

INTRODUCTION TO some themes in CHRISTIANITY

God, Jesus, Humans: Salvation and the human condition

1. What's the problem? The human condition

- Human beings are created in God's image, i.e. to show forth God's glory on the earth.
- God creates all things good, therefore Adam and Eve lived in the state of "original justice" in the Garden, i.e. humans were created in a guiltless relationship with God and with one another.
- Adam and Eve (human beings) have made a decision unworthy of those created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27) and are banished from the Garden, which is closed to them (Genesis 3:24), therefore they are sent into exile in a "foreign land".
- The sin of Adam and Eve is to want to be "like God" in knowledge; this is usurpation, rebellion etc.
- This sin disrupts the basic relationship with God:
 - Work becomes distressing toil (Genesis 2:15, 3:17-19)
 - Women experience the pains of childbirth (Genesis 3:16)
 - Death becomes a troubling affliction to be dreaded rather than the natural end to a life lived in the service of God (Genesis 3:19)
- There is an innate yearning in human beings to return to their true relationship with God: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts find no rest until they rest in you" (Augustine)
- Post-Christ, we want to go one step further and not just return to the Garden but enter into the life of Heaven; in Eastern Christian theology this is especially well drawn in terms of the divinisation of human beings who "grow into Christ" and are thus transformed.

2. What is sin and what are its consequences?

- An act of rebellion caused by human desire to be "like God"
- The misuse of freedom by which we seek to define for ourselves "right" and "wrong"
- Sin is like an avalanche: once Adam and Eve sin, the flood builds to encompass murder (Cain kills Abel), then revenge killing and ultimately genocide
- Sin gets to the state when God decides to cleanse the earth through the Flood (Genesis 6:5 – 8:22), after which God makes a covenant with creation "never again", the sign of the covenant is the rainbow
- Human arrogance and a desire to overreach ourselves leads to the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9), which results in a breakdown in communication and human confusion
- Sin inexorably coalesces to alienate humanity from God, leading to a radical disorder or perversity, in which we turn to the service of "other than God"

- Sin takes over and human beings fall into a kind of slavery to sin, a form of idolatry
- Solutions?
 - To obey God's commands brings welfare and God's blessings (Deuteronomy 6:1-3)
 - To turn towards light, truth and love is to turn away from darkness, falsity and hatred
 - To turn towards the love of God instead of the love of the self
 - All sin is ultimately a failure to love God and neighbour (Mark 12:28-34)
 - Repentance required also conversion of life and purification of the effects of sin
- Classic Gospel forgiveness parable: The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)

Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.' " ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." ²²But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ 'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your

property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!”³¹ Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.”³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

3. Exploring terminology

Original Sin

- A fundamental flaw in “fallen” human nature. We do not start life on an even keel but rather are tainted by the sinful practices of those who have gone before us; “an enduring legacy of the consequences of sin”.
Examples:
 - A downward spiral of sinful practice, leads to my children being born into a worse position than I started off
 - The “selfish gene” of the secular scientists
 - I have an inclination to rebellion; if I do not identify and struggle against it, it will win out
 - NB not tied up with sex (enjoyment thereof, transmitted thereby)
- Baptism as initiation into the community of healing, restoration
- Through Adam and Eve sin entered the world; through Jesus Christ as the “Second Adam” came healing, a life of loving obedience, lived in the power of God, set on the path of eternal life. Therefore we are not restored to the Adamic state of “life in the Garden” but initiated into the Resurrected state of “life in Heaven”

Redemption

- From the Gk. *apolutrosis* = buying back
- Drawn from the Graeco-Roman world where it is used for the freeing of slaves and the ransoming of prisoners of war
- Examples:
 - Exodus 15:16; 19:5 God redeems the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt
 - Isaiah 51:11, 52:3-9 God redeems the people from exile in Babylon
 - Romans 3:42 and I Corinthians 1:30
- Overlaps with terms like liberation, deliverance, salvation

Salvation

- Name Jesus = Heb. “God saves”
- To come to a whole life that is authentically healthy that brings us to true welfare in this life and in the hereafter

Atonement

- Old Engl. “At-one-ment” = bringing into a harmonious unity
- A unity existing in interpersonal harmony and friendship

- Technically: the restoration of harmonious unity through Christ of formerly estranged parties
- Language develops also into talk of “means” and “costs”, e.g. “making costly amends” and “making satisfactory expiation for offences committed”
- The process that removes the hindrances to reconciliation

Reconciliation

- Uniting things/people that were previously separated
- A cosmic sense: reconciling the whole world
- A process already accomplished and available *in potentia* to all who wish to avail of it

Expiation

- From the Gk *hilasterion* = the mercy seat
- Romans 3:25, Hebrews 9:5, I John 2:2; 4:10
- In the Jewish Temple, once each year on Yom Kippur (Day of Expiation [commonly Day of Atonement]), High Priest enters the Holy of Holies and smeared blood on the mercy seat (*hilasterion*) to wipe out the sins of the people
- In NT texts (above), Jesus becomes the true and final mercy seat, therefore what the High Priest had to do each year, Jesus does once for all time; through God’s initiative, he becomes the means by which the contamination of sin is taken away from all humanity
- God is the subject of expiation not the object, i.e. God does something to wipe away sin, it is not about human action. The New Testament never speaks of humans appeasing an angry God, rather expiation is the action of a loving God who saves human beings

So: when God “undoes” the sin of Adam by and through Christ as the Second Adam, he does more than restore humankind to the Adamic state but redeems, saves and reconciles into a new state of union with God.

Redeemer/Saviour

- Some speak as though “sending the Son” was the last attempt after all else had failed; the situation was “that bad”
- Others stress that “sending the Son” was always part of God’s plan, as it was the Son/Word that was at work in the creation and then ultimately in the incarnation, the whole of Christ’s life was salvific, healing, reconciling
- Jesus Christ was uniquely able to do this as he was both fully human and fully divine
- He opens up in himself a new relationship between human beings and God in which he is “the first of many brothers and sisters”, we are

“adopted sons and daughters of the divine family”, “co-heirs with Christ of the Kingdom (Rule) of God”

4. How's it to be done?

a. Redemption as deliverance from evil

- Overcoming sin and evil is seen as a new Exodus (parr. The liberation of slaves from Egypt) from the bondage of sin
- Christ gives his life as a ransom to redeem humanity from our bondage to sin. N.B. in the NT, the “price” of the redemption is not paid to anyone, neither to God nor to the Devil.
- Deliverance is achieved by the vulnerability of Christ as innocent victim – the lamb that is silent before the shearers – the Lamb of Sacrifice that overcomes the evil of the persecutors; therefore a new model of strength in/through vulnerability, meekness, not standing on one's own rights
- Matthew 6:13 (part of the Lord's Prayer) “And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.”
- As pertinent now as ever: modern day evils, the industrialisation of human killing in warfare, the exploitation of the poor, the abuse of trade relations; therefore Christians called to combat such evils as “completing the work of our redemption”
- “Christ the Deliverer” is a popular figure amongst liberation theologians

b. Penal substitution theories

- Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109): once sin has been forgiven by God it still requires “satisfaction” = additional good works to “make up” for the offence = works of supererogation above and beyond what is required
- Sin collectively offends against the honour of the infinite God; humans are finite and so cannot make adequate satisfaction. We already owe everything to God, so what more could we give?
- Christ is free from sin, therefore utterly innocent and blameless, “the Lamb without blemish”, therefore he can offer the infinite satisfaction
- Two key points from Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274):
 - As an infinite being, Christ has infinite love, therefore he can make infinite satisfaction. It is this infinite love that matters, not the magnitude of the work, suffering or sacrifice (*pace* Mel Gibson)
 - God's love for human beings is infinite, unchanging, everlasting; it is not changed by the satisfaction; what is changed is the ability of human beings to access that love.
- The 16th century Reformers developed the idea of Christ as a penal substitute to placate God, i.e. Christ took upon himself the sins of all humankind, plus the judgement of these sins and thus was justly condemned and deservedly punished vicariously (in the place of human beings). So through his suffering and death, he satisfied divine justice,

paid the price for human sin and so propitiated an angry God. In this was he redeemed humanity and made justification available to humankind through faith in Christ as Saviour (supported by an interpretation of Leviticus 16, Isaiah 53, Psalm 22, Galatians 3: 13, Romans 8:3-4 and 2 Corinthians 5:21)

c. The sacrifice of Christ

- The Hebrew Bible knows two streams of sacrifice:
 - The cultic: a blood sacrifice to wash away sins; hence the expiation of the mercy seat in the Temple; hence Christ offers his life as a sacrifice
 - The non-cultic: a contrite heart is a sacrifice pleasing to God (Psalm 51:17)
- The idea of sacrifice was human beings surrendering something valuable to God with a view to bringing about a communion with God and changing those who take part, therefore the link of a sacrificial meal in which life is offered and the food is shared.
- The whole of the life of Jesus as a self-offering of obedience and love to God (Christ as both priest and victim); thus the perfect example to be followed, he becomes the “first fruits” of the sacrifice of obedience and love by all humanity
- This links self-sacrifice with martyrdom, e.g. someone sacrificing their life to rescue someone else in mortal danger, e.g. the mother who throws herself over the body of her child to protect it from a bomb blast, the pelican who pecks her own chest to bring forth blood to feed her young
- Only free, willing, sacrificial suffering can be meritorious
- Christ’s sacrifice is of infinite value because of the nature of the victim rather than the amount of suffering endured (*pace* Mel Gibson again)

d. Christ as expiation for the sins of humanity

- The life of anything is contained in the blood (Leviticus 17:11-14, Deuteronomy 12:33) NB Jehovah’s Witnesses and blood transfusions
- The Day of Expiation, Yom Kippur, the expiation or wiping out of sin, the purification of the contamination created by sin
- NT talks of “the blood of Jesus” as the means of expiation of sin, 1 John 1:7 and Romans 3:25
- Sin disrupts the individual and collective life of humanity, therefore things are “out of place”. Note: Plato: justice = everything in the right place
- Therefore Christ as expiation reorders and repairs a world damaged by sin
- Three Gk prepositions used of Christ:
 - *Anti* = on behalf of (Mark 10:45) Jesus gives his life “on behalf of” many

- *Huper* = for the sake of (Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 15:3)
Christ died “for the sake of” our sins
- *Peri* = on account of (Matthew 26:28) the cup poured out “on account of” many
- Therefore Christ as representative acting “on behalf of”, “for the sake of”, “on account of” humankind. So 1 John 2:1 “if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous”
- The Son/Word of God voluntarily takes human form, therefore completely identifies himself with human beings and reconciles them with God. Human beings can chose to be incorporated “in Christ” by faith and thus bring his representative, expiatory, redeeming sacrifice to apply to them.

e. Redemption as transforming love

- The object of creation was to have Adam and Eve as representative humans on whom God could shower the divine gifts
- The object of redemption, a new creation, to draw human beings into the inner life of God so that we might share in the eternal love of God
- The love of God takes the initiative to reveal in Christ the gratuitous, unsolicited nature of divine love. God loves us when we are unworthy of that love. The love of God transforms sinful people so that we are lovable.
- The love of God is self-giving. God gives the Son who incarnates and initiates a community of salvation = the Church
- Jesus as redeemer who transforms through love:
 - As physician who heals the sinners: Mark 2:15, 17; Luke 7:36-50
 - As teacher who speaks with inner authority (Matthew 5:31-42), challenges conventional wisdom (Luke 15:11-32; Matthew 20:1-15), and whose teaching transforms the disciples (Mark 3:35; Matthew 8:21-22; Luke 9:59-60)