

The Concept of Atonement

The Christian Concept of Atonement

This article was written and presented by Rev. Philip Ind for a Christian contribution to our Shared Prayers program, presented at the Cookham Dean Church on 22 February 2007

The Christian Church developed from the roots of a Jewish Sect whose members believed that Jesus of Nazareth is “The Anointed One” in Hebrew the Messiah and in Greek, (the language of the Early Church), the Christ. In the Jewish Scriptures, the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings, there are allusions to a Messiah who is descended from the Priest-King David and who will, as God’s vice-regent, restore Israel under the rule of God. This shoot from the family tree of David would establish ‘The Kingdom of God’.

The concept of Atonement, then, has its origins in the Jewish Temple cult of Jerusalem. The underlying idea starts from the belief that God’s creation is essentially ‘very good’ when the whole creation is ‘At One’, living in perfect harmony with the Lord of Life. Every one and every thing experiences a state of blessing and fulfilment. Disease, conflict, inequity, subservience, violence and suffering and all their causes are healed and resolved and the natural world will flourish in ecological balance, while humanity will also flourish in harmony with nature.

The ancient seers and mystics then asked what caused the dis-harmony and suffering we see and experience? They rejected the myths of Assyria and Babylon which described a world where Good and Evil are engaged in a perpetual wrestling match as equals. They believed in One God who had established a moral law to which mankind was covenanted in obedience. God’s Law was revealed to Moses and mankind’s welfare was understood to be dependent upon perfect obedience to Divine Law including obedience to the rules laid down for the performance of religious ritual by the priests in the Temple.

The gift of freewill to love and obey (or to rebel against) God they believed has led to the possibility of sin, disorder and suffering. Their Temple festivals included provision of a ritual for penitence and forgiveness of both deliberate sin and sins committed in ignorance. This was the festival of “The Atonement” which was linked to Harvest Festival and to the Covenant Renewal ceremony. Then the Law was read aloud publicly and the pilgrims in the Temple signified their acceptance of the Covenant by replying, Amen Amen. This was repeated annually until the Temple was razed to the ground in 70AD by Vespasian and Titus. But the Temple was under the control of High Priests who were not of the house of Aaron. They were appointed by the Roman Prefect and were not of pure Jewish blood, consequently many Jews looked forward to a day when the Temple worship would be purified and in the mean time many formed movements which attempted to live under the Law without reference to the Temple. Some saw the future destruction of the Temple as a judgement from God. Among those who were deeply critical were Jesus and his disciples.

The description of the rite of Atonement can be read in Leviticus 16 (one of the books of 'The Law of Moses', the first five books of what Christians call the Old Testament). The barebones of the ceremony go thus:

the sanctuary of the temple, “The Holiest of Holies” had three high walls, probably covered with gold-leaf and decorated with pomigranates and palm trees. Its front had an elaborately embroidered curtain to screen whatever went on inside from public view. Inside there was one piece of furniture 'The Ark of the Covenant'. At one time it

was the repository for the tablets of stone on which, according to tradition, were written the Ten Commandments 'by the finger of God'. In later years it was empty and was often referred to as 'The mercy seat', God's throne on Earth, decorated with six-winged cherubim. In the Hebrew mind this was the point where Heaven and Earth meet and overlap. It was surrounded by an extensive sacred enclosure or courtyard where the pilgrims gathered for worship.

Each year on the Day of Atonement the people of Israel would try to make the pilgrimage to the Jerusalem Temple for the sacrificial rite. It involved an act of confession and penitence for the occasions when they had knowingly broken the Law of Moses causing chaos and suffering and the Priest-King, as representative of the People of the Covenant, made restitution by sacramentally placing the sins of the people on the head of an unblemished kid (the scapegoat) which was driven out of the city into the desert, the place where, it was believed, evil spirits were driven into exile. There the kid was then driven over a cliff to destruction. A second kid or lamb was sacrificed on the altar and part of the blood was taken in a bowl into the Holy of Holies and sprinkled at the foot of the Mercy-seat by the High Priest alone. This happened only once each year. The rest of the blood was sprinkled on the people as a sign of solemn renewal of the ancient covenant with Moses, sealed with blood. The Torah was again read publicly and the pilgrims affirmed their loyalty and obedience by shouting 'Amen, Amen'.

This was followed by the Harvest Festival, a time of singing and dancing in celebration.

After the destruction of the temple in 70 CE by the Romans the Rabbinic Jews found a different way to observe the Festival without sacrifice.

By the time of Jesus there was a build up of heightened expectation. Every five hundred years a special Jubilee Year was proclaimed when there was a great effort to find restitution for all the misdeeds within society. All debts were cancelled, slaves were restored to freedom, prisoners were released, the land was left fallow and sins were forgiven. It signified a return to the innocence of Paradise before 'the fall'. The perfect Rule of God was restored. Whether this was the moral ideal or actually put into practice we can not be sure.

The year of Jubilee was due to fall about 26 AD, the time when the ministry of Jesus began, hence the call of John the Baptist to 'repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand'. This would be inaugurated when the Roman conquerors would leave, and Israel would become free to serve God perfectly under the Torah, the law of Moses, with a legitimate priesthood. This gives us some idea perhaps just why the Romans were so jumpy when Jesus started to preach the good news of the advent of the Kingdom of God.

It is important to realise that in the days of the Temple-worship the High-Priest King both represented God to Humanity sacramentally and Humanity to God. He wore a gold circlet on his brow which was emblazoned with the sacred name of 'Yahweh', (the Hebrew means 'I am'), a name so holy that it was considered blasphemous to say it aloud. It was in this relation of advocacy that he entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement to pray and invoke God's mercy on His penitent people.

In Jesus' day the High Priests were appointed by the Roman Prefect and he had appointed men who were not strictly speaking Jews and were sympathetic with Hellenistic ideas about religion. They are recorded as despising the Jew's festivals and playing their part in the ceremony with a total lack of reverence; just going through the motions! As a result there were several Jewish sects that rejected the temple worship completely. Among movements for religious reform were the Pharisees, the Qumran Community, (possibly Essenes) and the followers

of Jesus (The Way).

When Jesus came with this message that 'the Kingdom of God is upon you', the good news of liberation from the powers of evil, all the symbolism of atonement would have been suggested by his preaching and healing acts to many Jews. When the High Priest stood before the people of God they read God's name on his brow and he spoke 'in the name of the LORD'. When Jesus said 'I am the bread of Life', 'I am the true vine', 'I am the light of the World' he was speaking in the name of the Lord. "I am" is the name that God revealed to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai. When he spoke of himself as 'the Son of man' he was also representing man to God. Jesus then, particularly in the Gospel according to St. John, is represented as the Davidic High Priest effecting atonement for the whole creation with the Almighty.

For Christians the sacrificial death of Jesus on the Cross happened as the unavoidable result of refusing to compromise on proclaiming the 'Day of the Lord' in the great Jubilee. It was a legal miscarriage of justice by weak, self-interested, amoral rulers. But sacramentally it also replaces the sacrificial rite of the Atonement in the Temple and is re-presented in the Eucharist or "Great Thanksgiving" (Holy Communion) as the great healing act which has the potential to restore communion between Humanity and God. It is through faith in that redeeming act, (redeeming mankind from the slavery to sin), that we believe the penitent are restored to unity with God and with the whole creation. They are AT ONE with God. They are commissioned to preserve life and heal the Earth, the Sea, the Heavens and find peace and wholeness for their souls and for all humanity. That is 'salvation'.

So St. Peter wrote to the Christians of Rome soon after Jesus' death and resurrection, "Come to Him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living-stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house".

The old Temple was destroyed and a spiritual Temple raised up in its place. Modern Rabbinic Judaism, of course has found its own way of replacing the Temple cult. For Christians 'the Word was made flesh' for Judaism the Word was made Book.

Finally let me say that it is my prayer that the misunderstandings and cruelties of the past can be expunged by working and praying together for the healing of the nations in the present age. The beginning of the process is in genuine inter-faith dialogue.