a low ebb, not only is haemorrhage of the faithful seemingly unstoppable, but also Christians are not longer able to talk about salvation in a way which resonates with people hearts and lives in the culture of today. If we cannot talk about these events in engaging and resonant ways, what *is* the content of our proclamation?

A particular challenge is presented by the liturgy. Given the classicising tendency of the liturgy, the old understanding is embedded in our prayers. This is true of the Roman Missal. It is even more true of the Book of Common Prayer. In other words, the crisis is across the traditions of the Western Church.

What would a renewed understanding of salvation look like? Here are some key features:

1. Taking seriously evil, sin and death
2. Joining up the incarnation, ministry, teaching and the events of salvation
3. Offering a consistent picture of God acting on our behalf
4. Uniting the death and the resurrection as "constitutive" of salvation
5. Rooted in the teaching of the New Testament
6. Rooted in Jesus' own understanding of his destiny

Working as a biblical scholar and theologian, the last point is a key one for me. Theories can say anything we wish them to. Why attach yourself to a particular one unless it is somehow grounded in Jesus' own understanding of his destiny? To this very topic, we devote the next presentation, entitled "The historical Jesus and his destiny."

The Joy of the Gospel

Jesus' whole life, his way of dealing with the poor, his actions, his integrity, his simple daily acts of generosity, and finally his complete self-giving, is precious and reveals the mystery of his divine life. (EG 265)