

## A series on the Atonement (preached 2012)

### Sermon for Lent 1: Michael Gray

*What is man, that thou art mindful of him?* (Psalm 8:4)

When we were planning a Lent course, the Atonement seemed to be a proper topic, but it could only be preached within a background - man as created and fallen. We would normally have covered that background in the three Sundays before Lent, but the weather intervened. So we have to begin a little late with man in creation.

I think an important need in these days of biblical fundamentalism is to remember that all pictures are imperfect images. That is true whether they are painted or verbal. Even words which we call "inspired" are imperfect - in the original and still more in translation. However, any successful picture will convey some part of the truth.

We must (this is for Anglicans a procedural rule in the 39 Articles) consider all relevant parts of the Bible together. So for man's place in creation we must consider not just the start of Genesis, but also the Psalms and Job, as well as the New Testament. We (and the biblical pictures) are not doing science, but theology. Not the mechanics of evolution, but how everything (and chiefly man) depends on God and has value for His purposes.

The alternative, as recently popularised, must be faced. On the basis of atheism, nothing has or could have any value, there is no purpose, man is merely a temporary phenomenon of no greater significance than anything else that has been before or will be afterwards or elsewhere. All the important questions are thus excluded - they cannot even be asked, much less answered. C.S. Lewis wrote an "Evolutionary Hymn", a satire which expresses this emptiness.

But that is not the Christian world. Indeed, we might rather say that the world was made for man. This is a plausible conclusion from the start of Genesis (including the covenant with Noah). It is not a clearly biblical statement (though it is found in books which were *nearly* accepted as Scripture such as the Apocalypse of Baruch and the Shepherd of Hermas.) As a principle of interpretation you can remember the scandalous remark of St. Paul "does God care about oxen?" (1 Corinthians 9:9)

But if the world is made for man, then it is more important that man is made for God. We do not exist for our own self-generated purposes. And of course we do not exist as if God needs us. He chooses to value us, maybe, but then he saw of all aspects of His creation that it was very good. If he values us, so does he value "that great Leviathan which you made to amuse you". (Psalm 104:26. And remember that Leviathan's companion is Behemoth, which is St. Paul's oxen!)

Now it has also recently been fashionable to emphasise man as steward of the creation. This is a true doctrine, even if it is not central to our theme. Man alone can wreck the planet *and know he is doing it* (other animals and plants may do harm but they do not know what they are doing). If man has his status as central to creation, this comes with responsibility, to reflect God's care for everything He has made.

But the doctrine of man does not just look back to creation. It also looks forward to destiny. This is, so far as is revealed to us, unique to man. "What is man, that thou art mindful of him, or the son of man, that thou visitest him? Thou madest him lower than the angels, to crown him with glory and worship." So Psalm 8, which is suggestive enough of a destiny, but it is taken up in the Epistle to the Hebrews, with the obvious comment that we do not yet experience this, but it has already been experienced in the Exaltation of Christ as the pioneer, the one who has opened the way for us. So the Christian doctrine on man includes a destiny with God in heaven – that is God's purpose for us.

Such promises we have – yet sin has intervened. At the risk of jumping ahead, atonement is about God in Christ putting us back on track for our destiny. But sin has intervened, and so these truths are hard to make our own. Like it or not, most Christians are beset with doubts. In Bunyan's "The Holy War," these are personified – the Election-doubters, the Vocation-doubters, the Glory-doubters (nine types in all) are the devil's shock troops in the war against Mansoul. And they are dangerous.

They reduce Christianity to a vague do-goodery from which any knowledge of goodness has departed. We will be "tossed about With many a conflict, many a doubt"; but only the full gospel, which includes the value and destiny of man in the sight of God, is sufficient.

## **Sermon for Lent 2: Michael Silver**

*The Gentiles which know not God* (1 Thessalonians 4:5)

A not unreasonable expectation might be that the most important beliefs should be the ones most clearly expressed in both Scripture and the Church Councils. The facts, sadly, are far otherwise: the Holy Trinity, Christ's Incarnation and Atonement are difficult in both expression and comprehension. What, peculiarly, makes the means of our Redemption hard to grasp - as Fr. Michael astutely commented last week - is down to first principles. What the Old Testament teaches about creation is vital if we are to trace how God wishes to re-claim it. A large problem, however, is that the Old Testament covers many hundreds of years. Towards the close of that era, there was an increasing excitement about creation's conclusion, the judgement of the cosmos. Creation itself is thus cast into deepest shadow as the spot-light of theology switches to the polar opposite.

The Old Testament, in various, contrasted passages, deals with man's collective rebellion against God, as well as with the sins of individuals, but it is not clear into what state this casts the human race. The Old Testament - at best - can only hint at the forfeiture of Eternal Life because the Old Testament [until nearly its close] does not seem to contemplate a truly conscious state for the departed at all, be they virtuous or evil. Rather the division is between the Chosen People and the Heathen. Yet both alike are brought to the grave and, at best, to an existence of shade and forgetfulness. Cf. Hebrews 11:13 "these all died in faith, not having received the promises."

The instrument of 'salvation' - although not salvation from death - was Torah (the Divine instruction) conveyed to Moses. Indeed today's Epistle sustains that very idea: "...the Gentiles which know not God..." Nevertheless, the Gospels critically question the saving properties of Torah, whilst St. Paul's letters explicitly repudiate any such idea, despite today's echo of his former faith. St. Paul, rather, bases some of his arguments on the covenant with Abraham, although the Gospel (Matthew 3:9 "from these stones") even questions the value of Abrahamic descent.

If we deny that obedience to God's commands will secure union with Him, not much is left from which to anticipate and interpret the saving act of God in these last times. By what means can we draw near to God and return to our Father's house? The practice of sacrifice remains, but that is far less rational or explicable than obedience. Cf. Hebrews 11:8-10 (Abraham obeys in faith of the future city). Moreover, is not sacrifice a matter of Torah, all those directions about the High Priest entering the holiest place of the Temple? As Mosaic commands, sacrifice falls under the same repudiation, for (Hebrews 10:4) "it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins." Yet there are also pre-Mosaic sacrifices, and three of these are recounted among us, in the ancient (pre-Anglican) Eucharistic Prayer used here. In the most solemn moments of our actions at the altar, we remember before God the offerings of Abel, Abraham and Melchizadech.

Why only these three; two of which are really non-sacrifices? The last is not an (explicit) offering to God, but some sort of emblematic homage to Abraham. The second incident is when the appointed offering - Isaac - was not, according to our text, sacrificed at all. The first example did not exactly go to plan, as the blood of the offerer himself was shed subsequent to the ritual oblation of his lamb. The significance of these examples is many-layered. Firstly, they transcend the formulas of Moses in Torah; secondly, their incompleteness points beyond themselves; lastly two, certainly, are not a matter of giving up, but giving over. In so saying, however, I am certainly not concluding that we are done with the Old Testament preparation of redemption.

Now, here's my contemporary allusion, to demonstrate my 'relevant' credentials. Last Sunday saw the much anticipated Oscars, in our former colonies. I did not see this for myself, but I gather that amongst all the glamorous stars in their fashionable, sexy outfits, was the dignified presence of a traditionally clad 73 year old Roman Catholic nun. This was one Delores Hart who had given Elvis

Presley his first on-screen kiss. She made several films and even got engaged, although not to a film star. Then quite suddenly she walked out of all of this to join a convent. Well, there are stories like this. What makes this one interesting, for me, is that Dolores Hart did not give everything up but 'gave it over.'

The man to whom she was engaged spent every Christmass and Pascha with Dolores, at her convent, until his death. Moreover, Delores never lost her involvement in the movies, but continued to keep pace with developments, more recently keeping up with the latest releases on a D.V.D. player in her room. Best of all she hated life in the convent, but stuck with it through the years. Here, mercifully, is no story of a goody-two-shoes! Last week she returned to the awards themselves. Our profession is not about abandoning everything precious to us but giving it to God and - unless we are talking explicit sin - of hoping that He will share the gift that we gave to Him with us.

Such considerations may not only give us some Lenten encouragement, they may - over-simplified and sketchy as they are - better frame our reflections upon the redemption that Christ wrought for us and in us. What Christ did, the prophecies of what He would do, and the Apostolic Preaching of why He did it... none of these are easy to understand. However horrific humanity's crime, or rather crimes, to which our Blessed Lord submitted; however much sorrow we may feel at His death - and rightly so! - we should never forget that He did not give up, but gave over. He laid down His life, certainly, but He took it up again. Cf. John 10:18 "I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again." "We may not know, we cannot tell, what pains he had to bear." He may have doubted, or He may have always seen the victory ahead, we are not permitted to know. The significance is in a death transcended, an offering shared with us, and eternal life let loose in the world.

### **Sermon for Lent 3:** Michael Gray

There is an Oxford myth that a philosophy examination contained the question "Is this a question?" To which some candidate hard pressed for time responded "This is an answer". Fortunately, the atonement is not about linguistic analysis. In the most general terms, the structure is quite simple. What is the problem with man? For whatever it is, God in Christ has the answer. "Atonement", which is a very rare word in the New Testament (Romans 5:11, but more frequently rendered "reconciliation"), is part of the much more important question how God reconciles us to Himself.

Note here that the Trinity work as one in this as in all things. In the New Testament, it is precisely because the Father already loves us, irrespective of our desert, that the work of Christ is effective. It was left to a much later period to believe in an angry Father whose wrath the Son placates.

In my earlier sermon I warned about the inevitable limitations of pictures, whether painted or verbal. We can happily accept many different pictures; they are all true provided we do not attempt to push them further than they will bear or make one of them normative over all the others. I suspect both the New Testament authors and the Church Fathers appreciated this; that is why I do not wholly trust "systematic" theology. So I propose to offer a quick tour of many early pictures. Maybe we want to use the word "atonement" about only some of these pictures. But we are more interested in how we are saved (and of course both "saved" and "atonement" are pictures!) than in a word.

The problem is ignorance? Man does not know how he should live, or what God wants. Christ provides the information (refining of course what had already been given). This might seem to be nineteenth century liberalism, but it is found in Clement of Alexandria, and it is true (that is why we read the Gospel narratives of our Lord's teachings) even if it is not the whole truth.

But those who thought Christ's teaching was the answer - "if you wish, you can keep the commandments" - soon found out that the problem had been misdiagnosed. Even rigorists like Pelagius conceded that for many the problem was weakness of will, and the answer had to be "the strength which God provides" (commonly called grace). This too is the sobering truth, even if not the whole truth. We will come back to it later.

One might add that the problem of weakness is made worse by the "world" (the downward drag of a

society which does not take God seriously, whether in first century Judea or now), and the divine answer is the Church. Again, not an inherently false picture.

St. Paul sometimes regards the problem as estrangement or alienation from God, so that the remedy is reconciliation (though always the initiative is God's, not ours). Man cannot make peace with God.

A very common picture in the New Testament and Fathers is that the problem is entrapment or enslavement. Now a narrow version of this is demonic possession, which is a fashionable diagnosis in some parts of Christianity. All I need say is this, that the Lord only addressed some human problems as demonic. Some bodily illness he treated as precisely that. It is not the case that the universal problem of man is individual demonic possession, granted indeed that where it does exist, Christ is the answer. No, by entrapment I mean that man is enslaved by the various hostile powers - sin, death, the powers of the air, the demonic indeed. These together prevent him from living in accordance with the creation blueprint. "But for us fights that proper man". Christ took on those powers; they thought they had defeated Him on the Cross, but instead had bitten off more than they could chew. This picture is early Christian (the narratives of the "harrowing of hell") and remains the Orthodox icon of the Resurrection. It underlies, for example, verses in the Te Deum "when thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death, thou didst open the kingdom of heaven to all believers".

A particular distortion of this picture redefined the problem to assert that the devil (in particular, though it might have been any of the powers) had acquired rights over man, and that those rights had to be compensated. Granted that Christ's victory was costly, it stretches the picture to say that a price was paid to the devil. Wiser thought realised that the devil could have no rights, that all the dominion of the powers was usurpation.

But is the problem worse than external entrapment? Already in the Old Testament, and much more in later Judaism, the problem is the "evil heart" or later "evil impulse". And God promises a new heart. This is quite close to the doctrine of "original sin" which the Articles define as "the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man". We are damaged goods, with "no power of ourselves to help ourselves". And the answer is "you must be born again". The promise is open to us. Later thought tended to make man "guilty" of original sin, as if it was an actual sin and required repentance. This seems odd, but it has been held and some think it is Anglican teaching.

I have left actual sin to the last, because it is confusing. Certainly it is part of the problem of man. But the Lord declares forgiveness of sin in his earthly ministry – indeed the scandal of that ministry is that he exercises a judgement which belongs to the Father alone. God had never been unwilling to forgive sin. The promise is held out in the Old Testament. He did not need the Cross to change his mind! Yet the picture of some compensation being required for actual sin is scriptural, and of course congenial to an accountant! All sins put one in debt to God, the records are kept, we cannot pay ("all for sin could not atone") yet there is the instinct that somehow payment must be made. For instance, by penance or in purgatory. This is matter for another sermon – the Catechism of the Catholic Church sees purgatory as a place of purification and does not mention it as a place of paying for sin, but it has sometimes been thought of more as a place of punishment or compensation for sin (though only temporary). The medieval Church (Anselm and Aquinas) elaborated a view that mere justice made it necessary that compensation be paid, and that Christ paid it on our behalf. This probably deserves a sermon in itself. The puzzle to me is that it seems to make justice more important than God Himself.

I have given you many pictures of God's saving work in his Son. They are all the grounds of Christian hope. Even in Lent, rejoice that the work of our salvation continues.

## Sermon for Lent 4 Michael Silver

*"O truly necessary sin of Adam"*

Why do we feel that we must understand the ways of God and the doctrines that reflect them? Are these not - by definition - all beyond us, is it not God Himself who 'moves in a mysterious way'? If the workings of our mobile phone are a mystery, why should we ever expect to understand divine designs? If we can dispense with personal technical knowledge -we just *use* a device - then, surely, this is exactly how we should approach the mysteries of faith? They are to be *used*, by God, for His purpose and our benefit.

Wanting to reason about the faith (even for those of us who are least equipped to do so) is not just because we moderns are a highly opinionated mob, but because theology and morality go hand in glove. If we fail to know how our computer works we could be in good company, if we are without moral parameters, however, we are likely to be in bad company, possibly in gaol. However modest our cognitive abilities, we have to be *morally literate*, if we don't want to be shunned. Despite this, Genesis 3:5 warns us against even moral enquiry; certainly, as either child or adult, we shrink from correction, moral lessons are rarely welcome.

Likewise with theology; if God matters to us, and we are already grappling with moral imperatives, we will likely feel the urge to engage with their concomitant doctrinal principles. We *claim* that doctrine governs our actions, as in Christ's Incarnation committing us to trying to see Him in all humanity, however much we struggle with that exercise. Moreover, true doctrines should 'ring true' morally, and the Atonement is not exempt from needing to make moral sense.

Alternatively, our Tractarian patrimony urges us, rather, both to practice 'reserve' and to curb individual reason. We receive a doctrine, not by engaging our reason but, by accepting Church teaching. Ironically, it was the Atonement that triggered Isaac Williams' tracts on reserve. He reacted against a pressurised form of revivalism which employed a crude rhetoric around Christ's afflictions as the means to "close the deal" on individual conversions. The Tractarian argument was that souls had to advance in spiritual competency before exposure to the deepest mysteries. This did not mean proficiency in Greek or some academic attainment, but a moral quality. The weakness of this position involves devising a measurement for spiritual competency; and who should do the measuring? Words of my old professor, J. R. Porter, also come to mind: "It is useless saying to someone: 'I don't understand any of this but you must believe it.' " As a principle, reserve is questionable, but as a warning it is essential 1 Cor. 3:2. So much for 'clearing the ground,' as we are wont to say in this church, let us now ask for grace to discern the mystery.

To say that Almighty God wills to forgive should not be understood as constituting the reason for His existence! Yet more deadly is it to suppose that Christ paid "for us to go on sinning."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, forgiveness appears to be realised in many facets and forms. Irrespective of Scriptural allusions to God's rejection of prayer (e.g. Isaiah 1:15), surely there never was a time when Heaven's doors were actually closed to cries for forgiveness, far less - as Fr. Michael reminded us - that God required any event to change His aversion (as some imagine it) to humanity. Christ did not storm Heaven, but Hell.

At Lent 2 we considered those three early sacrifices of Abel, Abraham and Melchizadech, but none appear to have been associated with the remission of sin. The first probably concerned fertility, whilst Abraham's intention was obedience, the last was an act of homage. Yet, as the history and religion of Israel 'rolled out,' the act of sacrifice was invested with further significance. Thus sacrifice sealed the Covenant that God made with His chosen people Exod. 14.4-8; whilst, at length, we find the startling statement in Hebrews that "without shedding of blood there is no remission." Heb. 9:22. Why should God so delight in blood? Well, despite first appearances, there is no fundamental reason to suppose that He does. The impulse to offer sacrifice is extraordinarily wide-

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<sup>1</sup>Austin Fairer, *Saving Belief*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1964, p. 105.

spread throughout the globe,<sup>2</sup> but it is not clear if that impulse is divinely implanted or results, rather, from fallen-ness. Originally it could have been as disordered an impulse as self-harm.

What does seem beyond debate is that God utilises that sacrificial impulse. He both constrains and consecrates it. He makes it serve His purpose.<sup>3</sup> Yet it would surely be a mistake to suppose that God was bound by what He had appointed for us? It is *we* who are bound by His ordinances, but God is free to act as He sees fit. I am not suggesting that God is like the 1970s President Nixon who held that 'if the president does it, it is not illegal;' God does not act contrary to His divine nature, but He is free to act towards His creatures in any way that is in accordance with it. The faithful of the Old Testament were bound to the sacrificial system, we are bound to the sacramental, but God can forgive and restore through any means.

So God has not (so-to-speak) tied His own hands to sacrifice, but He has condescended to use - not just its imagery, not even just its history, costliness and impulse - but the very thing itself. In taking our poor humanity, the Eternal Son not only submitted to bodily functions, ageing, the tyranny of time, and all the weaknesses within the created order, but *accommodated* himself to what we may esteem irrational ideas and deficient rites and ceremonies. Ultimately He submitted to sacrifice. Possibly the Eternal Father, Son and Spirit designed and delighted in that intricate pattern of expectation, antidote and fulfilment that frames the vast panorama of Biblical offerings - as Keble suggested - God may have a poetry of His own.

Some passages suggest that the Eternal Father was pleased with the self-offering of His Eternal Son on the Cross: e.g. Col. 1:19-20, 2 Cor. 5:18. It seems inherently unlikely that He was pleased with the Son's agony, isolation, derision or death. It is congruous to suppose that the Eternal Father was pleased with His liturgical-dedication, example, fulfilment, reparation, forgiving-impulse and love that were there sealed with His Blood, accomplished in and through the Eternal Spirit Heb. 9:14. We should never think of the Father and Son as somehow opposing forces in this operation, nor of the Holy Ghost as a spectator. Significantly, Gospel references to the Father's satisfaction in the Son come before the crucifixion (mostly at the Baptism and Transfiguration); Christ did not come solely to die, although a contest with death was clearly the climax in, and after, His ministry.

Two Sundays past, we noted that the Hebrew Scriptures are less than specific in identifying our plight after creation's rebellions. The Old Testament affirms that we can neither design nor save ourselves. The Cross, however, is *the* object lesson, it reveals what sin is capable of, it exhibits *sin unmasked*, and, accordingly, invites our compunction. We now get a better grasp of the depth of our nature's depravity and degradation. The costliness of the Sacrifice puts a price on our heads both negatively and positively.

Although the prophets insist that sacrifice must be preceded by repentance - as does our Blessed Lord himself Mt. 5:23 - significantly, He could not thus approach His own sacrifice, for He was without sin. Rather a sort of 'reverse perspective' is operating, as with His Baptism. He could neither be washed from sin, nor repent before making His own oblation of himself. Just as His Baptism was of no benefit to Him *but to us*, so too His Self-offering is not an occasion of self-scrutiny for Him, but the diagnosis and crisis that lays bare our own sins.

Fundamentally, 'forgiveness' is too weak a word to encapsulate all that Christ secured for us in His Atonement. Although "Christ did not pay for us to go on sinning," in practice, our spiritual lives could be characterised as 'revolving-door' repentance. It is a chronic condition, but, finally, Christ proves to be the door that leads somewhere! Jn.10:9. At the Paschal vigil we sing "truly necessary

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<sup>2</sup>Sadly it even hangs on in some comers of the Church itself

<sup>3</sup>Nevertheless, this view is an exact inversion of some passages in Sacred Scripture and the Fathers. The ancient view is that sacrifice was so widespread precisely because humanity had caught a glimpse of the Eternal purpose of God in determining upon the perfect sacrifice of which all else was a most imperfect prefiguring shadow. There is, surely, a form of interdependence in operation here?

sin of Adam." It raises eyebrows, yet, essentially Ambrose, Augustine and others recognised that we had gained infinitely more - more than existence, innocence or any conceivable entity - "God's Presence and His very Self and Essence all divine." (The hymn that Gladstone repeatedly used on his deathbed: J. H. Newman's "Praise to the Holiest".)

### **Sermon for Lent V: Michael Gray**

*"Christ for us became obedient even unto death."*

Our first duty in this course of sermons has been to expound the whole truth of our salvation. But we are Western Christians, in the heritage of Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas, and, after them, we struggle with the Anglican Patrimony. So we must not ignore the teaching of the Church of England, such as it was. Not of course as it is (as if that could be discovered), but as it was in official documents (Articles, Prayer Book and Homilies) and in closely related texts.

So, firstly, Articles IX to XII. To recite them all would be tedious, so here are key phrases. "Original Sin is the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man, whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil. He cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith and calling upon God. We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by Faith."

This is the teaching of St. Augustine. Note that "very far gone" is not the same as the Calvinist formulation of "total depravity" which was not, I think, Anglican teaching. But, as the collect for Lent 2 put it "we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves". Most definitely, only God can bring us into a right relationship with Himself.

There is a cross-reference in the Articles to the "Homily of Justification". There is no Homily with this title! But it is assumed that the "Homily of Salvation" is meant. Again, I quote selectively.

"Because all men be sinners and offenders against GOD, and breakers of his law and commandments, therefore can no man by his own acts, works, & deeds (seem they never so good) be justified, and made righteous before GOD: but every man of necessity is constrained to seek for another righteousness or justification, to be received at GOD'S own hands, that is to say, the forgiveness of his sins and trespasses, in such things as he hath offended. And this justification or righteousness, which we so receive of GOD'S mercy and Christ's merits. embraced by faith, is taken, accepted and allowed of GOD, for our perfect and full justification. For the more full understanding hereof, it is our parts and duties ever to remember the great mercy of GOD, how that (all the world being wrapped in sin by breaking of the Law) GOD sent his only son our Saviour Christ into this world, to fulfil the Law for us, and by shedding of his most precious blood, to make a sacrifice and satisfaction, or (as it may be called) amends to his Father for our sins, to assuage his wrath and indignation conceived against us for the same."

"The efficacy of Christ's passion & oblation is so much that infants, being baptized and dying in their infancy, are by this sacrifice washed from their sins, brought to GODS favour, and made his children, and inheritors of his kingdom of heaven. And they which in act or deed do sin after their baptism, when they turn again to GOD unfeignedly, they are likewise washed by this sacrifice from their sins, in such sort, that there remains not any spot of sin, that shall be imputed to their damnation. And although this justification be free unto us, yet it cometh not so freely unto us, that there is no ransom paid therefore at all."

"GOD in this mystery of our redemption, who hath so tempered his justice & mercy together, that he would neither by his justice condemn us unto the everlasting captivity of the devil, nor by his mercy deliver us clearly, without justice or payment of a just ransom: but with his endless mercy he joined his most upright and equal justice. His great mercy he showed unto us in delivering us from our former captivity, without requiring of any ransom to be paid, or amends to be made upon our parts, which thing by us had been impossible to be done. And where as it lay not in us that to do, he provided a ransom for us, that was, the most precious body and blood of his own most dear and best beloved Son Jesus Christ, who besides this ransom, fulfilled the law for us perfectly. And so the

justice of GOD & his mercy did embrace together, & fulfilled the mystery of our redemption.”

“Three things must go together in our justification. Upon GODS part, his great mercy and grace: upon Christ's part, justice, that is, the satisfaction of GODS justice, or the price of our redemption, by the offering of his body, and shedding of his blood, with fulfilling of the law perfectly & throughly; and upon our part true & lively faith in the merits of Jesus Christ, which yet is not ours, but by GODS working in us.”

The Prayer book is quite consistent with the Homily. In the Baptismal office, we hear “that this Child is regenerate”. In the Communion office, we hear of a “full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world”. Pastorally, the liturgy is confident that the atonement applies and that “we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son”.

Perhaps the peculiarity of the teaching is that the Father is simultaneously wrathful and loving, both angry with us for our sins and contriving the way of our salvation while we were yet sinners. This paradox is certainly more wise than the simpler idea of the Son propitiating an angry Father.

You may have noticed the language of satisfaction or amends, which we could not provide but Christ did. A few quotations from St. Anselm may help to explain this pattern of thought.

“He who does not render this honour which is due to God, robs God of his own and dishonours him; and this is sin. So then, every one who sins ought to pay back the honour of which he has robbed God; and this is the satisfaction which every sinner owes to God. It is not fitting for God to pass over anything in his kingdom undischarged. It is, therefore, not proper for God thus to pass over sin unpunished. If it be not fitting for God to do anything unjustly, or out of course, it does not belong to his liberty or compassion or will to let the sinner go unpunished who makes no return to God of what the sinner has defrauded him.”

This approach made good sense at its time, when (as still technically in this country) a crime was not just an injury to the victim but to the sovereign; and hence the sovereign punishes the insult to himself quite apart from any compensation to the victim.

“It is not fitting that God should take sinful man without an atonement. Without satisfaction, that is, without voluntary payment of the debt, God can neither pass by the sin unpunished, nor can the sinner attain that happiness, or happiness like that, which he had before he sinned. Satisfaction ought to be proportionate to guilt. When you render anything to God which you owe him, irrespective of your past sin, you should not reckon this as the debt which you owe for sin. Man cannot and ought not by any means to receive from God what God designed to give him, unless he return to God everything which he took from him; so that, as by man God suffered loss, by man, also, He might recover His loss. None but God can make this satisfaction. But none but a man ought to do this, otherwise man does not make the satisfaction. No man except Christ ever gave to God what he was not obliged to lose, or paid a debt he did not owe. But he freely offered to the Father what there was no need of his ever losing, and paid for sinners what he owed not for himself.”

This is not, I should add, the same doctrine as “penal substitution”. The Father does not punish the Son for our sins. That would be an abuse of justice. But the voluntary offering made by Christ breaks through the logical traps of justice.

We are saved, thank God, not by our getting the doctrine of the atonement right, but by the generosity of the Blessed Trinity. To God be the glory.