

**I speak to you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen**

**In this homily I am focused on the reading from the Letter to the Hebrews.**

**For a time, this letter was presumed to be one of Paul's letters. But while it is estimated by some scholars to have been written in the mid-sixties of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, others suggest it was written much later towards the end of the century – well after the martyrdom of St. Paul. It is written in a style reminiscent of Paul but in more polished language than the letters definitively attributed to him. Modern biblical scholarship cannot determine the author. It is believed that it was directed at the Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem in a time of great hardship, violence, and persecution. Hardship, violence, and persecution do little to assist in dating the epistle given that hardship, violence, and persecution were a constant throughout the Roman occupation of Palestine as they were throughout the succession of empires that had conquered and would conquer the Holy Land over millennia.**

**I want to concentrate on the last two verses of the passage that was read to us:**

***“Therefore, he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.”***

**What does this mean, and, in our time, perhaps more importantly what doesn't it mean?**

**We have all heard endless times, Jesus Christ died for my sins; Jesus Christ died for the propitiation of our sins, Since our penalty has already been paid, God will forgive all who put their trust in Jesus. These are all statements of substitutionary atonement.**

**They are all blasphemous and appalling theology. Nothing in the entire bible supports the notion of substitutionary atonement – The Son of God had to die so I should scape free?**

**It may surprise you to know that the notion of substitutionary or penal atonement was unknown in the Christian church until 1097 – nearly 11 centuries after the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord, and some 43 years**

after the Great Schism between the western and eastern churches. Substitutionary atonement is unknown in the eastern church except as one of many supposed errors of the western.

The doctrine of substitutionary atonement was promulgated by St. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury in his two-book work, *Cur Deus Homo* – Why a God Man.

*It is not proper for God to pass over sin unpunished...it is not fitting that God should take sinful man without an atonement...this cannot be effected unless satisfaction be made, which none but God can make and none but man ought to make; it is necessary for the God-man to make it.*

John Dominic Crossan the Irish-American, scholar, theologian, former monk and priest describes Anselm's assertion as the most successful bad theology ever promulgated. Much of what I have to say today is informed by Crossan's work.

To translate Anselm's position to language we understand more readily:

We have been bad beyond imagining; God's honour has been violated by our badness. Nothing we mere mortals could do could restore God's honour, so it is necessary that God's only begotten Son should suffer and die in great pain to restore God's honour so that we shouldn't have to burn for all eternity.

Does this sound like the loving Father who loves all his creation? Does this sound like the Creator who hates nothing he has made? Does this sound like anyone you would want to know, leave alone worship?

Of course not, it sounds like the thinking of a thoughtful possibly brilliant person whose lens was a feudal world where everyone from the highest to the lowest was completely in thrall to a human lord whose whim and violence could overturn everything. The King's whim could ruin the Earl. The Earl's whim could ruin the Squire. The Squire's whims could ruin the freeman. The freeman's whim could ruin the vassal and so on and on. Nothing was more unforgiveable than impugning the honour of those above you. If all that appalling chain of risk and danger was the daily reality of life and the lens in which one saw the world, how could one imagine it be any different with the divine lord?

Lest we get too proud of our own thinking and contemptuous of the limitations of our forebears' thinking, let us admit that in every generation, we create our own vision of God. Our God beyond the gods is truly more than we can imagine or comprehend, so we focus on an aspect of God that is a product of our particular *zeitgeist*.

Those of us well past the first blush of youth grew up in a rigid, ordered world in which conformity was supremely valued. It is no surprise that from an early time our Sunday school world of:

*His eye is on the sparrow  
And I know He watches over me*

Was quickly replaced with God the stern judge:

*O God, the Father of heaven; have mercy upon us miserable sinners and I am not worthy ...to do just about anything.*

Some of us were gob smacked in the late '60's early '70's with all sorts of talk and bad music about the God of Love. Who stole the judge?

Today, afraid and paralysed by the climate emergency and impending ecological disaster – by the way, a situation created by our 19<sup>th</sup> century view that God had given Dominion over the whole shebang to us to do whatever we pleased – we now in our fear turn to God the Creator who hates nothing she has made, for succor and assistance out of the perilous situation we ourselves have created because our violence was not just directed at our fellow humans, but at the earth itself.

Perhaps the most important sentence in the Letter to the Hebrews is the last sentence in our lesson today:

*Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.*

Jesus Christ did not die upon the cross to eliminate the consequences of our sins for us; he lived as human to show us a way out of sin even unto death. He came to point the way to God's order and show us how we could be agents and collaborators with the divine in its restoration in a world supremely disordered

by violence and empire. That is his atonement, and it is as real today as it was then.

And let me say a word or two about sin here:

Throughout the two plus millennia since our Saviour's death and resurrection it has pleased the Principalities and Powers to make sin an individual failing. We continually flail about over our personal failings with little regard to our collective failings and egregious misdeeds.

The first sin out of the Garden was violence: Cain killed Abel. Since then as a species we have perfected violence to a degree that even Satan himself must be agog. We have waged war; we have conquered; we have brutalized; we have deprived; we have brought extraordinary inventiveness to mass killing. We have even killed in the name of Jesus. And many times more often than not, we have done this evil corporately as a collective.

At the same time in a sin-obsessed world we have completely focused on personal, individual, sin because it has been a great way to ignore our corporate, collective sin of violence. Sexual sin has gotten lots of play because of that we can corporately disapprove and blame the sinner without having to change our own behaviour knowing that age will allow us to repent in time. As St. Augustine said, "God make me chaste but not yet"

Let me also say a word about punishment. We are very big on how our God will punish us for our sin. Forget it. Even if our loving God felt the need, God knows we have completely taken care of punishment for ourselves and for each other. Or as The Lady Julian of Norwich said it, "He does not blame his lovers for their sins. He knows that these things have already caused us great sorrow and suffering." We have proven to be entirely adept at creating Hell out of paradise. Jesus was constant even unto death in showing us how we could create heaven or the Kingdom of God in the here and in the now.

If there is one clarion message that comes from the Passion of Our Lord it is to meet violence with peace. Only with peace can we restore God's order. Jesus took a stand against violence even as he was arrested. He healed the ear of the slave of the High Priest on that his last night before his Crucifixion:

***Then one of them stuck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, "No more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, "Have you come with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit?" When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!"***

**For Jesus the power of darkness is not that the sun has gone down; it is that violence always is the most vicious when it is done in secret in a way that allows those who collude in it to remain oblivious.**

**Violence always happens in darkness with or without the light of day. Darkness because we can't see it; darkness because it is far away; darkness because it only happens to those whom we can dismiss as other; darkness because it protects our privilege; darkness because we didn't do it, no matter how much we profit from it.**

**The Letter to the Hebrew Christians in Jerusalem who lived under continual Roman violence, oppression, and danger was a reminder of Jesus who continually rejected violence and showed the way to withstand the test, to reject violence even unto death.**

**We are not in Jerusalem in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, but we are surrounded by principalities and powers. We are continually tested, often when we don't even realize it. In this Christmastide, as we rejoice in the birth of the child, we remain all too aware that Good Friday comes soon. Let us re-dedicate ourselves to being alive to God and strengthened to accept the help of Jesus to stand the tests that are with us and are yet to come. Like Jesus in the Garden, when faced with or tempted into doing or profiting from violence, let us be ready to say "No More of This". Thanks be to God.**

**Amen**